PROJECT TITLE:
THE FLORIDA STUDY OF PROFESSIONALS FOR SAFE FAMILIES (FSPSF)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Dina J. Wilke, PhD, MSW

KEY PROJECT STAFF:
Melissa Radey, PhD, MSSW, MA (co-PI)
Philip Osteen, PhD, MSW (co-PI)
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Carmella Miller (PhD Research Assistant)
Caitlin Nolan (PhD Research Assistant)
Sarah Rakes (PhD Research Assistant)
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REPORT DATE:
7/16/18
For contract period ending 6/30/18

1. **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT:** Recruitment and retention for child welfare professionals are widespread issues for the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Community-Based Care organizations (CBCs). High staff turnover puts vulnerable children at greater risk for recurrence of maltreatment, impedes timely intervention referrals and, ultimately, delays permanency. Annual attrition estimates across the state range between 25%-60%.

The Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF) is in year 3 of a proposed 5-year longitudinal study of newly hired employees into child protective investigator (CPI) and case manager (CM) positions. Our intent is to learn about individual, organizational, and community influences on child welfare employee retention, and ultimately, child and family outcomes. This statewide study is examining **worker personal characteristics** (e.g., educational background, family history, self-esteem, etc.) **worker beliefs and behaviors** (e.g., stress and burnout, work/family balance, social support and coping, etc.), **organizational characteristics** (e.g., physical environment, supervisory and management practices, vacancy rate, etc.), and **work characteristics** such as caseload
size and severity, prevalence of child deaths, and exposure to threats and violence. We are also examining community context (e.g., unemployment, poverty rates, etc.) recognizing that the local community may impact worker retention and child and family outcomes.

The FSPSF utilizes three broad strategies to answer several different research questions. First, respondents are surveyed every 6-7 months with a core instrument. Second, in addition to the core instrument, in-depth modules will be rotated during the data collection period. Each module will be completed three times during the 5-year study. Modules will include: 1) Mental Health; 2) Work/Personal Life Balance; 3) Supervision and Organizational Functioning. The intent of this strategy is to gain a deeper understanding of key areas of worker personal or organizational characteristics that may impact job satisfaction and retention. Finally, qualitative interviews will be used to further augment information gathered on the in-depth modules, or to explore special topics as they arise.

FSPSF project staff have recruited all Child Protective Investigators (CPIs) and Case Managers (CMs) who were in pre-service training between Sept. 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016. We are following this sample of new hires for five years, even if they leave their child welfare positions during the study timeframe. This strategy is critical to understanding employment outcomes for those who leave their initial CPI/CM positions. Participants were recruited during their pre-service training, a mandatory training for all new hires not currently holding Florida certification in the job for which they have been hired.

Overall, 100% of administrative units across the state of Florida have agreed to be part of the study. This includes 17 Community-Based Care organizations, 6 regions for the Department of Children and Families, and 6 Sheriff Offices.

2. **CSFR OUTCOMES:** Although all of the CSFR outcomes are indirectly related to the health and productivity of the workforce, which this study seeks to assess, none of the CSFR outcomes are expected to be directly impacted through this study.
3. **MEASUREABLE OBJECTIVES AND PROGRESS TO DATE:**

**UPDATES FROM PROGRESS REPORT 3**

Per agreement with the FICW, a deliverable report for quarter 3 was not submitted as scheduled. The following are updates on the expected outcomes for that quarter:

**Objective 2.5: Agency reports distributed**
- Agency reports for Wave 3 (12 months) were distributed in June 2018. The statewide overview is appended to this report (Appendix A).

**Objective 6.1: Research Briefs distributed quarterly to stakeholders.**
- A research brief on encouraging and challenging supervision was distributed in March 2018. A copy of the brief is appended to this report (Appendix B).

**PROGRESS REPORT 4:**

**Objective 3.1: Final panel distributed February 2018. Survey closed 3/15/18**
- Wave 4 data collection was completed as scheduled. The overall response rate for Wave 4 was about 81% (n=1,213).

**Objective 3.2: Data cleaned, merged across variables, and scales constructed**
- Initial cleaning is complete, and scales have been constructed. The employment questions were modified midway through Wave 4 to make coding of departure reasons more efficient in future waves. We are still in the process of reconciling the two sets of Wave 4 responses and expect to have that completed by August 2018.

**Objective 5.1: Instrument built in Qualtrics and pilot test completed; Objective 5.2: IRB documents submitted; Objective 5.3: First panel launched in June 2018**
- Wave 6 was launched as scheduled in June 2018 following IRB approval and pilot testing.

