

# Child Welfare Worker Recruitment and Retention

## Resilient Child Welfare Worker Interviews

conducted by  
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Monaca Eaton, BSW  
Gary Anderson, PhD, MSW  
Peg Whalen, PhD, MSW

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## Background

Success in recruiting and retaining qualified child welfare staff is directly related to the goals of Michigan's child welfare system and our hopes for children and families. The ability to assure the safety of children is anchored in the quality of the professionals who perform child welfare services. The best formulated protocols or programs are compromised without the supervisory skills that contribute to a positive work environment resulting in the recruitment, selection and retention of competent committed staff. Worker turnover results in lost planning momentum, lost knowledge and broken relationships, jeopardizing permanency planning

for children in the child welfare system. A succession of workers compounds attachment and relationship challenges for the child who already faces difficulties due to abuse and/or neglect. Although the primary reasons for addressing recruitment and retention of child welfare workers is the impact on child safety, permanency and well-being, there are other high costs for child welfare organizations to consider. Costs of continually recruiting and training workers and inefficiencies due to the loss of experienced workers are very expensive for child welfare agencies. The quality of the workforce is central to achieving the objectives of the child welfare system.

## Process

Twenty-one telephone interviews were conducted between mid-April and June 2004. The Michigan Federation for Children and Families corresponded with supervisors and directors of public and private child welfare agencies across the state of Michigan, and requested that these agency leaders identify resilient child welfare supervisors and frontline workers as potential participants for the telephone interviews. Fifty-seven potential participants were identified as resilient child welfare workers, defined as

effective, caring individuals who had been working in the child welfare field for three years or more.

Within the time frame of the study and to gain responses from a variety of agencies, twenty-one workers identified as resilient participated in telephone interviews. The telephone interviews ranged from approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. Each interview asked the informant to answer the following open-ended questions as well as provide brief demographic and education/training information.

### Child welfare resilience

- Why did you choose to work in child welfare?
- What are the reasons you stay in your current position?
- What is it about you and the way you do your job that keeps you motivated?
- Please describe any significant experiences in your child welfare career that have kept you involved in the field.
- Describe any mentoring or coaching you personally experienced.

### Supervision and mentoring

- Describe a time when you mentored or coached someone.
- Describe any mentoring or coaching you personally experienced.
- Describe the best supervisor you have ever had in your child welfare experience.
- What supervisory approach or style helps you do your best work?
- In your opinion, what are the three most important qualities supervisors need to possess to maintain positive motivation?

### Agency qualities

- Please tell me about what most attracted you to work in your current agency?
- Describe those experiences with your agency that reinforce your sense that this is a good place to work.
- Please give some concrete examples of how your agency supports you.
- Please explain the role that your work group plays in how well you feel supported in your work.

### Retention of others

- In your opinion, what are the primary reasons that employees leave your agency?
- What might improve retention of staff in your agency?

### Individual experiences of agency

- Do you feel emotionally and physically safe at work?
- What are the top stressors of your job?
- Do you feel you are able to maintain a balance between your work and personal life?
- Do you experience a sense of connection and belonging at work?

### Child welfare training recommendations

- Please describe those courses or educational experiences that best prepared you for your work in child welfare.
- What would you have liked to have more of in your formal educational experience to better prepare you for your work in child welfare?
- Tell me about the most helpful training you have received.
- What type of child welfare training would you like to see more of and why?
- In your opinion, what curriculum content is absolutely necessary to improve supervisor's and program manager's recruitment and retention of child welfare staff?
- In your opinion, what is the best way to deliver this training?

## Sample

Phone interviews were conducted with twenty-one of fifty-seven child welfare workers identified by agency administrators or supervisors as being resilient workers. These workers had responded to phone calls or messages requesting their participation in the interviews. Interviews were conducted by experienced consultants and ranged in length between 60 and 90 minutes. A few interviews were conducted in segments of two or three shorter, partial interviews; however, these sessions totaled no more than 90 minutes.

Of the twenty-one informants, the majority worked in foster care ( $n=12$ ), followed by adoption ( $n=5$ ), and then residential care ( $n=4$ ). Slightly over half ( $n=11$ ) were frontline workers, with another nine child welfare supervisors and one individual described as holding another unspecified position. Interviewees' length of time in child welfare ranged from three years to twenty-three years, with an average of  $11\frac{3}{4}$  years and a standard deviation of just over five and a half years ( $SD=5.6$ ).

