The Causes and Consequences of Turnover – Research Findings

The Causes of Turnover

The causes of turnover among child welfare workers are as varied as the organizations in which they work. Although there may be some common challenges such as low pay, heavy workloads, and ineffective supervision, the reasons for turnover in your organization may be very different.

The Magnitude of the Problem

A stable and highly-skilled child welfare workforce is necessary to meet the critical needs of vulnerable children and their families. High turnover of child welfare workers is a major contributor to the failure of child welfare organizations to meet state and federal goals. Some recent research findings include:

- In 2003, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) estimated that turnover of child welfare staff was between 30 and 40 percent annually nationwide, with the average tenure being less than two years.
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimates annual turnover rates of 20 percent in public agencies and 40 percent in private agencies.
- The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) found a 22 percent turnover rate for Children's Protective Services Workers for calendar year 2003, as compared to a rate of almost 20 percent for calendar year 1999.

The GAO's Research

The **GAO** conducted an extensive review of the child welfare system and released their findings in March 2003 in a report entitled, *HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff*. In conducting its study, the GAO:

- Reviewed nearly 600 exit interview documents completed by staff who terminated their employment in 17 states, 40 county and 19 private child welfare agencies.
- Examined 27 available Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR) completed by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The CFSRs assess state's performance on federally-mandated child and family welfare measures.
- Reviewed a variety of child welfare workforce studies.
- Interviewed child welfare experts and officials across the country.
- Conducted site visits to both public and private child welfare agencies in four states.

The Causes of Turnover

The GAO found that turnover among child welfare workers is caused by:

- Low salaries.

- High caseloads.
- Paperwork and other administrative burdens which detract from professional social work activities.
- Lack of supervisory support.
- Unavailability of training and/or insufficient time to participate in training.
- Risk of violence.

Generally speaking, although the causes of turnover will be unique to each organization, the following are the primary reasons we've identified for turnover across organizations.

1. Low Salaries

Some child welfare agencies pay their child welfare workers competitively, but many do not. As a general rule, public jurisdictions pay better than private, non-profit agencies. Recent research conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation documents that social services jobs consistently rank among the five worst-paying professional jobs tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for both men and women. In fact, "social services pays its workers less than any other sector that hires similarly qualified people for similar jobs." (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003)

The APHSA found that the average salary of Children's Protective Services Workers was $35,553. As a comparison, US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics data for November 2003 show the average annual salary for registered nurses was 48.5 percent higher ($52,810) and 29.7 percent higher for public school teachers ($46,123).

In their child welfare workforce survey examining state agencies, the APHSA identified 17 "preventable" causes of turnover and had respondents rank each of them using a three-point rating scale. See Table 1 (page 56) for the results.

Table 1: Preventable Turnover Problems (APHSA)

Preventable Turnover Problem	Average Rating	Number Reporting	Not Problematic (percent)	Somewhat Problematic (percent)	Highly Problematic (percent)
Workloads too high and/or demanding (e.g., stress)	2.75	32	6	13	81
Caseloads too high	2.75	32	3	19	78
After hours & unpredictable work interfere in personal life	2.41	32	13	34	53
Too much time spent on travel, transport, paperwork, etc.	2.25	32	19	37	44
Insufficient services resources for families & children	2.06	32	22	50	28
Workers do not feel valued by agency	2.03	32	16	66	18
Problems with quality of supervision	2.00	32	22	56	22
Insufficient opportunities for promotion & career advance.	1.94	32	25	56	19
Low salaries	1.91	32	38	34	28
Worker concerns about their physical safety	1.63	32	44	50	6
Insufficient agency support for professionalism of workers	1.53	32	50	47	3
Quality & quantity of training or continuing education	1.53	32	50	47	3
Negative media coverage of child welfare field	1.47	32	59	35	6
Agency management problems (e.g., high manager turnover)	1.44	32	59	38	3
Vulnerability to legal liability around cases	1.34	32	75	16	9
Poor working conditions (e.g., rundown/crowded building)	1.23	31	77	23	0
Lack of professional development opportunities	1.22	32	78	22	0
Other problems	1.00	2	100	0	0
TOTAL AVERAGES	**1.80**	**30**	**39%**	**38%**	**23%**

