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Retention Outcomes of a Public Child Welfare Long-Term Training Program

Cathleen A. Lewandowski, PhD

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the employment and retention outcomes of one state's Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship Program and to discuss the impact of declassification and privatization on the retention of traineeship graduates in public child welfare employment. This training program used federal Title IV-E funding and state matching funds to provide traineeships to BSW and MSW students to complete their social work degree and required trainees to work in public child welfare upon graduation for a specific period of time. Further, to understand patterns of retention, retention rates by trainees' level of education and by their employment status were examined. Also examined were the retention rates of minority social workers who entered the field of child welfare through the traineeship program.

First, the study compared retention rates of BSW graduates of the training program to MSW graduates. Second, retention rates of trainees who were employees of the state's child welfare agency were compared to trainees who were not employees of the agency at the time they were admitted into the training program. Finally, as one of the objectives of the training program was to increase the number of minority social workers employed in this state's public child welfare agency, retention rates of minority candidates were compared to retention rates of social workers in child welfare reported in the literature.

The Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship Program was in operation from 1990 to 1996, a period of six years. After several years of success however, this long-term child welfare training program was terminated, primarily because of a changing political climate that fails to support professional social services in the public sector. As with other arenas of human services, child welfare is being reformed under the guise of "devolution," which is the passing of authority for services from the federal government to state government, and from state to local government (Zalenski & Mannes, 1998). What seems to be spurring these changes on is an erosion of faith in the ability of public institutions to solve social problems. Instead, local governments are turning to private contractors to provide services. As part of this process, child welfare services are being privatized at an increasing rate.

Compounding the effects of privatization in child welfare have been the changes in services brought about by the declassification of social work positions. Declassification reduces opportunities for promotion and does not provide a role for social workers with advanced skills to practice in the public child welfare arena. Proponents of declassification have justified it by citing budgetary concerns and arguing that there is little, if any, practical role for social workers with advanced skills and knowledge in public child welfare.

While funding for long-term training in child welfare has always been inconsistent, declassification and privatization in this state have hastened the demise of long-term training efforts and may have affected retention rates. In 1994, the state's child welfare agency declassified social work positions so that job descriptions did not reflect the advanced skills of the MSW social worker. In 1996, this state completely privatized its child welfare services, with the exception of the investigation of child abuse and neglect reports. In spite of the training program's success, the long-term training program was terminated, and declassification and privatization may have contributed to its termination.

Two years after child welfare was privatized, no consistent long-term training program has been reinstated, and both the state agency and the private contractors are finding it difficult to recruit and retain social workers, particularly those with child

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welfare experience. Maintaining an ongoing long-term training program is not the only possible answer to child welfare's staffing needs, but it is one solution that was working with some degree of success. This state's experiences with the rise and fall of its training program illuminates the importance of consistent long-term training in reducing social worker turnover rates and the impact declassification and privatization can have on long-term training programs.

The State's Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship Program

The goals of the traineeship program were to prepare graduates for social work practice in the public child welfare setting, fill social work positions in underserved areas, and increase the number of minority social workers in public child welfare. The program aimed to achieve this objective by identifying social work students who had a demonstrated commitment to the field of public child welfare, train them for child welfare practice through their social work program, and provide them with financial support to allow them to be full-time students and graduate within the program's required time period.

This state's Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship Program provided traineeships to both current state employees and to social work students who were committed to social work careers in a public child welfare setting. All students were required to complete their field placement within the public child welfare arena. To strengthen their understanding of this practice setting, BSW students took a specialized course in child welfare, while MSW students were required to complete the concentration in children and families in their MSW curriculum.

Federal and state monies were used to fund the training program. Originally, the federal government provided funding for the training of child welfare professionals through Title VII, Title IV-A, and then later through Title XX of the Social Security Act (Sallee, 1992). Presently, states can receive federal aid for training through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which was enacted in 1980 as part of PL 96-272. Under these training programs, states are generally required to provide a 25% match.

Trainees who were not currently state employees were awarded a monthly stipend of $800 for their final two semesters of school. Trainees who were current employees of the state public agency were awarded the traineeship for up to two years. These trainees were paid 75% of their salary while in the training program, and 100% of their tuition for up to four semesters.