Years of employment within their current agency ranged from 2.5 years to 18 years, with an average of eight years and four months ( $M=8.3$ ), and a standard deviation of nearly  $4\frac{3}{4}$  years ( $SD=4.7$ ). The distributions of both years in child welfare and years working for current agency were normally distributed. Sizes of agencies, based on number of employees, ranged from less than twenty-five up to 150. Seven informants described their agency as relatively small, i.e., less than 25 employees, followed by five respondents from agencies with between 25 and 50 employees. Four informants were working in agencies with 51 to 100 employees, and five more were

employed in agencies with 100 to 150 workers. No one was from an organization with more than 150 employees.

Five men and fifteen women participated in the interviews. Their ages ranged from 26 to 61, with an average age of 38.25 and standard deviation of 8.7. The distribution of ages was slightly positively skewed. The majority of participants were white ( $n=17$ ) with only four African-Americans included among interviewees. No other racial/ethnic minorities were represented in the sample. Nineteen interviewees had BA/BS degrees ( $n=14$ ) or held a BSW ( $n=5$ ). Four of these individuals also had an MSW. One participant described a different degree. For fifteen participants, their current job was their family's primary source of income. Six respondents reported holding a second job to supplement their income, three of which also were social work jobs and three were outside social work.

Interviewees worked in a variety of counties throughout the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. Five identified mid-Michigan or south central counties and another five named southwest Michigan counties. The majority worked in counties within the southeast region of the state. No interviews were conducted with child welfare workers from Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula or from the Upper Peninsula.

This study was viewed as a preliminary step toward: (1) building our knowledge of the factors that contribute to recruiting competent and committed workers and retaining well-qualified staff; (2) developing curriculum and deliver training that is relevant to recruitment and retention; and (3) working with individual agencies to address their interests related to recruitment and retention.

The comments from the interviewees are reported here without detailed connections between the observations and the role or identity of the person interviewed. The answers to the questions are the opinions and observations of the individuals. This report contains

the concise and summarized responses to the interview questions. There is an attempt to identify the most commonly reported responses as well as the range of responses to the questions.

## Responses

### Child welfare resilience

#### Question 1: Why did you choose to work in child welfare?

Many respondents cited early exposure to human services and helping fields as the initiator of their interest to work in not only social work but also child welfare. This exposure took on multiple forms such as educational experiences, volunteer work and personal involvement.

Undergraduate internships and volunteer work created as well as confirmed a desire to work in child welfare.

- *I wanted to help families be stronger and children be safer. I had a good intern experience with the Families First Program.*
- *I always wanted to be a teacher or a social worker when growing up. I had an FIA internship and really liked it, really liked doing foster care.*
- *Saw an ad in the paper for summer camp at Eagle Village and from there went into the field.*
- *I enjoyed working with kids as a coach, dealt with their problems. Kids naturally came to me, "that's my calling."*

Personal involvement in child welfare was strong motivator to enter the field. For a few respondents, when children, members of their family were working in child welfare. Exposure to the field created interest at a young age. Others had direct interaction with the child welfare system through foster care or adoption as a child. Personal involvement in a helping field also created interest in child welfare for respondents. For many respondents, it created a sense of duty and desire to see positive change with children and families.

- *My parents fostered and adopted me. Family is full of social workers and nurses.*
- *My father was a proponent of volunteering in the community. He was a tutor who worked in a Detroit after school program. As a commercial artist he taught art classes in a rundown youth center. Took me and my sister on our first experience with social service kids where mom was a volunteer in a domestic abuse center.*
- *Because of my family upbringing; my father and stepmother are social workers and foster parents. I was in college when my father began foster care, and he and his wife adopted six kids.*

- *I wanted to get into front lines to go to people rather than wait for them.*
- *I know what it is like to be discriminated against, have a heart to want to advocate for kids.*

Other reasons workers entered child welfare: citing serendipity, having had a social worker for a role model and wanting to work with specific populations.