Source: *APHSA, p. 37.*
Note*: Respondents were encouraged to base their responses on exit interviews; the responses represent an administrative point of view rather than the more direct worker perspective.*

In the four states the GOA visited, all reported that they lose current workers to fields which pay higher wages and offer safer and more predictable work, such as education. The Bureau of Labor Statistics' national wage survey reports that elementary and middle school teachers earn, on average, about $42,000 annually while social workers earn about $33,000, a difference of 27 percent. According to the GAO's analysis of exit interviews/surveys, inadequate pay was cited as one of the top five reasons (13.85 percent of responses) for employees leaving.

In many instances, low pay may be a contributing reason for an employee's decision to leave an organization rather than the primary motivation. Even in those instances, however, eliminating even one reason for worker dissatisfaction may make the difference between leaving and staying. Furthermore, inadequate compensation may indirectly result in increased turnover. Low pay contributes to recruitment difficulties, resulting in more vacancies, and consequently higher caseloads. The stress and "burnout" resulting from high caseloads are consistently cited as being one of the more common reasons for high turnover.

2. High Caseloads

High caseloads often drive good employees from their positions because of the stress and frustration that results from not being able to do the job as it should be done. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recommends that caseloads be between 12 and 15 children per worker, and the Council for Accreditation for Children and Family Services (COA) suggests they not exceed 18 children per worker. The APHSA survey reported that caseloads average 24 children per worker for Children's Protective Services Workers and 23 children per worker for Foster Care and Adoption Workers.

Not surprisingly, high caseloads lead to increased turnover, which in turn leads to even higher caseloads and further increases turnover. Breaking this vicious cycle requires careful analysis and appropriate strategies to most effectively use limited agency resources.

Regulations and Retention

"Rule-bound, compliance-oriented jobs create a vicious cycle. On one hand, good workers who want some degree of autonomy will not stay in them. On the other hand, poor-quality staff are subjected to overregulation in a last-ditch effort to manage them. Though regulations are intended to build in accountability and ensure a base level of good practice, they fix the process into a one-size-fits-all intervention, ignore results, and are indifferent to high performance.

In addition, such regulation constricts flexibility and inhibits opportunity for professional recognition and career advancement. Excessive regulation, particularly in the fields of child welfare, juvenile justice, and income maintenance, is a consistent feature of work life and routinely cited as a leading reason why workers leave their jobs."

***Source**: Annie E. Casey Foundation, p. 20.*

3. Administrative Burdens

The GOA research indicates that child welfare workers and supervisors feel frustrated by overwhelming administrative burdens, such as paperwork and court appearances, that take up a large portion of their time. Some estimated that these administrative responsibilities take from 50 to 80 percent of their time.

Conscientious child welfare workers often feel so frustrated by the fact that administrative requirements diminish their ability to serve children and families that they quit.

A contributing factor to the increases in the administrative function of child welfare jobs is related to the difficulty in recruiting and hiring employees with appropriate credentials. Because of the scarcity of employees with masters and bachelors degrees in social work willing to work in child welfare, many agencies have been forced to hire employees with other degrees, or perhaps no degree at all. Jobs which had once been highly professional, requiring a large degree of independent decision making, have become far more structured with increased requirements for documentation. Consequently, some agencies find that the best qualified employees become quickly dissatisfied and leave.

4. Quality of Supervision

Good supervision is key to reducing turnover. Supervisory support can motivate child welfare workers to stay despite the stress and frustration of the job. Lack of supervisory support, on the other hand, is often cited as a critical factor in an employee's decision to leave.

Even good supervisors become ineffective when they are so stretched with other responsibilities that they are unavailable to their staff. Organizations experiencing high turnover among supervisors often also face high turnover among casework staff. Inexperienced supervisors who lack appropriate and timely training are sometimes simply incapable of providing the needed staff support.

In the APHSA survey, states were asked to rate the importance of 15 organizational and personal factors that may contribute to the decision of child welfare workers to remain employed by the state's child welfare agency. States ranked "quality of supervision" as one of the most important factors in retaining staff. Although the states acknowledged the impact of good supervision on staff retention, 78 percent of them indicated that "problems with quality of supervision" was somewhat to highly problematic in their agency (see Table 1, page 56).

