

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

Quantitative Study

Summer 2002

**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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Executive Summary

Overview

The retention of front-line caseworkers is an ongoing challenge for public child welfare agencies. In April 2001, a meeting was held with local district Commissioners experiencing turnover in child welfare that exceeded 25%. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss challenges and solutions to worker turnover. One solution identified by the Commissioners was to survey workers and front line supervisors on factors that influence retention. The Social Work Education Consortium agreed to work with the Commissioners and OCFS Bureau of Training to implement this study.

The purpose of this study is to better understand those factors that influence worker retention in order to develop and improve effective organizational strategies to improve retention. This is a participatory research project, which includes the local social services commissioners as co-researchers.

The first phase of the study involved a survey of caseworkers and front-line supervisors in 13 county-based social services districts. The survey was developed from instruments designed for previous studies in California and Texas (Dickinson and Perry in press; Scannapieco and Connell in press), literature from other fields on workforce retention and turnover, and extensive input from local district leaders to ensure relevance for the participating agencies. Analysis of this first wave of data identifies factors related to the decision to remain in a child welfare job.

This report is structured to provide new information about workforce retention. Three kinds of information are included: (1) A profile written by a member of the research team for your county; (2) Summary information about the 13 counties that participated in this study; and, (3) Data for your county and data for all respondents.

Preliminary Findings

409 workers representing 13 counties participated in this study. This report indicates that, while the 13 counties exhibit some commonalities and many similarities, each county is a unique entity. Indicators of uniqueness, commonalty, and similarity are emphasized in the summary profile for individual counties. Eight factors were identified as key elements in the study. Six are categorized as organizational factors, two as supervisory factors. The six organizational factors include:

- Clarity and coherence of practice,
- Life-work fit, and, goal attainment,
- Job satisfaction and efficacy,
- Job supports and relationships,
- Technology, training and record-keeping,
- Salaries and benefits.

The two supervisory factors include:

- Supervisor supportiveness and effectiveness,
- Supervisor competence.

For each factor, respondents who had not considered looking for another job were more satisfied with these aspects of their job than respondents who had considered looking for another job.

Action Planning

Each county received an individual profile. This profile includes specific information about why workers say they think about leaving and the changes they recommend to improve retention. Unfortunately, these reports, individually and collectively, do not and cannot solve the retention and turnover problem. One of the main contributions of the reports lies in the questions they raise and the knowledge they provide for “in house” retention planning.

This research also signals needs for future research, which will provide additional information about participating counties and their relation to other counties. Specifically, qualitative interviews with workers are a practical necessity to determine what workers have in mind when they identify problems, needs, recommended changes, and aspirations. In other words, there is no substitute for direct, detailed conversations with workers.

Prominent Findings about Retention

Here are some of the highlights from the data:

- 397 of the 409 participants responded to the question “Have you considered looking for a new job within the last year?” 72% (n=286) indicated that they had considered looking for a new job within the last year.
- Participants identified four main reasons why they considered leaving: pay/benefits; organizational/administration issues; burnout; and caseload.
- In 8 of the 13 counties, at least 50% of workers identified salary as a reason to consider leaving. In these same 8 counties, at least 50% of workers reported that a change in salary would encourage them to remain in their current position.
- Salary concerns are manifested in other ways. For example, 22.2% of participants indicated that they are satisfied with their salary. 59% of respondents (who reported that they have considered looking for a new job) specified salary as a reason they have considered leaving; and, 65% indicated that improved salary would help them to stay in their current position.
- In 7 of the 13 counties, at least 50% of workers cited solutions to administrative and organizational problems as a recommended change that would encourage retention.
- In 4 of the 13 counties, at least 50% of workers cited administrative and organizational issues as a reason to consider leaving.

- Overall, caseloads are heavy, and these high caseloads influence retention decisions. For example, 43% of workers who have considered looking for a new job said that their caseload would have to be reduced in order for them to stay, and 34% cited caseload size as a reason why they have considered leaving.
- 72% of the participants reported that they would again choose the same career in the same agency. This finding about the stability of career and agency choice corresponds to other concerns about length of time respondents have worked in child welfare and the agency. Together these findings tell us that half of all the workers who participated have been retained for at least 4.7 years; and some in this cohort plan to remain in this line of work and in the same agency.
- Technology, Training and Record Keeping and Salary and Benefits received the lowest overall mean scores indicating worker dissatisfaction with these areas of their job.

Thus, issues concerning salary/benefits, caseloads, burnout, technology& record keeping, and administrative/organizational needs influence decisions to consider a new job. The implication is that these issues need to be studied and improvements need to be made to address retention needs.

