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The Impact of Training on Worker Performance and Retention: Perceptions of Child Welfare Supervisors

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Introduction

Child welfare represents one of the broadest and most challenging practice fields in the human services. According to the Child Welfare League of America, states agencies are "ill equipped" to handle the issues of children and families involved in abuse and neglect due to limited resources (CWLA, 2003a), and the number of children in out of home care are at record highs (CWLA, 2003b). These issues are compounded by severe challenges confronting the child welfare workforce. According to recent national and state studies, staff shortages abound (Alliance for Children and Families, American Public Human Services Association, & Child Welfare League of America, 2001; Pasztor, Saint-Germain, & DeCrescenzo, 2002; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). According to a recent federal study, lack of supervisory support, high caseloads, and insufficient time to participate in training are just a few of the factors making it difficult for child welfare staff to be competent and to make a long term commitment to the profession (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). As the fundamental purpose of child welfare services is the protection of children and the strengthening of families (Rycus & Hughes, 1998), the lack of preparation of social workers may lead to poor assessments, interventions and, overall, poor service (Stevenson, Cheung, & Leung, 1992).

After the passage of P.L. 96-272, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, it was noted that children with special needs would need caseworkers, as well as foster parents and adoptive parents, with special skills (National Commission on Family Foster Care, 1991). Agency support for employees to obtain MSW or other related degrees in exchange for a work commitment had been considered an efficient and effective way to improve staff competence and retention (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & Plotnick, 2000). But in the 1980s, despite the need, those programs were cut. By 1988, it was reported that only 28% of child welfare staff had undergraduate or graduate social work degrees (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, Russell, 1988).

The problem is not unique to child welfare. In California, for example, the "bar has been lowered" so that entry level human services staff across mental health, aging, developmental disabilities, as well as in child welfare in some sites, do not need degrees in social work. In fact, some new hires can go into the field "with only a driver's license and a few weeks of classroom and/or field training" and they are classified as "Social Worker I" (Pasztor, Saint-Germain, & DeCrescenzo, 2002, p. 38). Over a decade ago, it was reported that the child welfare service delivery system has been de-professionalized as a result of many forces most notably, increased social and economic pressures on families, and paradoxically, decreased public funding. This situation was reported as contributing to a denigration of the child welfare field (Kamerman & Kahn, 1990).

While the number of trained child welfare services staff has fallen, the need for trained, highly specialized staff members has risen (Birmingham, Berry, & Bussey, 1996). Because of the lack of credentials

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and expertise of so many child welfare staff, child welfare agencies had to invest heavily in on-the-job training. In 1986, the Ohio Department of Human Services instituted a statewide system of competency based in-service training (Rycus & Hughes, 1994, as cited in Ferreira, 2001). The identified areas of competence were endorsed by the Child Welfare League of America in partnership with the Institute of Human Services (Rycus & Hughes, 1989). This program included four modules of core training and a computerized management system to track the individual training needs of each employee (Hughes & Rycus, 1989). Training could be individualized so that each worker would get the right training at the right time. Further, caseworker performance could be evaluated to help ensure that new skills were internalized, applied by the employee and, hopefully, supported by the agency.

Training provided by child welfare agencies historically has addressed nine major areas of child welfare practice: case planning, interventions, legal issues, investigation and assessment, medical aspects, professional issues, substance abuse, cultural issues and placement issues (Baezinger, 1998). A 1990 survey of 37 states found that only 12 states addressed all nine core areas in their training programs (Jones, Stevenson, Leung, & Cheung, 1995).

With a competency-based approach being used by a number of states (Helfgott, 1991), California established its own set of competencies through the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC). These competencies were revised in 2003 and county departments of social services as well as regional training academies are expected to implement these state-relevant core competencies.

Pre-service and in-service training has assumed even more importance as agencies attempt to provide new staff with essential practice skills, particularly since many new child welfare recruits lack educational training in social work or related fields. Not only is in-service training needed to impart knowledge and skills that may help staff implement agency objectives in a particular job (Baezinger, 1998) but ongoing training is crucial to keep staff informed of the latest developments in service technology (Pecora et al., 2000). It also is hoped that training might help maintain not only staff capability but morale as well.

