

**Social Work Education Consortium
Workforce Retention Study
Executive Summary**

Qualitative Study

September 2003

**The Social Work Education Consortium
University at Albany School of Social Welfare
Funded by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services**

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**General Summary of the Qualitative Study Process
And Implications
Summary of All Counties
*September 2003***

Introduction

This report presents some general findings from the second round of the workforce retention and turnover study. This study is being conducted on behalf of County Commissioners and NYS OCFS by faculty and staff representing the NYS Social Work Education Consortium. The report summarizes what we learned from qualitative interviews conducted with respondents from 12 counties in March 2003. These interviews were conducted as a follow-up to the first report, which presented findings from the written survey administered in February 2002.

The interviews were designed to achieve three related purposes. The first purpose was to gain more understanding about the findings from the survey. The second purpose was to gain new knowledge about retention and turnover. The third purpose was to elicit respondents' recommendations for improvements.

Method

Invitations were sent to each county inviting supervisors and caseworkers to meet with a study team member as a follow up to the survey completed in 2002.

Participants were interviewed in a private room. After participants were informed about their rights and the safeguards provided by the researchers, each gave her or his informed consent to participate. Participants were asked 14 open-ended questions. A researcher recorded their responses. Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes.

The Limitations of this Report

This study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the University at Albany's Institutional Review Board, which protects the rights of human participants in research. Participation in this survey was voluntary, and all opportunities to safeguard participants' anonymity and confidentiality have been taken. Respondents may not represent all workers in participating counties. In fact, there is no way for the researchers to determine whether participants' responses are representative of the experiences of other workers in the county.

The Organization of this Report

We are reporting responses to our questions under the following headings: Reasons to stay; reasons to leave; indicators of effectiveness; barriers to effectiveness; and recommended improvements. The following report identifies some of the correlates and consequences of undesirable turnover based on interviews in 12 counties. Turnover seems to be associated with a vicious cycle of needs, problems, and barriers to effectiveness. Unless strategic improvements are made, this cycle is likely to continue.

What improvements are needed? We have summarized the responses in an action-oriented chart attached at the end of this report. Specifically, respondents' recommended improvements are presented alongside the barriers and needs they identified. The implication is that, by meeting these needs and addressing these barriers, colleagues may make progress in reducing undesirable turnover and addressing effectiveness problems.

Reasons to Stay

In the initial survey we asked respondents who had not looked for another job, to identify the reasons why they choose to stay in their position. In counties where we conducted interviews, the participant's responses reinforced these findings. The most frequent themes across the counties included:

- Firm commitments to the work
- Life-work fit
- Local ties and commitments
- Vested in the system
- The absence of alternatives
- Multiple reasons for retention

Reasons to Leave

Responses from interviewees across the counties provided data that reinforced the findings from the survey. Specific themes that emerged in the interviews included:

- Pay and benefits surface again
- Split commitments: The Work Versus the Agency
- Quality of treatment issues
- Lack of appreciation & rewards
- Vicious cycles: Turnover creates turnover

This second study suggests that the reasons for leaving are not mutually exclusive. Several reasons appear to be intertwined. For example, the combination of too much stress, too many cases, too many hours on the job, too few supports, and too much paperwork have a cumulative effect on workers that result in leaving.

Indicators of Effectiveness

Definitions and determinations of effectiveness vary between the counties, and the mere fact that participants' views of effectiveness vary is an important finding. Most participants emphasize services to clients, improvements in clients, or both. Completing paperwork in a timely manner is also a factor in effectiveness.

Implied in these effectiveness data is that individual workers negotiate the terms and conditions of their effectiveness as they weigh several factors--including the client, the agency's rules, and the state's requirements.

Respondents have somewhat different views of the criteria that define their effectiveness. They negotiate the demands and meaning of their jobs and the work they are required to perform.

Whether this variability regarding effectiveness is a good thing for the agency is an important issue, and it needs to be discussed. For example, the research on high performing, learning organizations is instructive: Clarity and unity of purpose is vital to high performance, workers' efficacy, and learning-improvement systems.

Barriers to Effectiveness

Workers' perceived barriers are important. They influence whether client systems are served. Over time, they may compel workers to leave. At the very least, they serve as constraints on effectiveness, and, in all likelihood, they influence job satisfaction.

Barriers may be identified in two ways. The first is to ask workers directly, and we did. The second is to examine respondents' recommended improvements and analyze the barriers these improvements implicate. We also did this, and respondents' recommended improvements are identified in the chart provided at the end of this report.

One of the most important findings of this study is perhaps the most obvious and expected one: *High turnover creates conditions that encourage more turnover.*

For example, turnover creates heavy caseloads for everyone, including supervisors. Because supervisors may be doing casework, new workers do not receive the mentoring, guidance, and supports they need, and some are asked to take on cases before they have completed core training. Heavy caseloads involving hard to serve clients contribute to work overloads, stress, fatigue, and burnout. Workers' morale suffers. They wonder about the extent to which top-level administrators understand these problems; are prepared to support and reward workers; and will do something to rectify the situation.