**Question 2:** What are the reasons you stay in your current position?

Organizational climate was an important aspect of why workers stay in their current position. Friendly co-workers, supervisors and administrators were offered as an important aspect of staying in their current position. Child welfare as a field offers diverse tasks and flexibility of work schedule—both of which keep the field interesting and challenging for workers. Working with a population that they are interested in helping and enjoying seeing positive change also motivated workers to stay in their current position:

- *The agency really cares about me; I'm more than just an employee. They know I have a life and responsibilities outside of my job.*
- *Environment is like a family setting.*
- *Main reason is flexibility...agency philosophy is that workers come first.*
- *I like working with kids. Find it a challenge, give them skills to handle anger, may change their life for the better. I like the staff I work with and administration. I like the variety in the job, like to see kids solve problems. I say to kids 'you're my million dollars, you are a success.'*

- *I'm making a difference. Not every day but hold onto the good things I see happening. See the good, kids getting better. Families reunited, I'm a part of solution instead of putting blame.*

Additionally, workers stated that they gained personal satisfaction and rewards from working in child welfare. Seeing the job done well and children and families remaining safe and healthy were strong motivators for workers in the field.

**Question 3:** What is it about you and the way you do your job that keeps you motivated?

Both organization and time management were mentioned by multiple respondents as important aspects of doing a job in child welfare. Both skills are needed to make a job full of variety and multiple tasks manageable and approachable. Personal qualities such as optimism, humor and a positive attitude also helped workers to stay motivated. Support systems, both professional and personal that offer assistance and a sense of confidence were beneficial for resilient workers as well. Professional support systems were of the most importance in the first year of child welfare work, where supervisors and directors played an important role in keeping their workers motivated and successful. Co-workers offered positive support and understanding, which assisted workers in maintaining balance between their workload and their personal life.

Overall, most respondents took great satisfaction in seeing the system work and ensuring the safety of children and families. This is what motivated them to stay not only in the field of child welfare, but in their current

position as well. A love for the population they are working with as well as being able to see positive change with those individuals and families, enhanced the desire of respondents to stay and to continue work in child welfare.

- *I do have a lot of time management and organizational skills. I can deal with stress. I am motivated to help families. The more you give, the better you feel. I am motivated to get kids back to families.*
- *What kept me in casework is I saw changes in people and saw evidence that the best decision had been made for the child. Even when things didn't go well, I had support from other staff and had good supervision the first years there, faith, felt that God wanted me here. I enjoyed the work and felt supported.*
- *Being able to help others, helping staff and kids, being able to have the power and means to go beyond what is expected to help someone.*
- *I have personal satisfaction with the job and feel appreciated by the agency. I feel valued. Current agency director is good at showing appreciation. I stay motivated by challenging myself with goals to achieve and strive to make things better.*
- *I want to see kids through in first year. I feel an obligation to stay with kids. I want them to achieve permanency.*
- *I like the success of adoption; I see the connection between kids and families who are well matched. A desire to advocate for the underprivileged kept me in the field. I know my limits and will step back when I need to. My administrator respects this and gives me a break.*

**Question 4:** Please describe any significant experiences in your child welfare career that have kept you involved in the field.

Positive feedback from clients motivates workers to stay involved in the field. A few respondents had former clients come back to thank them and let them know that the worker had helped them even if they did not express their thankfulness at the time. When previous clients contact workers, sometimes at a much later date in time than the period in which they worked together to share their outcomes or to say thank you, it allows the worker to see the positive impact they made. This motivates them to keep trying with their current clients.

- *A teenager I worked with previously came into the group that I currently run. The things that I remembered were not the same that the girl remembered. The girl remembered the positive side of what she had done. This client had her rights terminated, and now she is doing well and remembered her experience positively.*
- *Knowing that others think I do a good job helps me to want to stay involved. I also get a lot of cards from children that I have worked with who have aged out. That is a great reminder of what we can do. I recently got an invitation to a wedding from a former child on my caseload.*
- *A foster mother who is a single mom and has medically fragile kids went back to school for a medical degree. She has an amazing outlook on life, very positive. She perks me up and keeps in touch.*
- *I have had kids who contacted me years later to say hello and how they were doing. When you hear back from families or a child and hear they have a job and stay out of trouble; it is satisfying.*



**Question 5:** Is there anything else that I need to know to understand what keeps you in the child welfare profession?

Spirituality and a sense that working in child welfare was “a calling” were again mentioned by multiple respondents as what keeps them active in child welfare. Spirituality is another form of support that workers rely on to make it in the field. When respondents felt called to the field and that it was a good fit with who they were as a person, it gave them a sense of purpose, which motivated them to keep working with clients even when times were difficult and success appeared far off.

- *Love working with kids, knew from early on that this was for me.*
- *My spirituality. This is a calling; without this I'd give up. My agency supports this.*
- *The grace of God.*
- *I just love it. This is not just a job. I have a sense of ownership.*

A few workers raised the issue that they remained in their current child welfare job due to extenuating circumstances such as family, money and the hassle of changing jobs.

