

Social Work Education Consortium Workforce Retention Study

Executive Summary

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**The Social Work Education Consortium
University at Albany School of Social Welfare
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Executive Summary

Overview

Since 2001, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and local district commissioners have made a commitment to understand and respond to workforce turnover among front-line caseworkers and supervisors in public child welfare agencies. Over the past five years, local and state leaders have worked with the Social Work Education Consortium (SWEC) to identify, understand, and improve the organizational and supervisory factors, which apparently cause workers to leave.

SWEC's research has been instrumental in providing understanding about workforce turnover, and this research also has guided improvement planning. Since 2002, SWEC researchers, in close consultation with local commissioners, have conducted three large-scale surveys in 12 counties. In addition, SWEC researchers have interviewed individually 101 workers and supervisors in 12 county systems.

Aiming to gain more understanding, and especially knowledge about whether the improvements implemented since 2001 have reduced turnover, in 2005 SWEC researchers again administered the survey to the original 12 county agencies, which participated in the original survey in 2002.

In brief, the findings from 2005 for those actions mirror many of the same findings in 2002. These findings indicate the factors related to workers' decision to remain in a child welfare job as well as reasons why workers consider leaving. The developing understanding adds to an improvement-oriented "road map", including special planning priorities for commissioners and others leaders in their work to recruit, deploy, and retain the best possible workforce.

This report is structured to illuminate key aspects of this improvement-oriented road map. It highlights knowledge about workforce turnover and 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 12 counties that participated in this study; and, (3) Data for your county and data for all respondents.

Preliminary Findings

The findings from both 2002 and 2005 indicate that, while the 12 counties exhibit some commonalities and many similarities, each county is a unique entity. Indicators of uniqueness, commonality, 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,
- 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 of the above factors, respondents who had not considered looking for another job were at least slightly more satisfied than respondents who had considered looking for another job.

Action Planning

Each county has received an individual profile. This profile includes specific information about why workers say they are thinking about leaving and the changes they recommend to improve retention. Participants completing the survey independently “wrote in” their top three reasons in three related, but different categories: (1) Reasons for staying; (2) Reasons for leaving; and, (3) Necessary changes that would encourage them to stay.

Each of these three response sets offers an opportunity to look at notable improvements over the past 4 years and areas for continued attention. Data such as this can assist each county in developing a unique and targeted series of interventions designed to support workforce retention. These interventions will be most effective when they include feedback to staff regarding the findings combined with in-depth input from the staff regarding action strategies that can build an effective learning organization.

A final caveat before proceeding to the findings: SWEC researchers and commissioners alike have learned over the past five years that all retention is not good. In fact, in some county systems, commissioners and other exemplary workers have complained that the best workers leave, while some of the least committed and competent workers stay. With this in mind, SWEC researchers and commissioners no longer talk about retention alone as the aim of this research and improvement planning. Rather, the aim is to optimize, professionalize, and stabilize the workforce.

The achievement of this aim depends on a comprehensive, coherent, integrated, and strategic plan for workforce development. This plan encompasses recruitment, training, deployment in the agency, continuing professional development and career opportunities, ongoing supports, incentives and rewards for competent practice, and positive, healthy agency climates and cultures. SWEC’s research and development initiatives are designed to complement and augment commissioners’ efforts aimed in the same direction.

Prominent Findings about Retention

Here are some of the highlights from the data:

- In 2002, 295 (71%) participants completed surveys as compared with 229 (60%) participants in 2005.
- In 2002 74% of participants answered yes to the question: “Have you considered looking for a new job within the last year?” In 2005, this dropped to 61%.
- In 2002 participants identified four main reasons why they considered leaving: pay & benefits; organizational & administration issues; stress & burnout; and caseload. In 2005, there were three main reasons: pay only; stress & burnout; and organizational & administration issues
- While pay continues to be a reason why people leave, across all counties, salaries appear to have improved. The number of participants who indicated salary as a change needed to stay dropped by 50% (152 to 74). Participants also indicated reasons other than salary for staying. For example, like the work 55%, co-workers 30%, and benefits only 30%. In contrast with 2002, where 67% said pay and benefits was a reason to leave, 57% indicated pay only as a reason to leave. In 2002, 72% indicated pay and benefits were changes needed in order for them to stay and in 2005, 55% said pay only was a change needed to stay.
- The data indicate improvements in the area of workload as well. In 2002, 29% of the respondents indicated workload as a reason to leave in contrast with 11% in 2005. The issue of more staff and smaller caseloads also improved according to respondents. In 2002, 35% indicated that more staff and smaller caseloads were needed in order for workers to stay. In 2005, 28% gave the same reason.
- In 2005, among those participants who indicated reasons for staying, 55% identified that they liked the work. This is a striking increase; it stands in sharp contrast to participants in 2002 where 8% identified this same reason.
- In 2002, 82% of the participants reported that they would again choose the same career in the same agency. This finding was reinforced again in 2005, when 77% indicated the same.
- Two areas received the lowest overall mean scores for participants in both the 2002 and 2005 cohorts. These areas are indicative of both consistent and persistent worker dissatisfaction with Technology, Training and Record Keeping; and Salary and Benefits. As with the findings in 2002, salary and benefits are both a reason to stay and a reason for leaving. The implementation of the new Connections Build 18 case recording system may have impacted responses in the record keeping area.