Issue of Turnover

The issue of turnover and retention has emerged as more complex than we first believed. This complexity has become more apparent as the data have been analyzed and discussions of these data have proceeded. Alike in some ways, the county systems in this study also are unique. This uniqueness among counties makes it dangerous to offer blanket solutions.

Turnover and retention issues that have been identified include: recruitment and selection strategies that comply with civil service requirements, mechanisms for bringing new workers into the job without overburdening existing workers, effective coordination of hiring processes and training so that new workers can participate in training and counties aren't forced to put untrained workers in the field, supervision of a significant cohort of new workers while managing external demands for accountability, having sufficient seasoned workers to mentor new workers.

We have yet to consider how much turnover is “healthy” and what is the turnover tolerance in these agencies? What we do know is that it takes a year for a worker to become grounded in their position and many identify two years as a minimum period of time for a worker to feel competent. When looking at the length of time survey respondents have been in child welfare, with the agency and in their current position:

- 25% (96) had been in any child welfare position 2 years or less,
- 30% (118) had been in their current agency 2 years or less,
- 50% (196) had been in their current position 2 years or less.

This means that half of the workers in these counties were still developing the prerequisite knowledge and skills for competent performance of their jobs.

These are just a few of the critical questions related to the larger issue of turnover and retention that require further research and analysis.

Overall Demographic Information

- ❖ Age distribution: Based on the responses of 387 participants, the distribution is as follows:
 - ✓ 24.9% of respondents are between the ages of 22 and 29.
 - ✓ 25.9% of respondents are between the ages of 30 and 39.
 - ✓ 25.1% of respondents are between the ages of 40 and 49.
 - ✓ 21.8% of respondents are between the ages of 50 and 59.

- ❖ The highest percentage of *supervisors* is between 40 and 49 years old (32.1%).

- ❖ The highest percentage of *workers* is between 22 and 29 years old (29.7%).

- ❖ On average participants have worked in their current agency for 7.4 years and in child welfare for 8.4 years. Moreover, workers have been in their current position for 3.4 years.

- ❖ Annual salary ranges include:
 - ✓ 12.5% of participants are paid between \$20,001 and \$25,000.
 - ✓ 32.3% of participants are paid between \$25,001 and \$30,000.
 - ✓ 18.1% of participants are paid between \$30,001 and \$35,000.
 - ✓ 25.2% of participants are paid between \$35,001 and \$45,000.
 - ✓ 11.5% of participants are paid over \$45,000.

- ❖ ***The median number of children in a caseload is 30, and this figure stands in contrast to the 2002 recommendations provided by the Child Welfare League of America (Day 2002).***

- ❖ According to CWLA, the recommended caseload size for a family foster care worker is 12-15 children per social worker. The recommended average caseload for a CPS worker is 10 active on-going family cases and 4 active investigations. Within the Adoption unit caseload recommendations are:
 - ✓ “20-25 families per 1 social worker counseling with birth families, preparing and assessing adoptive applicants for infant placements, and supporting these families following placement.
 - ✓ 12-15 families per 1 social worker preparing and assessing adoptive applicants for the placement of children who are older or have special needs, and supporting these families following placement.
 - ✓ 10-12 children per 1 social worker preparing children for adoption who are older or who have special needs.
 - ✓ 30-35 families per 1 social worker assessing and preparing adoptive applicants for inter-country adoption” (Day, 2002).
 - ✓ Recommended caseload size for Family Preservation Workers is 15 families per social worker.

- ❖ Respondents report spending more time doing paperwork than any other task on a weekly basis. They reported that 44% of their time goes to paperwork; 30% of their time goes to direct services; 7.4% of time is spent in court; and, 7.4% of time is spent in supervision. The remaining 11% goes to management issues, community action and other.

A Reminder about Mean Scores and Median Scores

Mean scores and median scores are provided in this Executive Summary, many county reports, and the data profiles for each county. Sometimes the mean score is more important than the median, while in other cases the median is the more important indicator. A brief reminder follows about each and their relationship.

The mean score is simply the average. The mean results by adding up all of all values and then dividing the total score by the number of values.

In comparison with the mean score, the median score reveals more information about the distribution of these values. The median is the mid point in the distribution of all of the values. Half the scores are higher than the median, and the other half is lower.

For example, some respondents reported caseloads of up to 1700 children, while others reported 0. Of the 409 respondents, the mean, or average, is 61 children; in contrast, the median is 30 children. In this case, the median is a more accurate representation of the caseload size because the majority of respondents reported caseloads closer to 30. Readers are thus encouraged to examine both scores and weigh their meaning for the practices and policies in your county.

REFERENCES

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