

CHILD WELFARE: A CONGRESSIONAL REPORT ON WORKFORCE ISSUES

To ensure the safety and emotional well-being of children served by child welfare systems throughout the nation—and also that positive permanency outcomes are achieved—a stable and highly-qualified workforce is essential.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) recently released a report, *HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff*, identifying and highlighting child welfare workforce challenges, and promising interventions aimed at improving recruitment and retention of qualified staff in both public and private child welfare agencies. The study, commissioned by Congressmen Pete Stark (D-CA) and Jim Greenwood (R-PA), was based on 585 exit interviews from former child welfare service providers; interviews with child welfare practitioners and researchers; an analysis of 27 federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs); and comprehensive site visits in California, Illinois, Kentucky, and Texas. These states were selected based on geographic diversity, variation of caseload sizes, and their ability to provide both urban and rural perspectives (GAO, 2003).

The GAO child welfare study and subsequent report present a compelling argument for the necessity of a stable *and* highly skilled child welfare workforce, towards the goal of ensuring safety, achieving positive permanency outcomes, and maintaining child and family well-being, while complying with federal regulations emphasized in the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The study's findings validate the challenges child welfare workers, supervisors, and administrators face. It also draws a correlation between those challenges and child safety and permanency outcomes. Furthermore, the GAO child welfare report validates promising workforce practices, such as Title IV-E training and university/agency partnerships; agency accreditation; and leadership and mentoring programs aimed at improving recruitment and retention of highly qualified child welfare workers. Finally, the GAO report makes recommendations and

holds the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services accountable for helping (public and private) child welfare agencies address recruitment and retention challenges.

KEY FINDINGS

Both public and private child welfare agencies are increasingly presented with challenges in recruiting and retaining highly qualified child welfare staff. The GAO child welfare report highlights a range of promising workforce practices child welfare agencies have implemented to begin addressing some of these challenges.

Factors Contributing to High Turnover

- **Low Pay:** Specifically, the report cited differences in salary between public and private agencies, with child welfare workers in public agencies earning more than their colleagues with similar experience working in private agencies. Public and private agencies in rural areas often compete for qualified staff working in urban areas where salaries are typically higher. Nonetheless, the GAO report indicated that child welfare workers still earned less, on average, than professionals in comparable positions, such as teachers and social workers in school, hospital, or public health settings.
- **Risk of Violence:** Safety was a leading concern, which the report identified as a contributing factor in the turnover rate of workers. A major study (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, 1998) cited in the report found that 70 percent of front-line child welfare workers had been victims of violence or threats in the line of duty. A review of the

LaVoyce B. Reid, MSW, LCSW
Senior Staff Associate
Children, Families & Schools
lreid@naswdc.org

585 exit interviews found that 90 percent of those former child welfare workers experienced verbal threats, 30 percent experienced physical attacks, and 13 percent had been threatened with weapons.

- **Staff Shortages and High Caseloads:** The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 1998) recommends a caseload of 12 to 15 children per worker, and the Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services (COA) recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 children per worker. However, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA, 2001) and findings of the GAO child welfare study both indicate that child welfare workers maintain an average caseload of 24 to 31 children, with a range of 10 to 110 children. High turnover rates contribute to staff shortages, which lead to more child welfare workers being forced to take on increased responsibilities and heavier caseloads.

- **Administrative Burdens:** Excessive paperwork was highlighted in the report as one of several administrative burdens contributing to high turnover. The GAO child welfare study estimates that child welfare workers spend 50 to 80 percent of their time on paperwork. The report also identified the amount of time child welfare workers spend in court as a result of ASFA requirements, further removing them from direct service with children and families, as a second administrative burden (GAO, 2003).

- **Inadequate Supervision:** Consistent throughout the study was the finding that “competent and supportive supervision (is) critical to reducing staff turnover” (GAO, 2003, p. 17). However, the quality and availability of supervision was cited in the report as a concern by child welfare workers. In many instances, child welfare workers with minimal child welfare and supervisory experience were promoted to supervisory positions. In addition, supervisors may maintain caseloads themselves or provide coverage of cases in workers’ absence, and, as a result, they are not fully available to supervise staff.

