Why Workforce Development Matters: Child Welfare Workers Making a Difference Day by Day

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Across this country, thousands of child welfare employees go to work each day thinking about the day ahead and how they can best support families who may be struggling with violence, depression, trauma, substance use, homelessness, and poverty. These women and men find the work of engaging families and children through child welfare systems deeply compelling and meaningful. Few jobs and careers bring as much opportunity for using finely honed skills, community networks, and teamwork to support healing for families and children. In fact, practitioners may find such work constitutes the pinnacle of their careers.

However, there is a paradox here. Although child welfare work is important and highly impactful, the fact is that some child welfare agencies struggle to recruit caseworkers and lack sufficient systems to ensure their safety, retention, and well-being. Agencies and workers are confronted with demanding caseloads and are often tasked with making life-and-death decisions about safety and risk, traumatic stress, and public oversight and scrutiny. Staff turnover, which is sometimes as high as 40 percent a year, is more than a fiscal issue for an agency; it has a direct impact on case outcomes and to the safety, permanence, and well-being of children and families. Caseworkers and supervisors who experience secondary trauma and insufficient support may carry scars, like the children and families they serve.

Consequently, workforce development is much more than a recruitment and hiring issue. Reducing turnover increases the chances of stability for families and permanency for children, improves the timeliness of investigations, ensures greater contact between children in care and their families, and supports effective service delivery (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute [NCWWI], 2018). It facilitates a child welfare system that can focus on supporting families and providing resources that help restore family functioning and promote child and family well-being.
Workforce development is a top priority for the Children’s Bureau. In fact, since its inception in 1912, workforce development efforts that recruit and support a strong and skilled cadre of caseworkers and supervisors to serve the most vulnerable have been a consistent focus of the Children’s Bureau. So how do we begin to understand and address the factors that underlie the workforce crisis currently impacting our child welfare systems? One way is by clarifying for the general public what child welfare workers do. When asked, the general public may say that child welfare workers take children away from their parents or accuse parents of being unfit to care for their children. While it is true that there are times when children may need to be brought into care to protect their immediate safety, the vast majority of families are engaged with the child welfare system due to child neglect, not abuse. Since 2017, NCWWI has been working with the Children’s Bureau to educate the public and celebrate child welfare work being done across the country. September has been designated as National Child Welfare Workforce Month, and efforts to publicize this event nationwide will be a focus of NCWWI in the coming years.

Other focal areas within tribal, voluntary, and public child welfare agencies are the importance of organizational culture and climate, including workload and work conditions, workforce competencies and skill sets, university-community partnerships that support workforce preparation, career ladders, ongoing professional development, high-quality supervision, and inclusive management. Many states have been using title IV-E funds for years as an important workforce development strategy to support social work students and child welfare staff returning to school. At least 34 states have nurtured these robust partnerships between schools of social work and agencies. NCWWI has been working intensively with jurisdictions and tribes across the country on leadership training, university-agency partnerships, education and transitions to work for new employees, and organizational health.

Currently, NCWWI is working to foster partnerships with eight jurisdictions, tribes, and schools of social work in a systemwide, outcome-focused change effort. These include a systematic assessment of the health of an organization through a comprehensive organizational health assessment. The findings of the assessment will be used to develop and implement an organizational intervention, embed leadership training into agency training systems, work in partnership with a school of social work to prepare graduates for child welfare practice using tailored educational programs and long-term...
supports for the transition to work, and inform an embedded continuous quality improvement process as well as evaluation data to measure progress and assess outcomes.

The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD), another initiative funded by the Children's Bureau, is engaged in research on effective strategies to attract and retain child welfare workers. Its partnerships with eight jurisdictions and tribes will provide important knowledge to guide the development of evidence-based and evidence-informed recruitment and retention strategies. Its team is also examining research from multiple fields and collecting information about workforce trends and what works in areas including staff recruitment and retention as well as agency culture and climate (QIC-WD, 2019).

The national conversation about the child welfare workforce and the urgency to "create the conditions for strong and thriving families and communities where children are free from harm" (Milner, 2019, para. 10) reinforces the message that meaningful, effective work with vulnerable children and families is coveted as a career option by many. Developing more preventive services, including initiatives through the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act, and utilizing practitioners' family-centered and culturally competent skills earlier on can help families before their stress and impoverishment take an often irreversible toll. Moreover, the child welfare system's expanded focus on prevention will also bolster services, programs, and collaborations in the health care, legal, education, child care, early childhood education, and social services fields.

Attention to primary prevention and early intervention is a community issue and requires concerted, collective efforts among all stakeholders to build systems of family support, capacity building, and community-based child protection. These intentional efforts, fostered and supported by the Children's Bureau, offer a strong foundation to support our current and future workforce, the essential component for achieving excellence in our child welfare system.

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References
