



Mentoring program in children's protective Services: Evaluating the Mentoring Program in Children's Protective Services

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Evaluating the Mentoring Program within Children's Protective Services

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Introduction

Retention of child welfare workers is a problem nationwide. The problem has existed for decades as evidenced by the Children's Bureau 1960 report "In Search of Staff for Child Welfare," which reported "staffing shortages nationwide, and urged aggressive recruitment and retention strategies" (Bernotavicz, 1997). Although many retention programs have been developed over the years to address the problem in Children's Protective Service agencies, the problem persists. According to the Child Welfare League of America the vacancy rate for child protective workers was 12.6% in 2007 (National Data Analysis System, 2007).

In the state of Texas for fiscal year 2007 the overall turnover rate for Children's Protective Services (CPS) workers was 34.1%. The turnover was significantly higher for a new caseworker, a CPS II, at an alarming 40.8%. For a CPS worker III it was 27.7%, and for a CPS worker IV it was 16.7% (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Databook, 2007), indicating that the longer a worker remains with the agency the greater the chance of their retention. A review of the percentages provided in the TDFPS data books identifies another trend: turnover rates varied depending on the stage of service to which the worker was assigned. In the investigation stage of service, which is when the worker makes the initial contact with the family and investigates the allegations of abuse or neglect, the turnover was much higher than in the ongoing stages of service. For Investigations in 2007, the turnover was 40.7% across the state, whereas in Family Base Safety Services it was 27.4%, and in the Conservatorship stage of service it was 33.8%.

In further examination of the percentages of turnover, much concern existed in the Region 8, Bexar County Children's Protective Services In-

vestigation Units, with a record high of 75.1% turnover. The staff turnover for Bexar County was much higher than other metropolitan areas with similar demographics. In particular, two areas noted were Harris County with a 45.0% turnover, and 48.0 % for Travis County (Management and Reporting Statistics 9/6/07 TDFPS). The percentages provided for employee turnover do not include vacancies resulting from promotions or transfers. One can speculate that the reasons for employee turnover may be related to factors such as stress, high caseloads, poor employee selection, and/or salary. To speculate on this issue is not sufficient, as the impact on the families being served is tremendous. The alarmingly high turnover called for immediate action by the county.

Exit interviews of Children's Protective Services Workers in Bexar County indicated that the number one complaint was lack of supervisor support, second was that caseloads were too high, and third was lack of knowledge or training (DFPS Management Human Resources, 2007). As a result of the high turnover in Bexar County, focus groups were formed and a retention committee was set up to address the problem. After a review of the information from the focus groups, which provided information similar to that which came from the exit interviews, it was decided that a mentoring program could be helpful to new workers. The mentoring program would focus on retention of the caseworker in the investigation stage of service. The program chose tenured workers who had a positive performance record to mentor the new workers, and these mentors were given the title of "retention agent." The program was developed in the fall of 2007 with the first retention agents being inducted in October of 2007. The process included assignment of

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a new employee to a retention agent from the first day of employment through the 12-week training class. During this time the retention agent would be expected to meet with the new employee, and assist in developing them, training them, and providing support. As a result the new worker would gain more field knowledge, further develop leadership skills, and provide support to the supervisor.

According to findings by Barak, Nissley, and Levin, employees leave because "they are not satisfied with their jobs, feel excessive burnout, and do not feel supported by their supervisor or organization" (Social Review, 2001). Many studies have looked at why workers leave as well as why workers stay. In a study of 768 children's protective workers in Louisiana the findings showed that the source of dissatisfaction was related to organizational factors such as paperwork, lack of administrative support, and lack of support of employees (Bernotavicz, 1997). Landsman states that researchers are now analyzing the concern from the perspective of retention rather than turnover and burnout (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). Landsman further asserts that the current research supports the idea that retaining employees has more to do with supervisor support and organizational support than any other factors.

In order to determine if the mentoring program was effective, evaluation of the program was necessary. The purpose of evaluating the mentoring program is to assist in obtaining further information regarding retention of child protective workers. This information will be helpful in determining the need for continuation of a mentoring program within Bexar County and to find out if there is a need to implement the program in stages of service other than Investigations, or throughout the agency statewide. Positive results could spawn similar programs nationwide. The first group of new workers who were assigned a retention agent graduated from training on February 22, 2008. In evaluating the Retention Agent Program, follow-up surveys within the organization were conducted to gather feedback on program efficacy and data on possible barriers to the program. The surveys were sent via e-mail and provided to those who participated in the program.

