



Improving Public Image of the Agency

Strategy: Improve Public Image

*Excerpt from WRRRP SMARRT Manual. Butler Institute for Families. (2006).
Strategies Matrix Approach to Recruitment & Retention. Denver, CO: Author.*

Unfortunately, it is rare for the public at large to form favorable opinions of child welfare systems. The media's frequent misinformation, one-sided perspectives, and tendency to focus on the sensational can often create problems for agencies, including a reduced pool of qualified applicants.

Organizations are not powerless to improve their image in the eyes of the public. To do so, create a strategic communications plan that includes situational assessment, goals, tactics, timelines, work assignments, and evaluation of the plan's impact. Have communications student interns create this plan or secure a communications firm to work pro bono. The plan should establish organizational structures and identify champions who can promote public child welfare as service work that is a viable and respectable career choice (Ellett, 2002).

Here are some elements that such a plan might include:

- Articulate specific negative ideas that the public has about child-welfare workers, and tailor communications to address these. Make sure to address the high-level qualifications of child welfare workers.
- Identify different target audiences, and individual messages and desired outcomes and actions for each. Create brochures or other publications with messages specific to these different target audiences.
- Distribute paper or online newsletters, or both, that consistently carry the agency's most important messages.
- Select and train a Speakers' Bureau to systematically present to faith and community groups. Aggressively and strategically market the Speakers' Bureau so engagements are consistently taking place.
- Develop positive working relationships with local media (television, radio, newspaper) during non-crisis times. Pitch stories with unique news hooks that help



the reporters and announcers meet their own needs, and that connect to other current stories. Create a regular timeline of communication with the media about successes and positive child welfare achievements.

- Become known by the media as ready local experts who may be consulted regarding any issues related to child welfare. Become known for giving high quality information, being professional, and responding quickly to media inquiries.
- Offer rewards for employees to alert agency communications staff to great stories concerning children, families, and workers that should be pitched to the media.
- Work with the media and the legal system to create a campaign that extols the virtues of the profession (Cyphers, 2001). For example, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation sponsored a recruitment campaign with the message, "Some people are lucky enough to love their work. Make your work more than a paycheck. We offer some of the best benefits around, plus appreciation like you've never had before" (Howard & Gould, 2000).
- Get specific about competitor's jobs and attractive labor market alternatives, and tailor marketing to these areas to show why social work is a better choice (Cyphers, 2001).
- Train and strategically place child welfare employees on public and nonprofit boards and commissions and publicize their contributions.
- Join local associations of nonprofits and other human service groups to network and establish positive relationships (Helfgott, 1991; Pasztor et al., 2002).

Sources: Cyphers, G. (2001) Report from the child welfare workforce survey: State and county data and findings. Washington, DC: American Public Human Services Association