The focus on training with commensurate training dollars has naturally resulted in training evaluations. These studies could range from simple participant satisfaction surveys, to knowledge and skills learned, to knowledge and skills applied on the job and, finally, to systems change in the field (Baenziger, 1998). Efforts also have been made to evaluate the effects of training on child welfare workers, and identify factors which contribute to effective training (Ferreira, 2001). But as might be expected, because of complexity, hardships in managing variables and costs, it is difficult to fund and therefore find studies that measure training impact. The focus has primarily been on participant satisfaction, and knowledge and skills learned based on participant's perceptions (Baezinger, 1998).

Training studies also have focused on training needs assessments. For example, at the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) Department of Social Work, its Child Welfare Training Center surveyed 433 child welfare supervisors at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) regarding their perceptions of training needs. The responding 213 supervisors identified the most important training priorities for caseworkers as managing individual stress barriers to productivity and conflict management. For supervisors, the most relevant training topics were personnel issue, such as performance evaluations and employee discipline (O'Donnell, 2001).

Subsequently, also at CSULB, Ferreira (2001) surveyed 2,602 Los Angeles County DCFS caseworkers regarding their training preferences. With 874 responding, the top training priorities were identified as child maltreatment, assessment, and investigation.

Workforce issues are now focusing not only on quality of staff and their performance, but also on

the quantity of staff and their retention. Both the Child Welfare League of America and the National Association of Social Workers have created initiatives to focus attention to the problem. Across the country, the state and county officials are struggling to fill job vacancies, ranging from ten to forty percent across public and private jurisdictions, based on reports of 43 states (Alliance et al., 2001). But despite the financial investment in staff training over the past 20 years, perhaps more costly in the long run than the social work education stipends that were cut in the 1980s to save money (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & Plotnik, 2000), less attention has been given to the impact of training on line staff performance and retention. In the studies on staff retention, one significant similarity is that improved training for both line workers and supervisors are two of the most frequently implemented retention strategies.

Even in the corporate sector, retention is considered an obstacle to be addressed in a market-driven economy (Cappelli, 2000). Over 50% of firms surveyed had a strategy to recruit new talent, typically away from competitors, but only about 30% had a strategy for retaining the talent they already had (Wyatt, 1999, as cited in Cappelli, 2000).

In fact, in the child welfare arena, workforce quality and quantity has become so challenging that the U.S. General Accounting Office recently issued a report which investigated: (a) recruitment/retention challenges; (b) how these challenges may impact child safety, well-being, and permanency, and (c) whether there have been any successful models of staff recruitment/retention that could be replicated. Findings included that limited supervision, high caseloads, and insufficient training reduce the appeal of child welfare work; and no replicable models have been rigorously evaluated (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

The failure of many states to provide adequate training at the entry level or to update and enhance the skills of experienced staff members compounds the problem. High staff turnover and the hiring of staff members lacking specialized educational backgrounds have thus diminished the effectiveness of service delivery (Birmingham, Berry, & Bussey, 1996). Meanwhile, agencies devote enormous resources to the training of new staff in order to manage the turnover. But when staff members feel their work is unappreciated and undervalued that work loses meaning and satisfaction (Helfgott, 1991; Pasztor, Saint-Germaine, DeCrescenzo, 2002; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). In a survey of child welfare staff members in Hennepin County, Minnesota, inaccurate and negative media coverage and the negative public image that results was one reason staff members frequently cited for leaving their jobs (Hennepin County Child Welfare Staff, 1990).

As a result of the ever-increasing complexity of child welfare work, it is critical to design relevant training to meet the needs of child welfare workers. Certainly federal legislation over the past 20 years has had an impact on what child welfare staff must know and be able to do. This legislation includes, for example, The Child Abuse and Reporting Act of 1974, The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 as previously mentioned, the 1993 Family Preservation and Support Initiative, the 1994 Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, and the 1999 Foster Care Independence Act. Further, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 which includes mandated federal outcomes that states must achieve (and which states are struggling to address) requires a skilled workforce in order to reach specific outcome measures related to child safety, well-being, and permanency.