These comparative data show important improvements effected in the years following the initial survey. County commissioners, managers, and other system leaders should be pleased with the work they have done around caseloads, salary, and hiring people who like the work. Issues concerning stress& burnout, administrative & organizational needs, technology& record keeping, and work-life fit continue to influence decisions to consider a new job. The implication is that these issues need to be prioritized and tracked in order to respond to retention needs.

Issue of Turnover

The complexity of turnover and retention has become more apparent as the several waves of data have been analyzed, findings have been discussed, and improvement strategies have been initiated. While some strategies have been useful across systems, others have been developed in a unique manner, making it necessary to adapt strategies for the agency context.

Turnover and retention challenges include: recruitment and selection strategies that comply with civil service requirements, mechanisms for bringing new workers into the job without overburdening existing workers, having sufficient seasoned workers to mentor new workers, and carving out time for regular supervision of all workers while managing external demands for accountability,

SWEC researchers have yet to consider how much turnover is “healthy.” In other words, the question is, what is the turnover tolerance in agencies?

Apparently, it takes at least a year for a worker to become grounded in their position. In fact, many leaders identify two years as a minimum period of time for a worker to feel competent.

Findings from 2005 show some interesting differences in the average number of years that workers and supervisors have been in their current agency and position.

- ❖ For *workers*, the average time in both current agency and position increased. (Agency 4.9 vs. 5.9; Position 3.1 vs. 3.5).
- ❖ For *supervisors* the average number of years in the current agency decreased (Agency 13.4 vs. 12.4) but it increased slightly for current position (4.7 vs. 5.0).
- ❖ In spite of the slight increase in the average length of time that respondents were in their current agency and position, 47% of the respondents have been in their position for less than two years. This is a slight improvement from 2002 when 50% of the respondents had less than two years on the job.

These data mean that close to half of the workers in these counties are still developing the prerequisite knowledge and skills for competent performance of their jobs.

Overall Demographic Information

Age distribution

Years	2002	2005
22-29	10.7%	8.6%
30-39	21.4%	25.7%
40-49	42.9%	31.4%
50-59	25%	31.4%
60-69	0%	2.9%

Years in child welfare, current agency, and current position

Average years	2002	2005
Current agency	6.72	7.13
Current position	3.45	3.80
Child Welfare	7.68	7.86

Annual salary ranges

Salary range	2002	2005
Less than \$25,001	15.1%	5.4%
\$25,001-30,000	40.9%	45.2%
\$30,001-35,000	22.3%	29.4%
\$35,001-45,000	20.6%	18.1%
More than \$45,000	1%	1.8%

Caseload

In 2002 the question used by researchers to determine caseload size was insufficient. Therefore, the comparisons are limited. For example, researchers only have median caseload for children for 2002.

Researchers revised the caseload questions for subsequent versions of the retention survey so more detailed information about caseload is available now, but caseload differences cannot be compared between 2002 and 2005. Commissioners also receive detailed information on caseload size from OCFS on a monthly basis which allows for continuous monitoring.

❖ ***In 2002, the median number of children in a caseload was 30. In 2005 the median number was 25 and the average was 27.***

Caseload Information for 2005 and CWLA recommended caseload standards

Unit	Average	CWLA	Recommended Caseload
Investigations	11	Investigations	15
Foster Parents	7.5	Family foster care	12-15 children
Children	27		
Families	15	Family Preservation	15 families
		Adoption Infants with birth families	20-25
Adoptive parents	3	Older children	12-15 families

Unit	Average	CWLA	Recommended Caseload
			10-12 children
		Inter-country	30-35
Biological Parents	18		
Other	7		

Workload

While respondents continue to report spending more time doing paperwork on a weekly basis than any other task, the data indicate what may be an important change between 2002 and 2005. The amount of time reported in direct service activities increased by 4.48% (from 26.35% to 30.83%) and the amount of time spent on paperwork decreased by 6.2% from 42.15% to 35.95%). While time spent on paperwork still exceeds that spent on direct practice by 5%, both findings are in the hoped for direction.

Organizational and Supervisory Factors

On each of the organizational and supervisory factors, the difference in the mean scores was significant ($p=.05$) for responses in 2002 and 2005. This difference indicates that there was a significant change in the mean score for the six organizational and two supervisory factors being studied. In 2005, the overall mean scores increased indicating greater agreement among respondents about the presence of effective practices. Comparisons between the two sets of data are informative and instructive regarding retention priorities. It appears that counties are making some positive changes in organizational and supervisory practice, which are being noticed by the respondents in this survey.

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.