**Objective 6.1: Research Briefs distributed quarterly to stakeholders**
- A research brief on field day experiences was distributed in June 2018. A copy of the brief is appended to this report (Appendix B).

**Objective 6.2: Minimum of 8 manuscripts submitted to peer-reviewed journals**

Langenderfer-Magruder, L., & Wilke, D. J. (Under review). The use of text messages to increase completion of web-based surveys. Submitted to *Journal of Technology in Human Services*.


Radey, M., & Schelbe, L. (Under review). Gender disparities in occupational support in a female-dominated profession. Submitted to *Social Service Review*.


**Objective 6.3: Minimum of 8 abstracts submitted to national peer-reviewed conferences**


4. **EXPENDITURES TO DATE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel (Wages &amp; Fringe Benefits)</td>
<td>$ 421,071.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials &amp; Supplies</td>
<td>$ 6,150.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>$ 34,018.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Incentives</td>
<td>$ 170,415.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTDC</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>$ 36,353.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL EXPENSES THROUGH 6/30/18</strong></td>
<td>$ 668,007.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respectfully submitted,

Dina Wilke, PhD
Principal Investigator
Appendix A
Wave 3 Employment Outcomes by Job Category

Turnover and Employment Experiences of Newly Hired Child Welfare Workers by Job Category for Employees in Training 9/15 – 12/16

The following table reflects findings from all participants who responded to our third survey, approximately 12 months after pre-service training. Those in the same agency/same role category have not changed jobs since our baseline survey. Those in the same agency/different role category have changed positions within the same agency. Depending on the scope and services provided by an agency, these participants may no longer be in a child welfare position. For example, someone who began the study as a CPI for DCF could now be an Adult Protective Investigator for DCF. For those who left their agency, we provided the total percentage of workers who left in the first 12 months, as well as a breakdown of who left within the first 6 months on the job (i.e., before wave 2) and who left between 6 and 12 months (i.e., since wave 2) on the job.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Workers (N=1,294)</th>
<th>All DCMs (n=762)</th>
<th>All DCF CPIs (n=416)</th>
<th>All Sheriff CPIs (n=116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Turnover</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same agency/Same role</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same agency/Different role</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left agency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since wave 2</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before wave 2</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for Agency Departure</strong>*</td>
<td>(n=297)</td>
<td>(n=162)</td>
<td>(n=119)</td>
<td>(n=16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job responsibilities</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency environment</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family circumstances</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other career opportunities</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary departure</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not provide a response</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reflects those participants who left their baseline child welfare agency between Wave 2 and Wave 3 and those who did not respond to Wave 2, but who told us they left their agency by Wave 3.
The following two tables reflect responses from participants who remain in the same agency and same role as baseline. When appropriate, mean values are provided with standard deviations in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 2 (6 months) to Wave 3 (12 Months) Changes</th>
<th>Child Welfare Workers only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Child Welfare Workers (N=739)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Hours Worked</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>45.6 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>44.9 (15.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceptions of Work-Family Balance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work could interfere with a romantic relationship/marriage (Yes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work could interfere with having/raising children (Yes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work could interfere with caring for ill/older/disabled relative (Yes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Health (Excellent/Very Good)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental Health (Excellent/Very Good)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Work Experiences</td>
<td>All Child Welfare Workers (N=739)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Satisfaction (range=0-20)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>15.8 (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>15.5 (5.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>14.7 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>14.2 (3.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>6.1 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>6.1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>11.1 (4.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>11.1 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>6.3 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>5.9 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived Stress (range=0-16)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>5.9 (3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>6.1 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Pressure (range=0-15)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>11.4 (3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>11.7 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Burnout (range=0-76)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>42.8 (15.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>45.2 (15.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary Traumatic Stress (range=0-68)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>24.6 (14.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>26.5 (15.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stigma: Attitude toward Clients (range=0-40)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>18.0 (7.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>19.1 (7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intent to Leave (Yes)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3</td>
<td>71.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Notes:
1. Information in this report was gathered during the first and second waves of data collection. Study participants completed a baseline survey during their first month of pre-service training and the wave two survey about 6 months later.
2. When average values are reported, the standard deviation is also presented in parentheses. Standard deviation reflects how widely dispersed answers are, such that larger standard deviations describe greater variation in responses. About 68% of responses are within +/- one standard deviation around the mean. For example, approximately 68% of newly hired workers across Florida during the study period were between the ages of 22.2 – 41.0 (average age=31.6, standard deviation=9.4). If you are interested in a brief primer on data collection and analysis, please check the Florida Institute for Child Welfare website for a technical report by Dr. Philip Osteen (Data and Statistics 101).
3. Items that comprise the scale scores are provided below.