However, the independent comprehensive study authorized by the California State Legislature in 1999 on the shortage of child welfare workers indicated that California must double the number of qualified public social workers in child welfare in order to meet current minimum legal standards. Specifically, the report indicated that the number of social workers in the 1999-2000 state budget and planned for in the 2000-2001 budget is 6,449.

However, the number of social workers it would take to meet minimum state standards is 13,762 and, to meet optimal standards would require 19,984 social workers (DeCrescenzo & Pasztor, 2000). In a more recent study commissioned by the California Assembly, it was reported that California is expected to need a total of approximately 25,000 social workers across the program areas of child welfare, aging, developmental disabilities, and mental health by the year 2007 (Pasztor, Saint-Germain, & DeCrescenzo, 2002). A service mandated to protect at-risk children and strengthen their families cannot function without a qualified, stable work force. To what extent does training influence the quality of their work, and the likelihood that they will stay employed to produce essential outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

Almost 20 years ago, training was identified by Vinokur-Kaplan and Hartman (1986, as cited in Ferreira, 2001, p. 3) as the top factor that contributed to work effectiveness and success. While several training models and competencies have been identified, there have been few published studies on training outcomes. The purpose of this study was to identify public child welfare supervisors' perceptions of training outcomes as they relate to worker performance and retention. The study addressed the following questions:

- What training topics contribute most to caseworker performance and retention?
- Compared to other factors, such as realistic caseload, quality supervision, caseworker safety, employee benefits, is training more, less, or equally as important?
- What variables about training, such as mandatory or optional or the extent to which it re-energizes staff; most effect caseworker performance and retention?

Methodology

This descriptive, exploratory, quantitative study used a cross-sectional design to illustrate county public agency child welfare supervisors' perceptions of the impact of training on worker performance and retention.

Sample and Instrument

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) granted permission to survey approximately 437 Supervising Children's Social Workers[1] (SCSW) throughout its regional offices. There were 130 respondents, for a response rate of 33.6%.

The data collection instrument was drafted by the authors based on questions developed in other studies, such as Ferreira (2001) and O'Donnell (1999). The instrument consisted of two parts. Part I included 11 demographic questions: gender, ethnicity, highest level of education, field of highest degree, length of time participants worked as a child welfare supervisor, years in the field of public child welfare, and approximate number of staff supervised were obtained from the instrument.

Part II consisted of 25 questions regarding SCSW perceptions about the impact of training on Children's Social Worker's (CSW) performance and retention. Respondents were presented with a list of 11 training topics that could affect performance and retention, and were asked to circle their top two choices. Ten factors that could have an impact on workers' performance and retention were presented and respondents were asked to check whether these factors were more, less or equal in importance to training. Respondents were presented with a list of factors that may impact training and were asked to indicate yes, no, or not sure for each factor. Respondents were asked to briefly describe their own perceptions of the impact of training on worker performance and retention in an open-ended question format.

[1] Supervising Children's Social Workers is the title used by Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services for its supervisors who are responsible for overseeing line staff; they may or may not have degrees in social work.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics (N=130)

Characteristic and Category	Child Welfare Supervisors *f*	%
Gender		
Female	82	63.1
Male	48	36.9
Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White	69	53.1
African American/Black	15	11.5
Asian Pacific Islander	7	5.4
Hispanic/Latino/a	31	23.8
Native American	1	.8
Middle Eastern	1	.8
Filipino	1	.8
Other	2	1.5
Non specific	3	2.3
Educational level		
College graduate	17	13.1
Some graduate school	9	6.9
Master's degree	93	71.5
Post master's degree	7	5.4
Doctorate degree	4	3.1
Field of highest degree		
Social work	52	40.0
Psychology	29	22.3
Sociology	8	6.2
Child development	1	.8
Marriage and family counseling	20	15.4
Public administration	1	.8
Other	19	14.6

Characteristic and Category	Child Welfare Supervisors *f*	%
Years as a child welfare supervisor		
2 years or less	29	22.5
3 to 6 years	46	35.7
7 to 10 years	18	14.0
11 to 15 years	23	17.8
More than 15 years	13	10.1
Years employed in child welfare field		
Less than 3 years	1	.8
3 to 6 years	11	8.5
7 to 10 years	23	17.7
11 to 15 years	31	23.8
More than 15 years	64	49.2
Number of workers supervised at current agency		
Less than 10	44	33.8
11 to 20	23	17.7
21 to 30	23	17.7
31 to 40	9	6.9
41 to 50	6	4.6
51 to 100	16	12.3
Over 100	8	6.2