- **Inadequate Training:** Training is another element essential to the recruitment and retention of highly qualified child welfare workers and supervisors. However, the GAO child welfare study found that training was often rated as insufficient or inadequate. Specifically, training did not always provide new hires with necessary job performance skills, or was simply irrelevant to job performance. For example, workers

indicated lack of training in areas including paper and time management, substance abuse, and mental-health issues. Finally, the report noted that administrative burdens and high caseloads often hindered workers’ ability to participate in staff training.

The GAO child welfare report does not differentiate between training needs based on educational background. For example, the difference in training needs and expectations of child welfare workers who hold BSW or MSW degrees, versus child welfare workers who hold degrees in other human services fields or who do not hold professional degrees.

Promising Workforce Practices

- **University–Agency Training Partnerships:**

Through the use of Title IV-E dollars and state funded contributions, more than 40 state agencies have formed child welfare training partnerships between the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited schools of social work and public child welfare agencies (GAO, 2003). These partnerships are intended to prepare social work students for careers in child welfare. In general, students are engaged in public child welfare agency field placements, and receive specialized training and stipends in exchange for employment with state or county public child welfare agencies. A minimum one-to-two-year employment obligation is expected. The GAO study found that, overall, university-agency training partnerships improved retention, competence, and skill level. However, the report also suggests that workers may still feel unprepared for the “realities” of child welfare practice.

- **Agency Accreditation:** The GAO child welfare report highlights systemic improvements like agency accreditation as a promising intervention to help alleviate recruitment and retention challenges faced by public and private agencies. Accreditation of child welfare agencies or systems is aimed at improving the work environment, and emphasizes appropriate educational backgrounds and smaller, more manageable caseloads for workers and supervisors. COA has accredited both public and private child welfare agencies since 1977. Illinois (2000) and Kentucky (2002) are the first and only two states to have received full accreditation by COA for their child welfare systems. Overall, these states report improved recruitment and retention of child welfare workers. However, the report does identify the fact that “accreditation status does not guarantee high-quality service” (GAO, 2003, p. 29).

• **Enhancement to Supervision and Mentoring:**

Some states, including Illinois, have taken steps to enhance staff supervision by lessening the number of workers that supervisors may oversee, and requiring all supervisors to have an MSW degree. Other states, like Kentucky, require a minimum number of years of experience in order to be promoted to a supervisory position and provide supervisory development training (GAO, 2003). The GAO child welfare report also highlights a Kentucky pilot project wherein new hires who have participated in Title IV-E training partnerships are mentored by experienced child welfare workers during their first three months of employment. This report does not identify the educational backgrounds of the mentors.

• **Competency-Based Interviews:** The GAO report describes how several states have begun to develop lists of desired worker competencies, which are then compared with on-the-job performance expectations and agency needs. These instruments have been used to screen potential candidates. Additionally, the report describes how some states are beginning to use “realistic job previews”—videos portraying child welfare workers engaged in routine job-related activities with clients and related systems, including courts and treatment agencies. The GAO study deems these tools useful, but indicates that a full evaluation of their short- and long-term effectiveness is still needed.

• **Recruitment Bonuses:** A final recruitment and retention practice identified in the GAO child welfare report is the use of bonuses to attract and retain qualified staff. Typically, bonuses are offered to new employees upon hiring, and again at one- and six-year employment anniversaries. The report indicates that there is little evidence to support the overall effectiveness and long-term benefits of hiring and retention bonuses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A significant, though preliminary, finding of the GAO study is that recruitment and retention challenges negatively impact children’s safety, permanency outcomes, and overall well-being. The magnitude of this finding, however, requires further review and study (GAO, 2003). Staff shortages, high caseloads, and administrative burdens hinder child welfare workers’ ability to develop relationships with children and families, and to conduct frequent and routine home visits to assess child safety and make permanency plans. It is quite apparent from the GAO study and report that workforce challenges impair workers’ ability to meet the multiple needs of children and families served by the child welfare

system. Nonetheless, the report does identify and detail several promising workforce practices believed to improve recruitment and retention. Few of these interventions, though, have been fully evaluated, according to the GAO report. The GAO child welfare report concludes with the following recommendations for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS):