Recipients incurred a month to month obligation to work in the state's public child welfare agency. Graduates were not required to reimburse the state for their training if no appropriate employment was available within four months after graduation, and the recipient had made a good faith effort to secure a position. Recipients who did not fill employment or who resigned from the agency before fulfilling their obligation were required to reimburse the state for their traineeship. In such instances, a monthly installment plan was arranged between the state agency and the trainee to reimburse the agency for the full amount of the traineeship.

While the traineeship program did benefit the trainees, its primary objective was to benefit children and families served by the agency. In terms of client benefits, graduates stated that they thought more families had been preserved as a result of their ability to stay more client-focused and target resources at client needs. Some graduates also reported that they had an increased awareness of cultural diversity as a result of completing the traineeship.

When asked about how well the training program benefited the agency, several agency administrators indicated that the training program created a viable employment pool of social workers who were prepared to interview for position openings. The professionalism and knowledge base of the agency were enhanced. Several area directors identified the improvement of staff retention and

morale as the agency's most important benefit. In turn, social work educators thought that the traineeship program fostered a renewed commitment to public child welfare and helped to strengthen the relationship between educators and agency social workers. Also, the traineeship program increased the prestige of social work education and fostered interest among agency employees and students in the field of child welfare.

Factors Affecting Child Welfare Training and Retention

It is not unusual for child welfare workers to receive no specific training in that area prior to case involvement. For example, a national study found that approximately one-third of protective service workers had no specialized training prior to case involvement and another third received less than 40 hours of preparation specific to their assigned tasks. Social workers viewed themselves as better prepared for the child welfare setting than those with other bachelor's degrees. Of those with social work degrees, MSWs reported being the best prepared and the most knowledgeable. In all but two areas, BSWs perceived their education as better preparation for public child welfare than those with other bachelor's degrees. (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988).

The retention of experienced workers is crucial in assuring that children and families receive quality services from child welfare agencies. However, increased job dissatisfaction contributes to experienced workers leaving child welfare practice. The annual turnover rate of child welfare workers has been estimated at between 30 and 40% (Reagh, 1994). The average duration of employment in child welfare is less than two years (Rycraft, 1994). The drain of staff results in discontinuity of service to families (Winefield & Barlow, 1995), and increased administrative costs (Barber, 1986). It is also detrimental to staff morale and discouraging to potential recruits to the field (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Those who stay are motivated more by their commitment to children or by personal fulfillment than by job variables such as salary, benefits, and work related stress (Cicero-Reese & Black, 1998).

There are little data in the research literature regarding the percent of minority social workers employed in public child welfare. Retaining minority social workers in public child welfare can contribute to meeting the service needs of minority children, who are overrepresented in the foster care system (McMurty & Lie, 1992). The type of services minority children and their families receive, once children are placed in out-of-home care, is another concern (Olsen, 1982).

Funding training programs in child welfare has always been inconsistent. While this state's Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship Program relied primarily on federal funding, there is some evidence to suggest that training programs are more stable when funded by the state. Training programs which rely on federal funding alone are much more vulnerable to cutbacks than programs which have state funding (Miller & Dore, 1991).

Declassification and Privatization

Declassification and privatization have made public child welfare even less desirable for the new social work graduate (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988; Miller & Dore, 1991). In terms of declassification, a national study found that 44% of states do not require a college degree for child protective service work. Only 19% required an undergraduate degree in a behavioral science (Miller & Dore, 1991).

Abramovitz (1984) argued that the increased numbers of service contracts with private agencies has reduced traditional public welfare clients' access to services. The increased opportunities in the private sector have attracted increasing numbers of MSW students, reducing the number of MSWs who consider careers in the public sector (Rubin & Johnson, 1984). National data indicate that the percent of social workers employed by social service agencies has been steadily declining. In 1998, 24.4% of social workers who were members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

reported being employed by a social service agency. By 1995, this percentage had been reduced to 20.5% of NASW members. Nonetheless, the percent of NASW members who report working primarily with children and families has been increasing. In 1988, 21.2% of NASW members worked primarily with children and families, while in 1995, 24.9% reported working with this population (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). These findings suggest that a larger percent of children and families are receiving services from social workers through private providers.

In 1996, the state's public child welfare agency began privatizing family preservation, adoption, and foster care services. While most states began to privatize incrementally, this state's speed and extent of conversion to private child welfare is unprecedented. With privatization came downsizing, and there was an assumption that social workers losing their positions in the public agency would seek positions in the private agencies. However, downsizing in the public agency happened slowly enough that few social workers left the agency involuntarily. Instead, many of those who were released from the public child welfare agency were hired by other state agencies.