Data Collection

The survey instrument was distributed through agency inter-office mail. On the front of the survey was an informed consent letter that also served to provide an introduction and instructions. After signing the informed consent letter and completing the survey, participants were asked to return both items in the two separate pre-addressed envelopes, which were provided. Each survey returned was assigned a record number so responses could be entered into a master data set.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed utilizing Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the demographic variables. Content analysis was used to identify themes in the open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the responses to the research question: "Which two training topics contribute most to Children's Social Worker Performance and Retention?" The topics were then ranked in order by most to least important.

Content analysis was also used to identify additional themes reported in the open-ended questions. These questions asked SCSW's to identify the single most effective strategy that could be used to positively influence CSW retention and performance.

Table 2. Supervisors' Perceptions of the Impact of Training Topics on Worker Performance and Retention (N =130)

	Child Welfare Supervisors	
	f	%
Performance		
Policy	37	28.9
Risk assessment	40	31.3
Conflict management	4	3.1
Stress management	21	16.4
Interviewing	12	9.4
Time management	8	6.3
Cultural competence	2	1.6
Indicators of abuse	4	3.1
Parent effectiveness	0	0.0
Legal foundations	0	0.0
Other	0	0.0
Retention		
Policy	20	16.3
Risk Assessment	9	7.3
Conflict Management	21	17.1
Stress Management	54	43.9
Interviewing	4	3.3
Time Management	9	7.3
Cultural Competence	1	0.8
Indicators of abuse	4	3.3
Parent effectiveness	0	0.0
Legal foundations	0	0.0
Other	1	0.1

Subsequently, content analysis was used to highlight specific themes reported in the question: What is the single most important factor that positively contributes to CSW performance and retention?

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Of the 130 study participants, the majority were females (63.1%). Regarding ethnicity, 53.1% were Caucasian/White, 23.8% were Latino/a, 11.5% were African American, 5.4% were Asian, 2.3% did not specify, 1.5% specified other, .8% Filipino, .8% Middle Eastern, and .8% specified Native American.

The majority of the participants (71.5%) held a master's degree, followed by 13.1% college graduates, 6.9% some graduate school, 5.4% post-masters degree and 3.1% doctorate degree. Forty percent reported having a Master's degree in Social Work, followed by 22.3% reported a having a degree in Psychology.

Nearly half of the respondents (49.2%) had been supervisors for more than 15 years. Twenty-three percent of the respondents have been supervisors for 11 to 16 years and 17.7% have been supervisors for seven to ten years, 8.5% three to six years and .8% had been supervisors for less than three years.

Employment in the field of public child welfare ranged from more than 15 years to less than three years. Forty-nine percent of the respondents reported being in the field for more than 15 years. Twenty-four percent from 11 to 15 years, 17.7% for 7 to 10 years, 8.5% for three to six years, and .8% for three years or less.

Supervisor Perceptions of Training on Worker Performance and Retention

As indicated in Table 2, supervisors were given a list of ten topics that typically are offered to child welfare workers plus a category of "other." They were asked to indicate which two of those ten contributed most to worker performance. The training topic that was reported most likely to impact worker performance was risk assessment 31.3%, followed by policy 28.9%, and stress management at 16.4%. The topics reported least likely to influence performance were parent effectiveness and legal foundations.

As also indicated in Table 2, supervisors were given a list of 10 topics that typically are offered to child welfare workers, plus a category of "other." They were asked to indicate which two of those ten contributed most to worker retention. The training topic most likely to impact worker retention was stress management (43.9%), followed by conflict management (17.1%). Third was risk assessment and time management, both of which were endorsed by 7.3% of the respondents. Once again, the training

topics least likely to influence retention were parent effectiveness training and legal foundations.