Social Support – supervision
1. How much can your supervisor be relied on when things get tough at work?
2. How much is your supervisor willing to listen to your work-related problems?
3. How helpful is your supervisor to you in getting your job done?
4. How much is your supervisor willing to listen to your personal problems?

Social Support – co-workers
1. How much can your co-workers be relied on when things get tough at work?
2. How much are your co-workers willing to listen to your work-related problems?
3. How helpful are your co-workers to you in getting your job done?
4. How much are your co-workers willing to listen to your personal problems?

Job Satisfaction – operating conditions
1. Many of our rules and procedures make doing a good job difficult.
2. My efforts to do a good job are seldom blocked by red tape.
3. I have too much to do at work.
4. I have too much paperwork.

Job Satisfaction – communication
1. Communications seem good within this organization.
2. The goals of this organization are not clear to me.
3. I often feel that I do not know what is going on with the organization.
4. Work assignments are not fully explained.
Job Satisfaction – pay
1. I feel I am being paid a fair amount for the work I do.
2. Raises are too few and far between.
3. I feel unappreciated by the organization when I think about what they pay me.
4. I feel satisfied with my chances for salary increases.

Perceived Stress
In the past 30 days, how frequently did you feel...
1. that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
2. confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
3. that things were going your way?
4. difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Time Pressure
1. I have too much work to do in the amount of time that I have.
2. I don’t have enough time to do my job effectively.
3. I am too busy at work.
4. My workload is too high.
5. I have a lot of time pressure in my work.

Burnout
1. How often do you feel tired?
2. Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?
3. Do you find it hard to work with clients?
4. How often are you physically exhausted?
5. Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?
6. Does it drain your energy to work with clients?
7. How often are you emotionally exhausted?
8. Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?
9. Do you find it frustrating to work with clients?
10. How often do you think: "I can't take it anymore"?
11. Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?
12. Do you feel that you give more than you get back when you work with clients?
13. How often do you feel worn out?
14. Is your work emotionally exhausting?
15. Are you tired of working with clients?
16. How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?
17. Does your work frustrate you?
18. Do you sometimes wonder how long you will be able to continue work with clients?
19. Do you feel burnt out because of your work?
Secondary Traumatic Stress
Please indicate how frequently each statement was true for you in the past seven (7) days.

1. I felt emotionally numb.
2. My heart started pounding when I thought about my work with clients.
3. It seemed as if I was reliving the trauma(s) experience by my client(s).
4. I had trouble sleeping.
5. I felt discouraged about the future.
6. Reminders of my work with clients upset me.
7. I had little interest in being around others.
8. I felt jumpy.
9. I was less active than usual.
10. I thought about my work with clients when I didn't intend to.
11. I had trouble concentrating.
12. I avoided people, places, or things that reminded me of my work with clients.
13. I had disturbing dreams about my work with clients.
14. I wanted to avoid working with some clients.
15. I was easily annoyed.
16. I expected something bad to happen.
17. I noticed gaps in my memory about client sessions.

Stigma: Attitudes Toward Clients

1. Although I try not to, sometimes I believe the parents I work with are not capable of change.
2. Sometimes I feel like the parents I work with lie to get what they want.
3. I believe there are some parents who should never get their child(ren) back, even if they meet all of the state requirements.
4. Although I try not to, sometimes I don’t believe my clients will ever be good parents.
5. There are times when I feel like some of the parents I work with don’t really deserve the help that I give them.
6. All parents are capable of change, even when they’ve committed serious offenses toward their child(ren).
7. Although I try not to, sometimes I find myself holding a grudge against the parents I work with.
8. Sometimes when I first meet a parent, I feel like I know exactly how the case will go based on similar parents I have worked with.
Appendix B
Research Briefs: March 2018 and June 2018
ENCOURAGING VERSUS CHALLENGING SUPERVISION: EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY-HIRED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

BACKGROUND

Due to the intense demands of their jobs, 20 to 50% of frontline workers leave child welfare within the first few years of hire.\textsuperscript{1,2} One factor contributing to workers’ job satisfaction and retention is quality supervision.\textsuperscript{3,4} However, workers’ typical experiences with supervision are inconsistent, primarily task-oriented\textsuperscript{5} and without emotional support.\textsuperscript{6} This study used interviews with newly-hired child welfare workers to consider: What are the supervision expectations and experiences of child welfare workers, specifically within the early stages of their careers?