Literature Review

No issue has a greater effect on the ability of the child welfare system to effectively serve vulnerable children and families than the lack of a competent and stable workforce. Over the past few decades, the high turnover rate of professional workers continues to pose a major challenge to child welfare agencies in general (Barak, Nissley, and Levin, p. 626). Reports of turnover rates range from 30 to 60 percent in a typical year. Items specifically cited as key challenges for staffing child welfare agencies included the following: increasingly complex demands for services and workloads, lack of resources for clients, insufficient training, inadequate financial compensation, safety and liability concerns, and poor physical and organizational working conditions. (Child Welfare League of America, Sept. 2002).

The problem of retention has existed for the last several decades. Four factors of retention emerged: mission, goodness of fit, supervision, and investment. (Rycraft, p. 75). "Mission" represents the caseworkers' view of their job and encompasses a commitment to helping others. "Goodness of fit" refers to the degree of suitability and flexibility in the job assignments. "Supervision" was addressed by identifying the attributes of a supervisor that the employee found desirable. Recent child welfare research has identified supervisors as key to retaining qualified and committed workers. (Landsman, p. 105). "Investment" covers the personal, professional, and mutual investment between the caseworker and the agency. Bednar points out that these factors are often within the control of the agency administration, which can do much to improve retention.

Further research addressed: "Why do they stay?" Results from this study identified a number of factors that workers felt influenced their decisions to stay employed with the agency: affective commitment (agreement with the organization's goals and values), personal fit with demands of job (e.g., thrive on the fast pace of doing job duties), coworker's relationships, tangible benefits (e.g., pay), and continuance commitment (can't

afford to leave, vested in retirement plan, etc.). It is a combination of personal factors that current and prospective staff bring to their job that will result in improved retention – “Professional commitment, previous experience, relevant education, maturity to address the complex needs of the children and families served by the system – coupled with an organizational environment that values and supports these staff.” (IASWR, p. 3)

Mentoring programs have been developed and utilized for the past decade to provide support and show value to the staff. The mentoring process should be one of support, education, and guidance. Mentoring is most simply defined as “a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced faculty member (or clinical supervisor) acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced student (or supervisee). A mentor provides the protégé with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support in the protégé pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession.” (Johnson, 2006, p. 20)

The benefits of a formal mentoring and retention program will definitely lower turnover rates and produce better outcomes. The outcomes would be as follows: worker retention, committed staff, team environment, more flexibility to take leave, assistance in working cases, and lower caseloads.

Methodology

Sample: It was decided that the sample frame for this research would include every CPS staff member who participated in the Retention Agent Program during its first three months of inception. This sample size included new caseworkers (22), the mentors (19) and the supervisors/program directors (17) in charge of the new caseworkers. Overall, there were 58 participants. As previously mentioned, all of these participants were from the Investigations program area of CPS.

Instrumentation: Because the purpose of the research was to identify the relationships between different variables associated with worker turnover

and retention, it was decided that a survey would be the best instrument to use. By providing close-ended questions, those planning the program hoped that participants would provide feedback that could be used to improve the mentoring program.

Research has shown that there is usually a low response rate to surveys. For various reasons -- fear of retaliation and lack of time to complete a survey, for example -- people often ignore surveys. Therefore, the retention committee decided to distribute a survey that was quick and easy to complete, while also maintaining a sense of anonymity. With the assistance from state office personnel in Austin, it was decided that Survey Monkey would be used to distribute the surveys to the CPS staff involved in the Retention Agent Program.

Procedures: Initially, it was proposed that one uniform survey would be distributed to all of the participants. However, after much discussion, it was agreed that it was best to issue three separate surveys, one for each group. Rich Brooks was assigned the supervisors/program directors (or CPS administrators). Tanya Netardus was assigned the new caseworkers (or protégés), and Rigo Montero was assigned the mentors (or Retention Agents). Each of them was given the task of developing questions that best suited their assigned group. The three then met to discuss each question individually. The final questions were approved by the Investigation Program Administrator, Robbie Callis. The surveys were then submitted to the state office personnel, who placed these questions into the Survey Monkey format and they were then distributed to each specific group via email. CPS staff was informed that the surveys were anonymous, and feedback would be used to improve the mentoring program.

