



Improving the Child Welfare Workforce

By Julie Farber and Sara Munson

The recruitment, support, and retention of child welfare professionals are an important and ongoing concern.

Studies have shown that the child welfare workforce faces significant challenges in meeting the needs of vulnerable children and their families. High caseloads, lack of adequate training and supervision, limited resources, and low wages are frequently cited as barriers to recruiting and retaining quality staff.

We must address these challenges to improve the functioning of our nation's child welfare systems and thereby outcomes for children and families. Even the best policy reforms will have little impact if staff does not have the proper training, support, and resources necessary to effectively implement changes. New strategies are needed to support a child welfare workforce that can deliver quality services and ensure that children are safe and have the opportunity to grow up in permanent families.

Children's Rights' Policy Department is involved in two projects focused on identifying strategies to strengthen the child welfare workforce. The first, in collaboration with the Children's Defense Fund and a diverse group of national child welfare organizations and experts, documented the essential components of an effective child welfare workforce based upon a review of current research. It also identified federal policy changes that could help promote an effective child welfare workforce. The next phase of this project involves public education and advocacy for these proposals.

The second project, in collaboration with the National Center for Youth Law, explored the impact of class-action litigation on the child welfare field. Through in-depth interviews with more than 70 individuals in 12 jurisdictions, we identified a range of strategies to strengthen the child welfare workforce.

A number of themes emerged, which are summarized in the following 11 recommendations for improving the child welfare workforce:

- 1. Recruiting the right staff and focusing on retention is critical to maintaining an effective workforce.** Identify key competencies for the job and screen prospective staff for those competencies. Give prospective staff a realistic preview of the job. Conduct a turnover study to understand why staff leaves. Use this information to develop recruitment and retention plans. Ensure that the human resources function understands the organization's needs. Implement employee appreciation activities. Examine hiring practices to remove obstacles to recruiting and retaining a culturally diverse workforce. Engage in recruitment activities outside the traditional scope of state and county hiring systems, including Internet postings and targeted recruitment in both the community and social work schools.
- 2. A supportive organizational environment is needed to promote caseworkers' long-term commitment to child welfare. Steps must be taken to develop competent, visionary, and committed organizational leaders.** Conduct a national search for agency leaders and managers. Draw upon national and local expertise to help shape the mission, policies, and practices of the agency. Encourage leaders to solicit caseworker feedback. Have staff and consumers discuss and develop policy and practice reforms to ensure culturally relevant reforms and greater buy-in and support for change.
- 3. Child welfare caseloads and workloads must be kept at manageable levels.** Assess the workloads of frontline staff when defining caseload limits. Increase clerical supports to alleviate caseworkers' paperwork and transportation burdens. Allow job-sharing and team approaches to cases. Create specialized, on-call staffing units to ensure that qualified, trained caseworkers are readily available to fill vacancies. Position staff in community settings so they are closer to the children and families served.
- 4. Effective supervision and mentoring for caseworkers increases job satisfaction and improves outcomes for children and families.** Develop and evaluate supervisory competen-

- cies. Encourage supervisors to occasionally work in the field with caseworkers. Require supervisors to attend the same trainings as their caseworkers to ensure consistent application of new knowledge to field practices. Provide opportunities for supervisors to obtain advanced social work degrees. Develop mentoring programs for supervisors.
5. **Competency-based training and professional development are critical to develop and maintain a skilled workforce.** Draw upon the resources of local universities to design and deliver training, and develop social work programs that prepare students for careers in child welfare. Develop training competencies in consultation with national experts. Ensure that training focuses on cultural competencies. Schedule trainings so that staff has the time to attend them, and monitor and track attendance. Make sure that the supervisory training model is aligned with the caseworker training. Monitor staff performance in relation to training competencies. Re-train the entire workforce, not only new staff, when implementing a new practice.
 6. **Timely and accurate data are essential to support a quality, effective workforce.** Develop and enhance automated data management systems to ensure easy access to, and analysis of, relevant data. Use caseworker focus groups to ensure staff input and buy-in to system-wide data collection improvements. Increase data collection and reporting. Enhance agency perception through effective data, methodology, and reporting. Use available data to inform training and supervision, and to make policy and other decisions.
 7. **Relevant, comprehensive research and evaluation are crucial to ensuring continuous improvement in the child welfare workforce.** Collaborate with universities to facilitate the analysis of agency programs and client outcomes. Consider using research capacity to assess turnover and other workforce issues and inform the use of evidence-based practice models.
 8. **Effective quality assurance (QA) and accountability mechanisms must be in place to support an effective workforce and to ensure positive outcomes for children, youth, and families.** Staff QA units with qualified individuals with backgrounds in research and evaluation. Ensure that QA units rely on solid data focusing on quality indicators, client satisfaction, and factors that impact outcomes. Encourage the use of QA reports as supervision tools. Share QA reports with outside stakeholders.
 9. **Caseworkers must be provided with technological resources and support staff to help them meet responsibilities and track information about the children and families they serve.** Provide access to laptop and hand-held computers. Test new technology with staff to ensure usefulness before implementation.
 10. **The child welfare workforce should have a safe and suitable working environment.** Provide caseworkers with cell phones and pagers. Ensure adequate security in agency buildings. Solicit assistance from law enforcement in high-risk settings.
 11. **Employment incentives are essential for an effective child welfare workforce.** Conduct salary studies to advocate for and develop more equitable pay scales.
- Identify and define career paths in state or county personnel systems. Offer stipends and incentives to caseworkers to obtain social work degrees. Advocate for the creation of specialized, higher-pay positions to attract and retain skilled staff.
- Many of these recommendations require new policies and resources in order to be implemented. Fortunately, there has been increased attention to improving the child welfare workforce at the national level. A 2006 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report identified recruiting and retaining caseworkers as one of the three primary challenges facing the child welfare field. Congress recently acknowledged the need for child welfare improvements to ensure that workers are able to conduct appropriate visits with children in foster care. This opens the door to educate policymakers about the nature of the crisis in the child welfare workforce, and solutions to address it.
- Julie Farber is the Director of Policy, and Sara Munson is a Senior Policy Analyst at Children's Rights. Cornerstones for Kids funded the workforce projects referenced. This article draws from two reports produced under these projects: "Supporting an Effective Child Welfare Workforce to Improve Outcomes for Children" and "Improving the Child Welfare Workforce: Lessons Learned from Class Action Litigation." The latter report was produced by Children's Rights in collaboration with the National Center for Youth Law. These reports, and the federal policy proposals developed by Children's Rights and Children's Defense Fund to improve the workforce, are available at www.childrensrights.org.*
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