As indicated in Table 3, supervisors were given a list of 10 factors that could impact worker performance. They were asked to indicate whether or not the factor is more important than training, less important than training, or equally important as training. A majority of the respondents identified only two topics as being more important than training: realistic caseload and quality supervision. A realistic caseload was identified by 79.2% of the respondents as more important than training. Similarly, 78.9% of the respondents reported that quality supervision is more important than training. Further, a majority of respondents identified only two factors as being equally as important as training. A culturally responsive workplace was identified by 57.8% of respondents, and employee benefits were identified by 52.7% of respondents as equally important as training. But, as indicated in Table 3, respondents were quite divided in assessing the extent to which the other six factors were more, less, or equally as important as training.

As also indicated in Table 3, supervisors were given a list of ten factors that impact worker retention. They were asked to indicate whether or not the factor is more important than training, less important than training, or equally important as training. The one factor that was identified most often as being more important than training was a realistic caseload (84.6%), second was quality supervision (78.5%), third was a competitive salary (55.4%), fourth was opportunities for promotion (52.3%) and fifth was worker safety (45%).

In addition to assessing factors which were more, less, or equally likely to be as important as training in impacting worker performance and retention, supervisors were asked 15 questions about their perceptions of the value of training concerning specific issues. These issues and the respondents' perceptions are listed in Table 4 (on page 46). A majority of respondents (62.0%) perceived that mandatory training was not helpful, whereas (85.4%) said that optional training was helpful.

Supervisors were divided on whether training actually "re-energizes" workers; in fact regarding whether workers are more stressed because training sets them back in their work, 49.6% said yes, 34.6% said no, and 15.7% were not sure.

Supervisors were asked four questions regarding whether workers are expected to share information learned in training either informally or formally

Table 3. Supervisors perceptions of factors which may be more, less, or equally as important as training in impacting worker performance and retention (N = 130)

	Child Welfare Supervisors					
	More Important		Less Important		Equally Important	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
Performance						
Realistic caseload	103.0	79.2	4.0	3.1	23.0	17.7
Competitive salary	39.0	30.5	32.0	25.0	57.0	44.5
Liability protection	33.0	25.6	49.0	38.0	47.0	36.4
Opportunity for promotion	42.0	32.3	29.0	22.3	59.0	45.4
Employee benefits	35.0	27.1	26.0	20.2	68.0	52.7
Respite	37.0	28.9	58.0	45.3	33.0	25.8
Worker safety	58.0	45.0	18.0	14.0	53.0	41.1
Quality supervision	101.0	78.9	1.0	0.8	26.0	20.3
Culturally responsive workplace	30.0	23.4	24.0	18.8	74.0	57.8
Freedom from sexual harassment	33.0	25.8	31.0	24.2	64.0	50.0
Retention						
Realistic caseload	110.0	84.6	2.0	1.5	18.0	13.8
Competitive salary	72.0	55.4	15.0	11.5	43.0	33.1
Liability protection	45.0	34.6	33.0	25.4	52.0	40.0
Opportunity for promotion	68.0	52.3	16.0	12.3	46.0	35.4
Employee benefits	57.0	44.5	24.0	18.8	47.0	36.7
Respite	33.0	26.0	47.0	37.0	47.0	37.0
Worker safety	58.0	45.0	16.0	12.4	55.0	47.6
Quality supervision	102.0	78.5	5.0	3.8	23.0	17.7
Culturally responsive workplace	39.0	30.2	17.0	13.2	73.0	56.6
Freedom from sexual harassment	33.0	25.6	27.0	20.9	69.0	53.5

Table 4. Supervisors' overall perceptions of training (n = 130)