5. Training Issues

According to the GAO audit, training opportunities are often inadequate to ensure that new hires are properly prepared for the challenges of their new jobs. Because of high caseloads and other work priorities, supervisors and experienced workers are often unavailable to provide on-the-job training. In some agencies, half or more of the newly-hired child welfare workers leave their jobs before completing their first year. Many who leave do so because they are not sufficiently trained and supported to do their jobs (GAO 2003).

Experienced workers reported that they elect not to participate in optional training because of time constraints and job priorities. Because work continues to accumulate while away at training, many workers simply prefer to forego needed training rather than return from training to a workload that has grown out of control.

6. Evening and/or Weekend Hours

In the APHSA survey, state agency administrators ranked worker dissatisfaction with the requirement for working evening and weekend hours as a major problem. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents identified this issue as being either somewhat or highly problematic during the past 12 months. (See Table 1, page 56.)

In many organizations, employees are required to be on call during evenings and weekends to investigate and otherwise respond to emergency situations. In many other instances, however, employees are involved in difficult situations at the end of the work day and simply cannot walk away because it's quitting time. Many child welfare workers simply choose to put in long hours, without the authorization or expectation of overtime pay, because they find it necessary in order to keep up with their heavy workloads.

What We Lose When Workers Leave

"Frontline work in human services is about relationships. Workers are not interchangeable parts, and a child or family suffers when caseworkers don't know how to help, or when they leave and are replaced by new, inexperienced workers. We know that just staying in their jobs continuously is an essential element of workers' effectiveness. We also know the consequences of high turnover; for example, families with children in foster care are less likely to be reunited in a timely way and children in child care centers show slower development."

Source: *Annie E. Casey Foundation, p. 18.*

7. Lack of Resources for Children and Families

As shown in Table 1, 78 percent of state agency administrators responding to the APHSA survey ranked "Insufficient services resources for families and children" as significant reason for turnover among child welfare workers. 78 percent of them believe that this lack of services is somewhat or highly problematic. Feelings of frustration in not being able to provide reasonable support services for children and families leads to worker burnout.

8. Morale

According to the APHSA survey, 84 percent of the responding state administrators believe that "workers feel undervalued by the agency" is either somewhat or highly problematic. In their recent report, the Annie E. Casey Foundation identifies "not feeling valued" as one of the consistently identified top three reasons for child welfare workers leaving their jobs. Many of the other reasons offered for high turnover – low pay, heavy workloads, insufficient resources, and complex policies that tie workers' hands – contribute to worker feelings of being undervalued. From the child welfare workers' perspective, an agency's failure to pay a fair wage, set manageable workload standards, provide basic equipment and supplies, and de-bureaucratize policy are regarded as a failure to address employee needs.

The Consequences of Turnover

Adverse Impact on Children and Families

The GAO study found significant evidence that workforce instability and high turnover result in child welfare workers having less time to:

- Conduct frequent and meaningful home visits in order to assess children's safety.
- Establish relationships with children and families. Trust between the children's services worker and child is essential to obtain the necessary information to develop and manage the child's case. When that trust is disrupted by turnover, it becomes more difficult for the new worker to reestablish a relationship with both the child and the family.
- Make thoughtful and well-supported decisions regarding safe and stable permanent placements. When turnover results in remaining workers assuming the responsibility for the departed employee's cases, the ability to ensure the safety of the children involved is compromised. Furthermore, transitioning cases from one worker to another can result in delays or changes to permanency decisions. Decisions reached hurriedly or without adequate investigation can result in placement disruptions, foster care re-entry, or continued abuse and neglect.

Failure to attain Federal Child Welfare Outcomes

As part of the GAO's audit of the Child and Family Service Reviews completed by HHS, GAO reported that HHS explicitly cited workforce deficiencies – high caseloads, training deficiencies, and staffing shortages – as a factor affecting the attainment of at least one assessment measure in each of the completed CFSRs. CFSR reviewers specifically cited staff turnover and vacancies as affecting worker responsiveness and decreasing ability to help children achieve permanency (GAO 2003).

References

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