- *Single parent, son in college, can't come up with something else to do.*
- *I feel comfortable in my current position right now. I would leave if I could do that easily.*
- *I don't know. Am I too dumb to leave? Need to be a ray of sunshine for kids.*

## Supervision and mentoring

**Question 1:** Describe a time when you mentored or coached someone.

Mentoring and coaching experience varied between respondents. Only one worker did not have any mentoring or coaching experience. Two respondents had negative experiences with mentoring and coaching. After reflection, they realized they are not the right people to take on a mentoring or coaching role, offering that it was tough, too hard and too intense.

Most often mentoring and coaching was done with new employees, followed by co-workers, clients and interns. Positive skills used in mentoring and coaching were identified as listening skills, encouragement, assistance in setting goals and offering support, with an overall goal of setting a supportive and positive environment.

Other aspects of mentoring included explaining agency policy and procedure, shadowing in the field, training new employees, debriefing and explaining how the system works.

- *I was a party to many workers and interns in training. Explained things thoroughly. Explained how the system works and encouraged them through each step of the job. Checked back with them, went into the field with them if they wanted me to. Offered support, debriefing, found out I enjoyed mentoring and the one-on-one approach.*
- *When I was a trainer, I would spend time with staff or units. Purposefully listened to them—frustrations as well as goals. I encouraged them with personal goals and learned that supervising someone is tough, too hard; it burned me out, too intense.*

- *I am in charge of training all new people. I am supportive. I tell them that the job can't be learned overnight, that it is ok to make mistakes and you will, but it is ok. Made a supportive environment.*
- *I learned I was a good listener and that you never know when you are being a role model for someone else and have to be careful how you carry yourself.*
- *I did shadowing and one-on-one meetings that went beyond weekly supervising. I learned it's easier to do a job than teach someone to do it.*
- *I have a lot of interns that I work with. They are fresh and excited and it revives you. Sometimes they give me good, fresh ideas from school.*
- *Model how to interact with families and how to treat people. Humane modeling. I repeat things over until a light goes on. I pull someone with certain skill who can be paired with someone who is weak in that particular skill. Repetition is important. Team approach is important.*

**Question 2:** Describe any mentoring or coaching you personally experienced.

Mentoring relationships were split between professional and personal. Professionally, mentors were co-workers and supervisors who took the time to foster the personal development of the worker to be able to cope and handle the professional stress and aspects of a job in child welfare. These mentors were supportive, encouraging, knowledgeable of the job and offered both constructive and positive feedback on all aspects of their job performance. Personally, mentors were parents and teachers who taught independence and perseverance, were supportive and encouraged self-care. Both professional and

personal mentors encouraged respondents, inspired confidence and modeled or taught leadership skills.

- *Supervisor was a mentor. Liked how she made decisions by looking at different prospects. She was encouraging. She helped me develop confidence and leadership skills. She saw potential in me when I didn't see it.*
- *My mother was my mentor. She was a teacher, single parent, worked part-time and got a master's degree. Taught me life and independence, which is what I am trying to teach these families.*

**Question 3:** Describe the best supervisor you have ever had in your child welfare experience.

Respondents favored supervisors who did not micro-manage, yet offered advice in the problem-solving process. Supervisors who remained supportive of their workers' decision-making abilities, demonstrating trust and offered further support to back the worker after the decision had been made were appreciated.

Supervisors who had previously held the position that the worker currently held were helpful and knowledgeable about all aspects of the job. Most often respondents listed qualities and skills such as good time management, flexibility, open communication and good organization as things that made them favor their child welfare supervisor. Timely and consistent feedback from supervisors was very helpful for workers. Further, supervisors that remained open, available and approachable were also favored.

- *The best supervisor I have had has utilized my strengths and has fit my personality into my job, not expecting*

*me to fit my job into my personality. Taking the time to point out my strengths, helping me learn how I can use them more effectively and meeting with me regularly.*

- *She was dependable, could hold and fill regular supervision time, always met with her, could count on that weekly time.*
- *Current supervisor, he always sets meetings, always available by phone and e-mail. He removes barriers.*
- *Very supportive, helpful, organized, knowledgeable and sympathetic. Would help me out any way she could. Would give me praise, written on report were messages of praise. I appreciated her upbeat personality.*

#### Question 4: What supervisory approach or style helps you do your best work?

Most respondents appreciated a supervisor who did not micro-manage. Independence was an important aspect of their job. Yet, they wanted to know that their supervisor was available to them and willing to help when they were in need of assistance. It was important to workers to have a supervisor who trusted their judgment and decision-making ability. Respondents reacted positively to supervisors who were balanced in their approach; not too laissez faire and not overly directive.