In 1998, administrators in both the private agencies who were awarded contracts and the public agency report that there are insufficient numbers of social workers to fill critical positions (Shields, 1998). Both the private contractors and the state agency are looking for help and have actively recruited outside the state. As further evidence of the shortage of trained social workers, one of the more rural communities has hired former police officers as child abuse investigators.

In spite of the recent difficulties in hiring social workers, one of the larger private contractors in foster care has reversed the declassification trend by hiring licensed social workers or other licensed professionals instead of unlicensed individuals for their case management positions. Experience has shown that licensed social workers are better prepared to provide the wide array of services required in foster care than individuals who may have a degree in a related social science.

As a result of declassification and privatization, there were few opportunities to practice social work in the public agency. Declassification minimized opportunities for advanced social work practice. In particular, declassification eliminated opportunities for MSW social workers with clinical skills to practice in this setting, using the full scope of their knowledge and skills. Under privatization, social workers' primary responsibility within the agency is to monitor the fulfillment of contractors' agreement in providing services which replaced their more traditional role of being service providers and case managers.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the retention outcomes of one state's Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship Program. The employment outcome examined are the training program's completion rates, success rate, and the retention rate. Retention is defined as trainees who continue to be employed by the public child welfare agency two years after the program was terminated. Since agency administrators stated they believed the BSW social worker was more suited to positions in child welfare than the MSW social worker, retention rates of BSW and MSW social workers were compared. Retention rates of employees of the agency and trainees who were not employees at the time they entered the training program were compared to examine the assumption that the employees would have better retention outcomes. The retention rates of minority social workers were examined to assess the extent to which the program was successful in increasing the number of minority social workers in the state's public child welfare agency.

Data were collected from the training program's own records and the state's personnel data base. Since the program's inception, administrators of the training program had maintained a data base of

applicants, trainees, and graduates. A survey was mailed to all key actors in 1996 to gather data on their perceptions of the program's benefits. These key actors include training program graduates, agency administrators and supervisors, and social work educators. Some of the data from these surveys are included in this study to provide a broader picture of the training program's successes and key actors' concerns.

Findings

During this training program's tenure, 363 individuals applied for traineeships, and 203 of these applicants were admitted, for an acceptance rate of 55.5%. Twelve of the 203 individuals admitted into the training program either dropped out before graduating or were withdrawn from the program because of unsatisfactory performance, leaving a total of 191 BSW and MSW graduates for this six-year training program. The employment rate was substantial, as 95% (182) of the 191 graduates accepted social work positions in public child welfare. Sixty-seven of the 182 graduates were still employed by the agency two years later, for an overall retention rate of 58%. This retention rate is similar to what is reported in the literature, which indicates a 30-40% annual turnover rate (Reagh, 1994).

Of these 182 trainees who entered the field of public child welfare, 152, or 83.5% were white, and 84% were female. There were twice as many BSW traineeships awarded as MSW traineeships, as 116 trainees received their BSW degree, while 66 trainees received their MSW degree. Similarly, there were slightly more agency employees who received traineeships than students not currently employed by the agency (108 and 74, respectively).

BSW and MSW Social Workers in Public Child Welfare

One of the goals of the Child Welfare Traineeship Program was to enhance the professionalism of services provided to children and families within the public child welfare agency. This was to be accomplished by increasing the number of BSW and MSW social workers in the agency. There was a perception among practitioners and educators alike that there was a better "fit" between BSW social workers and child welfare than MSW social workers. It was thought that BSW graduates, particularly the agency employees who had received traineeships to continue their education, were well suited for employment in the agency. MSW graduates on the other hand, did not "fit" within the agency as they had little opportunity to practice their clinical skills, and would ultimately become dissatisfied with their job. With declassification, the MSW social worker, especially a social worker with clinical skills, was over-qualified for agency positions.

National data indicate that a larger percent of BSW social workers are employed by a social service agency than MSW social workers. In 1995, 33.7% of BSW social workers were employed by social service agencies, compared to 20.5% of MSW social workers (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997).