Data Analysis

Protégé

The survey of the protégés yielded 15 participants. The participants are all Investigation case-

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workers in Bexar County, Region 8. The participants were asked a variety of questions related to their experience of being assigned a retention agent, who is a tenured Children's Protective Services Caseworker, to mentor them. Of the 15 participants 73.3% of the protégés reported agreed that they felt supported by their retention agent, 13.3% gave a neutral response, 6.7% did not agree that they had been supported, while 6.7% strongly disagreed. Eighty percent of the participants found their current supervisor to be supportive of them being assigned a retention agent while, 20% said they did not find their supervisor to be supportive. In exit interviews, as noted above, the number one reason given for leaving was lack of supervisor support. Considering this, the retention committee decided that a mentoring program should provide support not only to the new employees, but to the supervisors as well, leaving them more time for other management duties.

Another reason for leaving, as noted in the exit interviews, was lack of significant training. A positive result of the retention agent program was that 86.7% of the protégés responded "yes" while only 13.3% responded "no" to the question, "Did your retention agent teach you tasks that you did not learn in the training classroom?" However, the protégés' responses to whether they thought the mentoring process helped them to transition to casework was interesting. Only 53.4% agreed it helped, 20% answered neutral, 20% disagreed, and 6.7% strongly disagreed. In feedback of the overall satisfaction of the mentoring process 53.4% of the protégés were very satisfied, 13.3% were neutral, 20.0% were dissatisfied, and 13.3% were very dissatisfied. In reviewing the survey further, a trend was identified that could indicate a reason for 33.3% being dissatisfied with the mentoring process. Four participants responded in a similar manner when asked what changes they would recommend to the program, which was to lessen the retention agents' workload so that the agents would have more time available to work with them throughout the mentoring process.

In response to their experiences of observing

their retention agent, nine of the ten participants who responded to this question provided positive feedback. The majority of the feedback was pertinent to direct client skills. One reported that his/her retention agent "showed professionalism, no matter how difficult the client..." While another reported, "I learned/saw a lot of different interviewing skills used." Having this opportunity to observe a professional at work provided the protégé a better transition to casework and an opportunity to strengthen the skills needed for the job. It also provided an opportunity for the retention agent to fine tune those skills.

The researcher identified the following as a result of this study: the protégés felt supported by the retention agent entering the program, and the protégés learned skills they had not learned in the training classroom. These two factors, as related to reasons why caseworkers leave, are likely to impact retention if the program continues with some modifications. In the long term if workers are supporting one another, assisting with training new workers, and providing a positive environment in which the new employee feels connected, the supervisor will also be more available. The three areas noted on the exit interviews would all be impacted positively by the program with new workers having support from their supervisors and an increased knowledge base as they enter the field, the supervisors would have more support, and lower caseloads would result as retention climbs.

The finding was that approximately 30% of the protégés did not feel the program was successful for them. This could be related to the inability of the retention agents to work with them more due to their own workloads. The goal of the program would be that 100% of the protégés felt the process was successful; however, if retention reaches the level of 70% this would be a great improvement from the 25% retention at the initiation of the program.

Mentors (Retention Agents)

Out of 19 retention agents who were emailed the Survey Monkey, 14 responded. Most of the

feedback tended to be positive regarding the Retention Agent Program. As previously mentioned, they were asked ten questions. All of the questions were written using the Likert-scale model. Two of the questions asked for additional explanation, and the participants were provided text space to type in some feedback. Overall, the mentors felt the Retention Agent Program was a good program that could benefit future caseworkers.

In reviewing exit interviews, caseworkers mentioned several reasons for their frustrations that led to their departure from CPS. One of those frustrations was the lack of guidance from tenured workers. These caseworkers believed that their time at CPS would have lasted longer had there been someone who could have guided them throughout their training. This objective was included in the Retention Agent Program manual. According to the survey, 93% of the retention agents contacted their protégé 1-3 times a week. In addition, 93% also felt the length of the mentoring process was just the right amount of time. Overall, 93% agreed that the Retention Agent Program was beneficial to their protégé.

According to the exit interviews, another reason why caseworkers left CPS was due to the lack of support and knowledge of their supervisor. They did not feel their supervisor had been at CPS long enough to know the job thoroughly. In 2005, the 79th Texas Legislature added hundreds of new positions, including several supervisor positions. Caseworkers that had been with the agency no more than two years were hired to fill these supervisory roles. One of the objectives in the Retention Agent Program manual was to develop/improve the leadership skills of tenured workers. According to the survey, this objective was fulfilled, as 92% of the Retention Agents felt the mentoring program helped in developing their leadership skills. Their interest in becoming a CPS supervisor also rose from 93% before they mentored to 100% after the mentoring process.