- *Allows some independence but is there to support and talk things through. Not too directive, but not too hands-off. Likes some direction with good decision-making skills.*
- *Lets us do our job, doesn't micro-manage, gives support when needed, available, when needed helps identify options vs. giving directions. Be positive.*

#### Question 5: In your opinion, what are the three most important qualities supervisors need to possess to maintain positive staff motivation?

Supervisors need to possess a range of qualities, knowledge and skills to ensure their staff remain positive and motivated. Respondents feel supported when their supervisor is competent and knowledgeable about the supervisees' job.

Supervisors who previously occupied the position that they now supervise have a better understanding not only of the nature of the job, but of the role, goals, time frames and deadlines that the worker will face. These supervisors have a realistic expectation of the job.

Flexibility in scheduling is important to workers. Roles, goals and deadlines are most useful to workers when they are presented in a clear manner and supervised with flexibility.

Workers need physical accessibility and open communication from their supervisor in order to thrive. Open door policies encourage workers to engage with their supervisors. Feedback—either written or verbal regarding the strengths of the worker and the job that has been completed—motivates workers. A supervisor, who has the ability to give guidance and support by building up their workers, consistently using positive feedback, increases the motivation of their staff.

- *Take time to listen on a regular basis. Being dependable and accessible. Able to give encouragement. Understand how to encourage each person and look for opportunities to encourage.*
- *Balance between listening and allowing staff to vent. Being someone who can hold high expectations of staff and hold them accountable.*
- *Supportive, knowledgeable about the supervisees' job functions, being*

organized and clear on what the goals are—giving appropriate direction.

- Open door, ability to listen to staff. Know job well enough to assist with work when they need it. Positive attitude, if my attitude is bad, it will reflect on everyone else.
- Competence, people have to have faith in their supervision. Clear expectations for what they need from their staff. Feeling supported, that staff's best interests are being looked after (got your back).

## Agency qualities

**Question 1:** Please tell me about what most attracted you to work in your current agency.

Most respondents stated that the reputation of the agency—with human service providers as well as the community—strongly influenced workers to seek employment with their current child welfare agency. Many workers were drawn to their agency based on the mission and values of that agency. Either they believed in the services or programs that the agency offered, or their personal values were closely aligned with those of the agency, especially in the case of agencies with faith-based missions.

The organizational culture of the agency also attracted workers. Friendly and caring staff and supervisors as well as organized programs and management made agencies attractive to workers. When workers were met with a caring and friendly work environment during the interview process, the experience positively impacted them.

Other workers returned to the agency where they had done their internship or placement during their social work education.

- I had done an internship with them and had a good experience. When I got married and came back to the area, I applied. They have a good reputation in the area. Also they have a faith-based agenda, which appealed to me.

Benefit packages and salary attracted some workers to their current agency and position. Other workers were impressed with the interview process, the location of the agency and the organization and cleanliness of the building.

- I knew a person who worked here. The pay motivated me, and helping children made me proud.
- It is close to the community where I live. It's a chance to do social work in my community. They offered me more money and appeared organized; and different programs worked together for kids and families.

**Question 2:** Describe those experiences with your agency that reinforce your sense that this is a good place to work.

Staff, supervisors and administrators who create an environment of support for workers reinforce that the agency is a good place to work. Support was described as supervisors and co-workers who listen, being able to talk to supervisors and co-workers when needed, allowing flexibility in their work schedule to meet family needs, having enough personal and sick time, and an overall sense of caring in the agency.

- My agency is understanding. Not only do they understand that family is important for the kids I serve, but also to my family. They understand that I

*need to go home early because my child has a birthday.*

- *People care about each other here. I had a death in my family, and the agency gave me three weeks off. I have a lot of sick and personal time. They are very supportive of employees' families.*
- *People show how much they care about kids. It is more like a family setting. It looks like a home. This helps prepare kids to move to a family, helps with home training.*

Autonomy in decision-making and the ability to implement new ideas and strategies motivated workers to stay at their agencies. Supervisors who did not micro-manage yet offered workers a sense that the agency backed their decisions and would stand behind them was important to many respondents.