Data from this study were analyzed to compare these perceptions with the employment and retention patterns of BSW and MSW graduates who accepted positions in public child welfare. There was no significant difference between BSW social workers and MSW social workers in successfully fulfilling their employment obligation (chi-square = 1.1., df = 1, p = .29). However, there was a larger retention rate among BSW social workers than MSW social workers. BSW social workers were more likely to continue to be social workers in the agency two years later than MSW social workers. In 1998, 50 (43.1%) of the BSW graduates continued to be employed as social workers in the public child welfare agency. Only 17 (26%) of the 65 MSW graduates continued to be state child welfare employees in 1998, two years after the training program was terminated.

The 43.5% retention rate of BSW graduates of the training program is somewhat better than the 30 to 40% turnover rates reported in the literature (Reagh, 1994). In contrast, MSW graduates had a

lower retention rate than what had been previously reported.

To understand further these retention patterns, graduates who had accepted positions were asked if they were considering long-term employment with the agency. Overall, 58% reported a desire to remain with the agency. However, BSW graduates were more likely to be interested in long-term employment (80%) than MSW graduates (27%). BSW and MSW graduates who were not considering long-term employment with the agency cited the following work conditions they would like to see implemented for them to consider long-term employment: reverse privatization, improve administrative support of employees, increase financial compensation, create job opportunities for advancement, allow flex time to focus on client needs instead of the agency needs, adopt a clinical focus, and adopt a client-centered approach to paperwork.

The perception of a better "fit" between the BSW social workers and child welfare than the MSW social worker may reflect the recent declassification of social work positions that occurred in this state. With declassification, the entry-level social work position required either the BSW or the MSW degree, and promotion to a supervisory position is based more on agency experience than having an advanced degree. Other states, however, may find that the MSW social worker is well suited for practice in a public child welfare setting, and may write job descriptions that require advanced skills. State child agencies which develop positions that require advanced skills may have more MSW social workers remaining with the agency than what has been this state's experience.

Retention Rates of Agency Employees in Public Child Welfare

Several supervisors believed that employees who completed the program would leave the agency once they had completed their employment obligation. It was thought that employees, particularly those who pursued their MSW degree, viewed the traineeship program as a way out of the agency rather than as opportunity to become more skilled child welfare practitioners. Nevertheless, in contrast to the perceptions of some front line supervisors, many of the state's child welfare administrators believed that trainees who were state employees were more likely to fulfill their obligation than trainees who were not state employees at the time they were accepted for the traineeship program.

To assess the accuracy of these perceptions, the personnel data were again used to examine retention rates of agency employees who completed the training program to nonemployees who completed it. When compared to trainees who were not state employees when awarded the traineeship, employees of the agency were more likely to fulfill their employment obligation (chi-square = 10.02, df = 1, $p = .001$). Ninety-six (89%) of the 108 employees who graduated from the traineeship successfully met their obligation. In contrast, 52 (70%) of the 74 trainees who were not employees met or exceeded their employment obligation.

Two years after the training program's termination, there continued to be significant differences between agency employees and non-employees, as trainees who were employees had significantly higher retention rates (chi-square = 15.05, df = 1, $p < .001$). About half of the 108 employees remained with the agency two years later, while only 20% of the 74 trainees who were not employees at the time they began the training program were agency employees at the two-year follow-up period. As with the BSW graduate, trainees who were agency employees at the time they were accepted into the program had a lower turnover rate than what has been reported in the literature, while trainees who became employees upon graduation had a higher turnover rate.

Graduates on the Job

The training program sought to prepare trainees for the field of public child welfare through an orientation, a public child welfare course, a field placement within the agency, and an employment seminar just prior to graduation. To assess the

extent to which the program prepared trainees for public child welfare, area directors were asked how traineeship graduates compared with other candidates. Several agency administrators indicated the IV-E graduates were more prepared and interviewed better than other social work graduates. In addition, IV-E graduates knew the agency, and the training program served to open doors for them within the agency. The remainder of the directors indicated that IV-E graduates were the same as other social workers on the job.

Retention of Minority Social Workers in Public Child Welfare

The final objective of the Title IV-E Traineeship Program was to increase the number of minority social workers employed by the public child welfare agency. Administrators of the training program believed that increasing the number of minority social workers could enhance the agency's ability to address the needs of minority children in out-of-home care. Throughout the course of the traineeship program, social work educators encouraged their minority students to apply for the traineeship program.

Thirty-three or 17.6% of the total number of graduates were minority trainees. Of these 33 minority graduates, 14, or 42% of the total number of minority trainees continued to be employed by the agency at the two-year follow-up period. Further, minority graduates constituted 21% of the 67 graduates who were still employed by the agency at that time.