	Child Welfare Supervisors					
	Yes		No		Not Sure	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
Do workers perceive mandatory training as helpful?	31.0	24.0	80.0	62.0	18.0	14.0
Do workers perceive optional training as helpful?	111.0	85.4	9.0	6.9	10.0	7.7
Are workers generally re-energizedwhen they return from training?	56.0	43.4	47.0	36.4	26.0	20.2
Are workers generally stressed because they have lost a day of work and are further behind?	63.0	49.6	44.0	34.6	20.0	15.7
Are workers expected to informally share the information they learned?	64.0	49.2	63.0	48.5	2.0	1.5
Are workers expected to share the information they learned in formal supervision?	23.0	18.3	95.0	75.4	7.0	5.6
Are workers expected to share information they learned with co-workers informally?	63.0	49.2	56.0	43.8	9.0	7.0
Are workers expected to share information they learned with co-workers in a unit meeting?	50.0	38.8	67.0	51.9	12.0	9.3
Are workers expected to integrate the information they learned in casework practice?	111.0	86.0	8.0	6.2	10.0	7.8
Does the time workers spend in training compensate for their time away from their caseload?	69.0	54.3	28.0	22.0	30.0	23.6
Does the time workers spend in training help increase their time with the agency?	39.0	30.2	45.0	34.9	45.0	34.9
If supervisors had more training, would it help increase worker performance?	85.0	66.4	20.0	15.6	23.0	18.0
If supervisors had more training, would it help increase worker retention?	73.0	56.6	31.0	24.0	25.0	19.4
Does training have an overall positive impact on worker performance?	91.0	70.5	12.0	9.3	26.0	20.2
Does training have an overall positive impact on worker retention?	68.0	52.3	32.0	24.6	30.0	23.1

with their supervisors and co-workers, i.e., in supervision or unit meetings. Approximately half of the respondents indicated that there are no expectations for workers to share what they learn in training with other colleagues or their supervisors. Supervisors were also asked if workers were expected to integrate training content into their casework practice. Conversely, only 50% of supervisors expected that training content would be shared, while 86% of the supervisors expected workers to integrate the information learned in training into their casework practice.

Whether the time workers spend in training compensates for their time away from their caseloads, 54.3% said yes, 22% said no, and 23.6% reported they were not sure. When asked whether the time workers spend in training helps increase retention, supervisors were almost equally divided: 34.9% said no, 35.9% said not sure and 30.2% said yes.

Finally, supervisors were asked to assess whether or not training has an overall positive impact on worker performance and retention. Regarding performance, 70.5% of the supervisors said yes; regarding retention, only 52.3% of the supervisors said yes.

Strategies and Factors that Positively Impact Worker Performance and Retention

The 130 responding supervisors provided a total of 635 examples of strategies and factors that could positively impact their staff's performance and retention. Three factors emerged as impacting both performance and retention: 1) quality supervisors and administrators; 2) caseload/workload size; and 3) recognition and support.

Regarding quality supervision and administrative support, 88 of the respondents addressed this strategy/factor. The following comments are representative of the responses: competent, empathetic supervisors; less micromanagement; and supportive, motivational administration.

Regarding caseload/workload size, 66 of the comments addressed this issue, and the following three comments are representative: realistic caseload; lower caseloads to state legislative recommendations; and reduction of paperwork.

There were 76 comments that addressed staff need for support and recognition. Representative remarks were: positive encouragement and praise; feedback; and supportive environment.

Other miscellaneous strategies and factors that the supervisors perceived as having an impact on worker performance and which are noteworthy to mention included: accountability and performance-based incentives; training that leads to growth and positive experiences; and teamwork and a cohesive unit.

Discussion

Over two decades ago, the literature indicated that job effectiveness and staff motivation are shaped in part by reasonable caseload sizes and worker competence, as well as the following two factors: (1) clarity of performance expectations and (2) the type and quality of feedback that workers receive (Siegel & Lane, 1982 as cited in Pecora et al., 2000). More recently, it has been documented that a major reason why child welfare staff resigns is high workload (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). The majority of the respondents in this study also identified caseload/workload issues as having a negative impact on both line staff performance and retention.

Supervisors in this study predominantly perceived that a realistic caseload and quality supervision are far more important than training. These findings are not surprising. In fact, the literature has long documented that large caseloads, poor supervision, and troubled working relations between co-workers contribute to a "toxic organizational environment" (Cole, 1987 as reported in Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & Plotkin, 2000). Supervisors in this study predominantly concurred that the type of supervision and the type of support a worker receives can have a huge impact on performance and retention.

Numerous respondents in this study noted the impact that the media and negative publicity has on worker performance and retention. The literature also supports these findings. In 2001, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) found that retention of social workers could be enhanced by creating a more positive public image for social workers; and improving working conditions, including smaller caseloads.