More specifically, effectiveness and turnover are related, and both require organizational and policy improvements. In other words, *new strategies designed to improve effectiveness and reduce turnover must take into account organizational and policy needs, problems, and barriers in addition to what individual workers may need and require.*

Action Planning to Reduce Turnover and Improve Effectiveness

Undesirable turnover is associated with needs and problems in the agency, including several barriers to workers' effectiveness and agency performance. To facilitate action planning, we have constructed Figure 1 (attached at the end of this report); improvements are listed alongside the barriers and problems they may alleviate. A meeting with workers and supervisors in the counties could use the items in Figure 1 as a discussion tool to identify specific issues and recommendations for action.

Concluding Observations

This workforce study was commissioned to reduce undesirable, preventable turnover. Research aimed at solving an important problem like this one must focus initially on basic understanding. The underlying logic is solid: *The ability to solve problems depends on a thorough understanding of their antecedents, causes, correlates, and consequences.*

In this search for understanding, agency strengths, and achievements may get short shrift. When this happens, reports like this one run the risk of conveying the impression that there's not much good going on in the agency; and, that everyone is unhappy and looking to leave. Workers participating in the interviews identified distinctive strengths in each county. A meeting in each county would include discussion of the strengths as well as areas for improvement. A primary goal for this work is to enable agencies to build on these strengths as they strive to reduce and prevent undesirable turnover and improve retention. Reduced turnover and improved retention will benefit everyone, beginning with the workers who participated in this study and extending to the needy children, adults, and families they serve.

Figure 1. Recommended Improvements for Important Barriers, Problems, and Needs

<u>Barrier/Problem/Need</u>	<u>Recommended Improvement</u>
Premature assignment of caseloads to novice workers; and excessive caseloads	Provide more timely hiring, training, agency initiation, and deployment of new workers; do not assign cases to trainees.
When too many workers leave, administrators may try to fill vacancies in units providing mandatory services by transferring workers to cover cases, “robbing Peter to pay Paul”.	Exercise care when making internal transfers; and, consult workers and supervisors before transferring them.
Conflicts between work and personal life associated with turnover; and some job demands related to burnout.	Implement "flex time" and "comp time" arrangements.
Limitations in training and worker performance; problems with aspects of the agency's organizational climate.	Develop consensus on effective practice and overall job performance.
Over-reliance on training; individualistic, "sink or swim" socialization, which is associated with lower effectiveness and may sow the seeds for worker turnover.	Develop a coherent plan for initiation into the agency, including mentoring by expert, veteran workers.
Unavoidable selectivity and limitations of state and agency training regarding how to negotiate work demands in our county.	Capitalize on the expertise of effective, veteran workers in local training and agency initiation.
Lack of correspondence between aspects of training and actual work demands ("sugarcoating of the job")	Improve training quality and timing.
Effectiveness problems, agency climate, and their relations with burnout and turnover.	Ensure that workers have access to competent, supportive supervisors.
Morale and commitment problems caused by perceived lack of appreciation and trust as well as maltreatment.	Implement strengths-based, solution-focused, and improvement-oriented supervision and management procedures.
Heavy workloads, together with perceived absence of supports, and their relations with burnout and turnover.	Streamline paperwork requirements and provide clerical assistance.
Excessive caseloads; caseloads that have a disproportionate number of hardest to serve clients; special challenges of open cases inherited from workers who have left.	Improve caseloads (size and equity).
The challenges of travel in some counties, including the amount of time it takes workers to get home and the stress travel involves.	Assign cases, wherever possible, that are close to workers' homes. Assign workers to specific geographic regions or school districts for investigations and prevention services.

Lack of services, especially preventive services, for client systems; problems with paperwork requirements; excessive workloads related to burnout and turnover.	Employ and deploy strategically more parent aides, clerical aides, and transportation aides.
Workers' needs to feel appreciated and rewarded when they have performed effectively, especially good performance under extraordinarily challenging conditions.	Celebrate and reward "small wins" and big success stories.
Perceived lack of input by workers, together with lack of interest and knowledge by administration, including the negative effects of the agency's climate; need to develop the feeling that "we're all in the same boat here."	Convene listening circles, forums, and problem-solving sessions.
Need to increase a sense of professionalism among the workers and improve the agency's climate.	Improve screening and hiring processes and criteria.
Perceived barriers to promotion and development; needs for diverse leaders.	Support and promote ethnic-minority workers.
Transportation challenges and needs.	Add more county cars.
Perceived lack of appreciation and respect, which threaten to make the job "thankless" and reduce commitments to the job and the agency.	Work with the local media to promote success stories and to improve public awareness and appreciation of the agency and the workers.