METHODOLOGY

From workers participating in the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), researchers randomly invited child protective investigators (CPIs) and case managers (CMs) from throughout the state to participate in interviews to discuss their experiences transitioning from training to independent caseloads. At the time of the interview, workers had been employed in their role for approximately six months. The FSPSF team completed interviews with 38 participants who were: 1) CPIs or CMs; 2) had completed pre-service training; and 3) maintained independent caseloads. Participants were asked about their classroom and field training, supervision, support, and their perception of preparedness for independent work and caseloads. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes.

FINDINGS

Most newly-hired workers considered their current supervisor as “hands on” and encouraging or, conversely, as “empty” and challenging. Approximately 50% of workers described encouraging experiences ($n=20$) and 33% described challenging experiences ($n=12$). The remaining workers ($n=6$) described mixed experiences typically due to supervisor turnover. Workers voiced similar expectations for supervision and recognized a range of supervisor quality. They felt “lucky” or “shafted” depending on their situations. Workers classified their experiences in four domains: 1) availability and approachability; 2) consistency of provided information; 3) micromanagement; and 4) support. Regardless of their actual experiences, workers had similar expectations of their supervisors in each domain. The sections below outline newly-hired workers’ expectations and experiences regarding each domain and suggest ways to promote encouraging supervision.

AVAILABILITY & APPROACHABILITY

Although newly-hired workers recognized the nature of child welfare work meant fast-paced, time-contingent, and unpredictable work, they expected that supervisors would be available and willing to assist them as needed. Rather than requiring a certain frequency of supervision, workers voiced the need for ad-hoc availability. Workers with encouraging experiences felt supervisors were available “24/7,” while workers with challenging ones felt they were “winging it” on their own.
CONSISTENCY OF PROVIDED INFORMATION

Newly-hired workers anticipated having many questions and expected their supervisors to provide and teach clear, accurate information. Encouraging supervisors met these expectations while challenging supervisors gave contradictory instructions, assigned tasks without justification, and gave the same explanations over and over despite workers expressing confusion.

MICROMANAGEMENT

Given their ultimate job responsibility of child safety, newly-hired workers almost universally expected “micromanagement.” For them, this meant frequent case consultations, case reviews, and detailed feedback. Workers with encouraging experiences felt that micromanagement provided opportunities for them both to learn and ensure child safety while workers with challenging experiences desired more micromanagement and felt vulnerable in their case decisions.

SUPPORT

Given the demanding nature of the job, in order to ensure child safety new workers expected their supervisors to provide a supportive, team atmosphere. Workers with encouraging experiences commonly described “a great union” and supervisors who would “go to bat” for them while workers with challenging experiences and little support often felt incompetent and that they were “letting down” their supervisors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken together, these findings yield four main implications:

- Supervisors can benefit from understanding new workers’ high reliance on guidance over the first six months on the job. Although supervisors cannot be available at all times, akin to office hours, supervisors can welcome newly-hired workers to check in during specified hours each day on an as needed basis.

- Developing appropriate competencies for supervisors to meet newly-hired workers’ common expectations for available, knowledgeable, case-oriented, and supportive supervisors can guide training efforts. Supervision requires a distinct skillset from frontline child welfare work and providing supervisors with essential knowledge and skills can promote successful transition experiences among newly-hired workers.

- A checklist to guide decision-making for workers to reference during the transition from pre-service training to independent casework can help workers increase their sense of competence and confidence on the job. The checklist can provide workers with step-by-step instructions under various conditions as they handle a variety of cases for the first time.

- Reduced caseloads for both newly-hired workers and their supervisors during the first six months on the job can promote a supportive environment that effectively socializes newly-hired employees. Supervisors can spend time to address workers’ job concerns and apprehensions and workers can spend time to learn and complete their jobs tasks.