- Using the department’s annual discretionary grant program to promote targeted research on the effectiveness of perceived promising practices
- Issuing guidance or technical assistance to encourage states to use their program improvement plans to address the caseload, training, and staffing issues cited in the child and family services reviews conducted by the department

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

While many child welfare workers hold professional degrees in social work, both at the bachelor and master levels, the majority of these workers hold degrees in fields other than social work. As cited in the GAO child welfare report: “Fewer than 15 percent of child welfare agencies require caseworkers to hold either bachelor’s or master’s degrees in social work, despite several studies finding that bachelor’s of social work (BSW) and master’s of social work (MSW) degrees correlate with higher job performance and lower turnover rates among caseworkers” (CWLA, 1998, p. 5).

Although social work is not necessarily synonymous with the child welfare system, social work education is far more compatible with the delivery of child welfare services than any other field or educational training. Social work is the very science of helping people—children and families—achieve an effective and productive level of psychosocial functioning. It requires expertise in human development and behavior; social and economic development; cultural influences; and the interaction of these factors and influences (NASW, 1999). Social workers in child welfare and other practice settings utilize their specialized educational training and skills to facilitate change and interactions between individuals, and also between individuals and their environments. The GAO findings, with respect to university-agency training partnerships and agency and state child welfare accreditation, demonstrate the compatibility between social work education and child welfare service delivery. The social work profession—including schools of social work and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)—together with the Department of Health and Human Services, has a responsibility and role in addressing child welfare workforce challenges.

At the time this update was written, NASW was in the beginning phase of revising its *Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection*, which will be guided, in part, by the findings of the GAO child welfare study.

REFERENCES

American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. (1998). *Double jeopardy: Caseworkers at risk helping at-risk children: A report on the working conditions facing child welfare workers*. Washington, DC: Author.

Barker, R. (Ed.). (2003). *The social work dictionary* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Child Welfare League of America. (1998). *Minimum education required by state child welfare agencies, percent, by degree type*. Washington, DC: Author.

Child Welfare League of America. (1999). *State child welfare agency survey*. Washington, DC: Author.

U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). (2003). *Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff*. Washington, DC: Author.

RESOURCES

National Association of Social Workers. (2003, April). *New advocacy resources: Child welfare workforce; human services; data on children & families*. Government Relations Update. Available at www.socialworkers.org/advocacy/updates/041803.asp

U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). (2003). *Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff*. Available at www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-357

O'Neil, J. (2003, June). *Child welfare reform is called essential*. NASW News, p. 9.

National Association of Social Workers. (2003). Child abuse and neglect. In *Social work speaks, 6th edition, NASW policy statements, 2003-2006*. (pp. 32-36) Washington, DC: Author.

National Association of Social Workers. (2003). Foster care and adoption. In *Social work speaks, 6th edition, NASW policy statements, 2003-2006* (pp. 144-151). Washington, DC: Author.

National Association of Social Workers. (2003). Public child welfare. In *Social work speaks, 6th edition, NASW policy statements, 2003-2006* (pp. 285-286). Washington, DC: Author.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section. Available at www.socialworkers.org/sections



NASWJOBLINK
THE SOCIAL WORK CAREER CENTER

Make the most of your job search

Find the job you're looking for on JobLink, NASW's online social work employment network.

Take control of your job search and career today!

- Personalize your job search and find the right job for you.
- Get an extra edge over the competition.
- Join NASW to post your résumés and attract top social work employers.
- Quickly apply for your favorite jobs online with just one click.
- Set up job search agents and have new listings emailed directly to you.

Go online today at www.socialworkers.org to take advantage of the new NASW Joblink Career Center.

NASW
National Association of Social Workers

750 First Street NE, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241
www.socialworkers.org
888-491-8833