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“Thrown Right in Right Away”: Voices of Recently-hired Child Protection Investigators and Case Managers

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Research Questions

- What characterizes the training and transition process for newly-hired Child Protective Investigators (CPIs) and Case Managers (CMs) in Florida?
- What impacts newly-hired workers' preparedness for independent caseloads?



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Methodology

- We used quota sampling of Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF) baseline respondents.
- We conducted telephone interviews with 21 CPIs and 17 CMs in all Florida regions.
- Participants met four criteria:
 - currently employed as a CPI or CM
 - recently participated in the online portion of the FSPSF study
 - recently completed pre-service training
 - recently acquired own caseload.
- Interviews lasted between 22 and 68 minutes, averaging 43 minutes.





Analytic Approach

- Thematic analysis using the qualitative software, NVivo
 - a detailed approach appropriate for identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
 - Become familiar with the data.
 - Generate initial codes.
 - Search for initial themes.
 - Review the themes.
 - Define and name the themes.
 - Produce the report.





Sample Description

- Workers ranged in age from 21 to 59 with an average of 33 years old.
- Most workers were White ($n = 21$) or Black ($n = 9$), with 2 bi- or multi-racial participants.
- Workers had been on their current job an average of 28 weeks, or approximately 6 months (range = 21-41)
- 52% indicated previous child welfare experience





Findings. Pre-Service Training

- **Content is informative, yet difficult to apply because of client complexities and agency procedures that workers encounter.**
 - *[The] book covered textbook cases, but people are not textbook cases.*
 - *we never really got the full, the realness, the rawness of what it really means to be a CPI. We never really got that. We got the sugar-coated part of it.*
 - *I feel like the classroom prepared us for the perfect world, if everything went okay, ...whereas when you're working with a family, a lot of times our families have ten-plus priors, and so they're very familiar with the system. At times they may know more than you do, and it's just a different ball game – very different ball game.*





Findings. Pre-Service Training

- **Field training was helpful, but highly variable. Participants wanted more field days to understand the daily reality of the work.**
 - *The field days were very critical in learning how to be prepared in learning the agency's approach to things like conducting home visits...which to me was the scariest thing.*
 - *Unfortunately there weren't a lot of those field days and we weren't guaranteed to get whatever unit item you were supposed to be learning if you went out in the field that day.*
 - *I had field days, but rarely did I go out. There was not staff willing to take me out or to take us out. We were more used as transporters. Go pick up kids, take them here, take them there.*





Findings. Transition to Independent Caseload

- **Transition was highly variable depending on protected caseload procedures and caseload assignment procedures.**
 - Varying lengths of protected caseload sizes (0 – 12 weeks)
 - Varying lengths of protected caseload severity (0 – 12 weeks)





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Findings. Transition to Independent Caseload

– *I can tell you [my transition] was a disaster. [On a protected caseload in my agency,] you get a case, and you get a day to work that case, and the next day another case. You get a day in between to...get all your ducks in a row, get all the paperwork done...[W]hen I got off of protected caseload, ...I went from getting two cases a week to getting two cases a day, and that was challenging. I was not a happy camper.*



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Findings. Transition to Independent Caseload

- **Unwritten expectations about forms and procedures leave workers confused about what to do.**
 - *There was no guidance from supervisors to be like, "Hey, this is the case you're getting. This is what you need to do." That was very difficult for me because it was almost like you're given a case, and they assume you know certain things. The things you don't know, they assume you know.*
 - *There was little guidance on handling the first case and then the cases keep coming, but there is no guidance on how to handle the cases.*





Findings. Agency Environment

- **The environment was stressful due to the nature of the job** (e.g., guidelines, expectations, rules, workload).
 - *we're all on the same page that we are severely overworked [and] severely understaffed...*
- 1/2 of participants felt the agency morale was positive; the other 1/2 felt it was negative.





Findings. Agency Environment

- **Environments with high morale included accessible supervisors, collaborative coworkers, and a team approach.**
 - *If somebody observes that – another CPI is struggling with their caseload. A lot of times they’ll go to that CPI’s supervisor or their supervisor and say, “Hey, what can we do to help this person? They seem like they’re overwhelmed.”*
 - *I had one of my teammates go out with me on a case, because I couldn’t find a father...and we worked together to find him. And we did. And it was a good teambuilding experience. And then I had another time when a teammate called me and said, “Hey, I really need help with this.” And I went out and helped them.*





Findings. Agency Environment

- **Environments with low morale were largely unfriendly and understaffed with high caseloads.**
 - *In training, they told all these stories about how we got all this support system around us and how we can count on each other, and that's not true. It's a lie. We're nothing more than numbers... [t]hat's what it feels like around there.*





Findings. Agency Protocol

- **Workers felt a disconnect between training content and agency protocol.**
 - Knowing the policy and doing the job are two different things:
 - *[I]n the classroom setting, you've got a lot of information being thrown at you. Not thrown at you, but being presented to you, and when you pass that exam and you get your caseload, you've got a lot of expectations being put on you. I don't know. Then I've had people say, "It'll all come together. You've got to give it about a year or two and you'll get it." Well, I don't feel like I'm getting it.*





Findings. Agency Protocol

- **Workers were unfamiliar with necessary forms for particular circumstances.**
 - *there are certain forms that I have difficulty filling out or that weren't shown to me in training and... I just feel like I'm letting down my supervisor often.*





Findings. Agency Protocol

- **Workers were unfamiliar agency procedures for particular client circumstances.**
 - *...there's a bunch of protocol and it seems almost like there's an unwritten handbook of protocol and what is appropriate and what you can do, what you can't do.*
 - *I was just thinking I might as well have been told to build a rocket ship by myself in an hour without knowing how to build a rocket ship. That's how I feel about this job. It's impossible to do a good job with what you're working with.*





Findings. Expectations-Reality Divide

- **Participants felt that the job met their expectations that they could help children and families; however, they did not expect the extremely high caseloads and the workload expectations associated with each case (e.g., forms, procedures)**
 - *So I knew that we would be making safety decisions... however it's just different when ...you're actually doing it, and then those cases start to pile up, and you feel as though you're just one person and all this weight is piled on top of you and it's holding you down so then you just become overwhelmed.*