Although the retention agents strongly felt the mentoring program should continue, they also had some recommendations and suggestions on how it could be improved. These retention agents were

asked to help their protégés with their cases, in addition to handling their own caseload. The mentors often times worked on their protégés cases during the day, and would have to work on their own cases late at night. Many of the retention agents suggested that the protégés cases be counted on the mentors' caseload, so that they could get "credit" for working cases.

Some retention agents also felt that supervisors were "dumping" the protégés on them, and not taking the time to truly develop them, as a good supervisor should do. One agent recommended that supervisors should take an active role in developing the protégé and not completely depend on the Retention Agent. Overall, the majority of the Retention Agents that responded to the survey felt the mentoring program benefited the new caseworker. They also felt that CPS administration was supportive of the mentoring program. Because this program was implemented only a few months ago, there was certain to be obstacles and issues. Nevertheless, the Retention Agents felt the program and the agency are headed in the right direction.

Supervisors and Program Directors

Seventeen surveys were sent out to the Supervisors and Program Directors to ascertain their evaluation of the Retention Agent Program. Eleven surveys, 64.7%, were filled out and returned. The results of the data go as follows: 36.3% strongly agreed, 45.5% agreed, 9.1% neutral, and 9.1% strongly disagreed that the retention agent was helpful. One person commented that the relationship between the mentor and protégé was not a good match. A high percentage -- 63.6% -- of the supervisors or program directors met with the protégé 1-3 times per week, 18.2% met 1-3 times per month, and 18.2% met 1-3 during the program. Also, 27.3% of the supervisors and program directors met with the retention agent 1-3 times per week, 45.5% met 1-3 times per month, 27.3% met 1-3 during the program. No formal documentation was required during these contacts.

The next two questions of the survey asked

about this feedback. After further review, it is felt that had the questions been worded differently, they could have produced different results. The question asked was, "During the contacts were you able to provide feedback?" A better question would have been, "Were you able to get feedback about the program?" More than half -- 54.5% -- stated they were able to provide feedback, and 45.5% were not able to provide feedback. The next question was, "What was done with this feedback?" Due to the wording 54.5% of the respondents skipped this question. Other responses: "gave me better direction in helping the employees," "provided information and feedback in conferences and meetings," and "followed my advice in how to document, interview, and make referrals." Another question answered in a positive manner was possibly influenced by pressure to be politically correct. The question asked if administration supported the Retention Agent Program; 18.2% strongly agreed, and 81.8% agreed, and no one answered neutral or disagreed.

The benefits of the retention program were that the protégés felt more supported, had a better and more realistic idea of the job, appeared to be better prepared, had better working relationships, had someone to go to for questions, and lower caseloads. The barriers of the retention program were six: the time it takes the mentors away from their own units, mentors not being given lower caseloads as retention agents during the mentoring time, being assigned a protégé in different buildings, distance and time for the rural units, mentors questioning the supervisor's methods, not a good match between the protégé and mentor, and the retention agent not being available to answer questions. In regard to the retention agent program, 27.3% were very satisfied, 45.5% satisfied, 18.2% neutral, and 9.1% very dissatisfied. And, 100% stated that a formal retention/mentoring program needed to be implemented in other areas within CPS.

Discussion

DFPS' goal is to employ highly motivated, diverse, ethical, well-trained, and professional staff

who are committed to the agency's mission and well-prepared to produce successful outcomes. The DFPS organization will demonstrate its commitment to retain employees through the implementation of proactive strategies, policies, procedures, and practices. To achieve this goal, DFPS has established an agency-wide initiative that includes the following projects: promote employee communication and input, improve hiring practices, strengthen supervision, manage workloads, enhance work environment, and value employees. Based on this cross-agency initiative, the formal Retention Program was created.

The survey supports that mentoring should be implemented within other areas of Child Protective Services. The administration is supportive of the Retention Program and the majority was satisfied with the outcomes of the program. The survey further supports that the retention agents as well as the protégés benefited from the program. For the program to succeed all staff will have to be committed to making it work and place this as a priority among other tasks. Workplace harmony and success is directly related to support of the managers and their commitment to making employees feel connected and valued.

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