Supervisor perceptions in this current study were also similar to those of the 874 staff who participated in the Ferreira 2001 study on training preferences. Then, the top training priorities were predominantly related to basic child maltreatment, assessment, and investigation. The top training priorities identified by supervisors in this study were also related to risk assessment followed by policy.

Regarding the value of mandatory training, supervisors in this study overwhelmingly perceived that mandatory training is not helpful, and yet workers and supervisors alike continue to be mandated to attend on a frequent basis. Supervisors also predominantly perceived that optional training is much more helpful than mandated training.

One common theme found throughout the supervisors' open-ended responses identified respect and support as essential variables that contribute positive-

ly to worker retention. The literature has documented that the for-profit sector is addressing retention problems, as Cappelli (2000) found that firms that place more value on interpersonal issues such as greater orientation toward teams and more respect for individuals also have lower turnover. While those organizations that focus more attention on work tasks and task performance, concentrating on performance at the expense of relationships has higher turnover (Cappelli, 2000).

Finally, two of the most recent national studies on the human services workforce have indicated that inadequate supervision, lack of administrative support, high workload, and lack of relevant training are all contributing factors to worker turnover (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). The major findings of this study support this national research.

Limitations of the Study

The first major limitation to this study was the use of a cross-sectional design. As supervisors' perceptions were collected at only one point in time, and because of ongoing staff turnover, the study did not capture previous or subsequent supervisors' ideas and recommendations. Second, these findings are based on supervisors' perceptions that may differ from those of workers.' Third, the responses may not be representative of the entire supervisor population at DCFS. Additionally, as Los Angeles County houses one of the largest public child welfare agencies in the country, and the largest in the state of California, certain characteristics that hold true for Los Angeles County may not be representative of other jurisdictions.

The instrument used in this study was designed by the researcher; therefore, the reliability and validity are unknown. And finally, because the principal researcher was a supervisor with Los Angeles County DCFS at the time of this study, there may have been an inherent bias with an element of social desirability possibly affecting the participants' responses.

Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice

The data suggest that there are specific factors which impact caseworker performance and retention. Out of ten possible factors, the top factors the responding supervisors identified—more than training—were predominantly related to caseload/workload and quality supervision. National standards, such as those promulgated by the Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services (COA) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), provide specific guidelines for caseload/workload size in all child welfare program areas, including emergency response, child protection investigation, family preservation, kinship care, family foster care, and adoptions. Public policy and legislation that holds agencies accountable for meeting these standards—with the commensurate financial support—could address the caseload/workload issues so dramatically stated by the supervisors who responded to this study.

The results of this study illustrate that there is a need for competent support on the part of supervisory and administrative staff. Perhaps utilizing more competency-based training for supervisors and administrators could help to address this deficit. This could include, for example, placing more value on inter-personal skills, teamwork, participatory decision-making, effective communication, and any strategies that contribute to a reduction in stress and fear.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future studies, a larger, more diverse sample, which could generalize across agencies and states would be valuable to the profession. It might also be useful to conduct the same type of study in a setting where caseload/workload size meets national standards and supervisors and administrators are perceived to be more supportive. For example, there is only one nationally accredited public child welfare agency in California (Stanislaus County) and, as such, caseload size does meet national standards. Although that is a much smaller jurisdiction in Central California, it might be helpful to explore where training fits compared to these other issues. Another approach might be to match Los Angeles with a similarly sized jurisdiction. For example, the Illinois Department of

Children and Family Services also is nationally accredited and so its jurisdiction in Cook County (Chicago) might provide a research comparison.

Conclusions

New goals and directions in the field of child welfare demand an expanding and ever-changing array of knowledge and skills. However, basic social work professional values should remain constant. It should be beneficial to pursue similar research studies by utilizing the perceptions of child welfare supervisors, who may well hold the key to the future success of the field.

Child welfare professionals face complex challenges each day. These ordeals can best be overcome or at least managed when staff have realistic workloads in a culture of supervisory and administrative support. There also must be a culture of public support with elected and appointed leaders providing the political will to invest in a qualified and respected workforce. Only then can training dollars be maximized. And only then can child welfare clients—vulnerable at-risk children and families—be assured of the quality services they need and deserve.

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