Funding Provided By:


FIELD TRAINING EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY-HIRED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

BACKGROUND
Annual child welfare turnover rates among frontline workers range from 20% to 40%, and rates are particularly high among newly-hired workers. Training is a critical component in attracting and maintaining workers in child welfare positions, and a lack of effective training contributes to turnover. This brief uses interview data with newly-hired child welfare workers in Florida to examine their agency-based field training experiences. Field days are a key component of training for new hires to apply the pre-service curriculum in a real-world environment. During agency-based field days trainees shadow certified workers, who serve as mentors, to learn core job responsibilities. This study seeks to identify what facilitates meaningful field day experiences in preparation for frontline positions from the perspectives of recently-hired workers.

METHODOLOGY
Through a random selection process to include child protective investigators (CPIs) and case managers (CMs) from throughout the state, researchers invited Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF) respondents to participate in interviews to discuss their experiences in training and in transitioning to independent caseloads. At the time of the interview, workers had been employed in their role for approximately six months, which included about 2-3 months of training, and 3-4 months of casework. The FSPSF team completed interviews with 38 participants who were: 1) CPIs or CMs; 2) had completed pre-service training; and 3) maintained independent caseloads. Participants were asked about their classroom and field training, supervision, support, and their level of job preparedness. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes.

FINDINGS
All workers expressed that field days played an important role in their job preparation. However, workers’ experiences with field days varied. Almost 50% (n = 17) had positive, meaningful experiences and 40% (n = 15) did not. Those with positive experiences generally felt that their field days exposed them to critical, realistic job content while those with negative experiences felt frustrated that they received incomplete training and wasted time in agency offices without guidance. The remaining participants felt mixed about their experiences (n = 6) such that although some field days were helpful, they desired more exposure to job tasks and procedures. Data analysis identified four themes related to the conditions facilitating meaningful field day experiences and preparation for their positions:

AVAILABILITY & APPROACHABILITY
Participants consistently viewed field days as an excellent opportunity to integrate pre-service classroom learning into the practice setting. Observing mentors and applying content from the classroom-based training enabled newly-hired workers to improve the skills needed for their positions. Likewise, participants emphasized that field experiences provided exposure to the reality of the child welfare context, which facilitated their development of realistic job expectations. Regardless of the quality of the experience, participants expressed that field days could offer a supervised forum in which they could “see what you learned and actually put it into play.”
STRUCTURE OF FIELD DAYS

Newly-hired workers expressed that having structure within field days contributed to the quality of learning experiences. Most participants with meaningful experiences had field days with a defined purpose, assigned tasks, and an experienced mentor assigned to them. Tasks included shadowing the mentor while conducting a home visit, attending court, or completing administrative tasks necessary for documentation. Alternatively, workers whose field days lacked structure expressed frustration and regret that they “just sat” during their time at the agency due to unassigned mentors and fluctuating schedules. In these circumstances, agencies were unprepared to provide appropriate experiences for new workers.

FUNCTIONING IN DISRUPTED ENVIRONMENTS

The work setting shaped participants’ field days, and at times disrupted meaningful experiences. For some workers, high caseloads, the fast-paced nature of the work, the priority of timely investigations, and timelines for case closures translated to mentors not being available to newly-hired workers. Typically, workers did not blame mentors who were unable to attend to them due to their own job responsibilities. In fact, in spite of frustration in having limited opportunities to observe or participate in critical job tasks, study participants valued gaining a realistic view of job demands.

CONNECTION TO MENTORS

The quality and level of engagement between the newly-hired worker and mentor played a key role in the quality of the field training experiences. Several study participants with meaningful experiences noted the patience of their mentors; they connected with their mentor. Alternatively, workers without meaningful experiences described lacking approachable mentors. In addition to the structure and content of field days, the quality of interaction between the worker and the mentor contributed to participants’ ability to ask the questions necessary to learn job tasks and feel welcomed in the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Field days were most successful when agencies were prepared for trainees and had a plan for their learning experiences that mirrored training content. Taken together, these findings yield the following recommendations for agencies:

- Identify agency-based liaisons as a single point of contact for training personnel in order to coordinate the field day experience of trainees. This could include planning daily field day activities, assigning trainees to effective mentors, coaching mentors on the needs of trainees, and providing feedback to training personnel on the continued learning needs of trainees based on field day performance.
- Develop checklists for mentors and trainees to use to optimize learning experiences.
- Identify approachable and supportive agency professionals to serve as mentors and provide training on best practices for teaching and coaching new employees.
- Have alternative activities prepared for trainees whose training day activities become disrupted due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., alternative mentors, training about agency-based policies and practices).

1 Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) (2016). Child protective investigator and child protective investigator supervisor educational qualifications, turnover, and working conditions status report. Tallahassee, FL: Authors.