NEWLY-HIRIED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EXCEPTIONALLY CHALLENGING CASES

BACKGROUND
Nationally, over 3.3 million youth received a child protective investigation or alternative response in 2015. Child welfare cases are often complicated, with co-occurring issues such as domestic violence, mental health problems, and parental and youth substance use. Despite research showing child welfare workers experience challenges in managing their caseloads (e.g., burnout), little is known about what makes particular cases exceptionally challenging. The present qualitative study explores newly-hired case managers’ and child protective investigators’ perspectives on what constitutes an exceptionally challenging case.

METHODOLOGY
Data for the present analysis is from wave 2 of the FSPSF, collected between March 2016 and June 2017, when participants had been in the field for approximately six months. Participants who reported they were still working in child welfare and carrying a caseload at wave 2 were asked to estimate their caseload size and how many of those cases they considered to be exceptionally challenging. They were then asked to provide a short response as to what makes a case exceptionally challenging.

From an initial review of the short responses, nine patterns relating to exceptionally challenging cases were identified: 1) difficulty making contact (e.g., unable to locate client, language barriers); 2) agency-related issues (e.g., lack of supervisory support, high workload); 3) parent/caregiver attitudes or behaviors (e.g., difficult or hostile parents, non-compliant parents); 4) mental health issues; 5) substance abuse issues; 6) case types (e.g., high-risk cases, cases involving domestic violence); 7) case attributes (e.g., teenagers, multiple children on a single case; medical issues); 8) case tasks (e.g., removals, safety planning, transportation); and 9) procedural/paperwork issues (e.g., interacting with the legal/court system, workflow issues). Two members of the research team then coded each short response according to these categories.

FINDINGS
A total of 1,034 child welfare professionals shared what made their cases exceptionally challenging. Among participants who provided estimates (n = 997), the mean caseload size was 14.9 (SD = 7.2), and on average, they perceived 27.4% of those cases to be exceptionally challenging (SD = 18.4%). At six months on the job, perceived challenges fell into each of the nine categories, which were then organized into three primary themes: 1) agency policies and procedures; 2) specific case types, attributes, and tasks; and 3) client-related challenges.

AGENCY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
Many participants indicated that cases were only exceptionally challenging because they were situated within a high workload, often with elevated time pressure. Beyond this, procedural issues made cases more difficult for workers, including workflow problems, such as having to wait for someone else to complete a task before moving forward on a case. Others described their lack of familiarity with, or uncertainty about procedures and paperwork to be completed. When difficulties did arise, participants did not always feel supported, by either their supervisors or colleagues.
SPECIFIC CASE TYPES, ATTRIBUTES, AND TASKS

Cases with particularly egregious maltreatment such as sexual abuse, physical abuse with injury, and child death presented difficulties for workers as did those with concurrent issues, such as domestic violence, juvenile justice involvement, repeat offenders, and mental health and substance abuse problems. Often, participants identified complicated family dynamics, which included both the logistical challenges of working with large families, as well as navigating conflict within the client system, such as disagreements between the parent and caregiver. Though some participants spoke to child-specific attributes of a case such as runaways, medical issues, or sibling abuse, most participants described the challenge of multiple children on a single case, or cases in which the plans were very complex due to the need for numerous services or providers. This was especially true in the context of certain case tasks, such as transportation, visitation, and locating placements, as workers felt the time it takes to do these things interferes with their other responsibilities. Notably, some workers also expressed difficulties with tasks related to safety planning, removals, and shelter cases, with some specifically saying they have difficulty in identifying present danger or distinguishing between impending and present danger.

CLIENT-RELATED CHALLENGES

Being unable to locate clients or otherwise having difficulty in connecting with them due to circumstances (e.g., homelessness, incarceration, out of town placements) or lack of contact information also made cases particularly difficult. Among clients that workers were able to contact, those who were disrespectful, argumentative, and rude to the worker, as well as those having a lack of boundaries (e.g., making inappropriate demands on the workers time) were considered exceptionally challenging. At times, workers described how these attitudes and behaviors rose to the level of racism or threatening or violent behaviors toward the worker.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Newly-hired child welfare workers reported they considered about 27% of their caseloads to be exceptionally challenging, with many of them reporting multiple areas of difficulty. Initial findings suggest that newly-hired workers are facing both procedural and emotional frustration in these cases. To better understand these frustrations, FSPSF researchers will continue examining how workers perceive challenging cases, and how those perceptions may change over time. Some elements of exceptionally challenging cases do not have simple solutions; however, we offer the following recommendations to help support newly-hired child welfare workers in managing difficult cases:

- Supervisors should consider regular “refresher” sessions for newly hired workers regarding policies, procedures, and paperwork. Many new workers in this sample described challenges related to unwritten expectations or lack of knowledge of required documentation. Ensuring that newly hired workers have clear, written direction may alleviate some of this uncertainty.

- Trainers should consider additional content and/or time on present danger. Many workers shared that exceptionally challenging cases are those with present danger, though there was much variation in their specific challenges, including identification of and safety planning for present danger.

- Relatedly, workers shared that distinguishing between impending and present danger is challenging. While this might be related to the need for directed training, it may also reflect a need for support and encouragement around the difficulty of making high pressure decisions, especially within the first few months on the job. This is consistent with previous FSPSF findings that newly-hired workers desire close supervision and support in the transition period from training to field work. Agencies should provide new workers with sustained mentorship to ensure they have the capacity to respond to this and other challenges on their caseloads.

- Agencies should promote effective supervision/mentoring to help workers navigate challenges that are unmalleable (e.g., difficult or hostile parents, cases with domestic violence, cases with present danger). Supervisory support and mentoring could increase workers’ efficacy in addressing these issues as well as help them debrief any emotional reactions they may be having in working these cases. Topics would ideally be addressed during regularly scheduled, ongoing mentorship with supervisors about cases and caseload responsibilities.

---