This retention rate compares favorably with the overall percent of agency employees who are minority. In 1997, the state's personnel records revealed that 12.3% of the total number of agency employees were minority (State of Kansas, 1997). To have retained 42% of the total number of minority social workers two years after the program's termination reflects the 30-40% annual turnover rate reported in the literature (Reagh, 1994). Finally, national data indicate that minority social workers comprise 14.1% of the total number of social workers employed by social service agencies (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997).

Conclusion: Recommendations for the Future

Based on the experiences of the past two years, it appears that there is a role for a long-term training program to meet the need for social workers in the field of child welfare regardless of whether the services are provided by public or private agencies. This training program provided a viable pool of new graduates to fill these entry-level positions on an ongoing basis. The traineeship program actively worked to identify individuals with a commitment to the field, believing that personal commitment is needed for a social work career in child welfare.

Two years after the training program's termination, both the public child welfare agency and the private contractors have reported high turnover rates and difficulties in recruiting social workers for critical positions. Once more, there is discussion of reinstituting a long-term training program for child welfare. Findings from this evaluative study suggest that an ongoing traineeship program could serve to meet the need for social workers with child welfare training.

Overall, the training program did not greatly enhance retention rates in child welfare. However, declassification and privatization did occur during the program's years of operation, and their actual effects on retention cannot be assessed. Graduates who were not considering long-term employment with the agency did cite both of these actions as reasons for wanting to seek other employment.

The results indicated that BSW social workers were more likely to remain with the agency than MSW social workers. Further, agency administrators believed BSW social workers were more suited for the field of public child welfare than MSW social workers. This finding may not be generalizable to other states, as position descriptions do vary across the country. MSW graduates strongly believed their advanced skills were beneficial to

children and families served by the agency, but were frustrated that there were few, if any, opportunities to apply these skills.

The results also indicated that trainees who were already agency employees at the time they were awarded the traineeship were more likely to remain with the agency than trainees who were not employees. It should be noted, however, that due to their two-year traineeship, employees in the BSW program incurred a two-year employment obligation upon graduation. In contrast, trainees who were not employees incurred a one-year obligation to match their one-year traineeship. In terms of cost, training the nonemployee was less expensive, as they received a monthly stipend only, while employees received 75% of their salary in addition to 100% of their tuition. Thus, given the added expense of training current employees and the fact that the vast majority of graduates accepted social work positions within the agency, both employees and nonemployees would be viable candidates for any future traineeship program.

The traineeship program was fairly successful in recruiting and training minority social workers. Although the retention rate of minority social workers is similar to what is reported in the literature, the percent of Title IV-E Child Welfare Traineeship minority social workers who have remained with the agency exceeds the overall percent of minority employees in the state agency. Given the continued overrepresentation of minority children in out-of-home care, any subsequent child welfare traineeship program should continue to recruit minority candidates.

Finally, long-term training programs are only part of the solution to the ongoing child welfare staffing needs. State agencies should continue to make effort to improve the work environment for social workers in public child welfare. Two concerns addressed in this article are the declassification of social work positions and the privatization of child welfare services. Declassification minimizes the importance of the work performed in child welfare settings and implies that children and families served by these agencies are not deserving of professional services. It affects the morale of social workers who remain in the agency as it devalues their skills. As a value-based profession bound by a code of ethics, declassification further implies that following agency procedures is more important than ethical practice.

In addition to adequate training, agencies should address the concerns expressed by social workers in this study. Some of these concerns were how to improve administrative support of employees, increase financial compensation, create job opportunities for advancement, allow flextime to focus on clients' needs instead of the agency's needs, adopt a clinical focus, and adopt a client-centered approach to paperwork.

No other state has undertaken to privatize child welfare as extensively and quickly as this state, which places it in the position of being an example for other states considering privatizing their child welfare services. This article focuses on the impact full-scale privatization has had on long-term child welfare training efforts. As a relatively new phenomenon, federal guidelines have not necessarily kept pace with the shifting of responsibility for child welfare from public to private agencies. This may make state agencies wary of attempting to use federal funding to train social workers who will actually be employed by private contractors instead of a public agency.

Regardless, there continues to be a critical need for committed, well-trained social workers to enter the challenging field of child welfare. An on-going long-term training program can play a vital role in meeting this need.

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