- *If something needs to be done, they give you the assignment and let you do it. It is really hands-off, not micro-managed at all. The agency is sincere, caring for people, kids, staff and their families.*
- *A couple of cases had completely fallen apart...despite issues with my agency's objectives, I was backed by my agency. I feel my agency will stand behind me.*
- *The agency will take your ideas and implement what they can. People have a common cause of helping residents to be productive. We work together to help residents do things differently when they get back into their home environment.*

When agencies appeared resilient to workers, it also fostered a sense that the agency was a good place to work. Budget cuts, funding issues and agencies closing that offered similar services did not cause these agencies to close. Through hard times, these agencies remained

supportive and appreciative of workers and demonstrated a commitment to helping children and families.

- *The agency itself is resilient; it is able to get through tough financial times. It has a commitment to true treatment. There is a lot of therapy going on, not just behavior management.*
- *It is still operating, it is still here. Others have closed. Agency has expanded services. We have an outstanding supervisor who is out in the community networking and keeping doors open.*

Ample training and seminars were beneficial to workers. Not only did these provide them with additional skills and information to increase their job and service skills, they demonstrated an agency's dedication to its services and its workers. Incentives such as bonuses, retreats and Christmas parties were ways that agencies showed staff appreciation.

- *Every year, "our day" for upper management, workshops are offered in the morning, you choose what you want. Workshops include: how to take care of self, how to motivate staff. There is lunch and a meet-and-greet in the afternoon. Every year there is an annual Christmas party for staff even when money is tight; there is staff appreciation.*
- *Agency really supports training opportunities, has a nice physical work environment. I went from a cubicle to a private office. Administration tries to meet the needs of the staff despite high caseloads. They work on improving morale even when the budget is constrained. They offer compensation, staff retreats and longevity bonuses.*

**Question 3:** Please give concrete examples of how your agency supports you.

Flexibility in scheduling was the most frequent way that agencies showed support to workers. This broke down into flextime, mental health days, paid vacation, sick time, the ability to earn “incentive” days off and the ability to create one’s own schedule. This was especially important to workers when there were personal health problems, or health problems with family members that required additional accommodations, most often being time off.

- *They allow me to flex my schedule around my kids. Supervisors are always available to talk. Most of my problems revolve around kids, so having flex time with my workload was important. When I need to go, they always help me.*
- *I have had a lot of surgeries on my eyes. They were so encouraging. They allowed me to work at home. They never told me to hurry back but to take my time. I really appreciated that.*

Making ample training opportunities and tuition reimbursement available for workers to further their skills also demonstrated agency support. Workers also appreciated access to support staff and aids to assist with casework. An open door policy with administrators and frequent supervision time where feedback and recognition could be gained supported workers.

- *Tuition reimbursement. President of organization is a phenomenal person. If you want to talk, he has an open door policy. Very personable person, will help you if he can, this is true for all of the management.*

A few respondents stated their agencies watch for and help to prevent burnout. One respondent stated that her supervisor moved her to another position when he sensed she was getting burned out.

- *The agency recognized that I was getting burned out and transferred me to another job. This showed support.*

Additional ways that agencies demonstrated staff appreciation and support was through agency newsletters, retreats, potluck dinners and picnics.

**Question 4:** Please explain the role that your work group plays in how well you feel supported in your work.

Work groups offered various forms of support for workers. Formal or informal, they offered help and a sense that someone “has your back.” Work groups were most helpful when they had open communication, especially if supervisors were part of the work group. This was another way that showed that the agency and administrators supported the decision-making abilities of workers. During team and work group meetings, workers shared resources and experiences and found that “two minds are better than one.”

- *My immediate team is vital. We can share resources, vent feelings, offer ideas, share experiences. My team gives me new resources especially around independent living for kids, especially funding.*
- *It is a strong environment of people backing each other up.*
- *I know that if I went to anybody, they would help me. I can go to anyone and be pointed in the right direction.*

## Retention of others

**Question 1:** In your opinion, what are the primary reasons that employees leave your agency?

Educational and professional advancement was the most common reason that employees left their agency. Workers left to finish degrees or obtain a master's degree. Others moved to a higher position with another agency. For some, the agency they were working at was a stepping-stone to move to another agency. For a few, the job did not meet their expectations, and they sought a position with another agency.

- *75%-90% of my agency is younger staff. It's usually their first job right out of college or graduate school. Graduate school does not prepare you for what you are going to do. Many leave the job because it is not what they expected, and they are burned out.*
- *To further their own careers. They go back to school and go into related fields. Want higher pay so they got out of nonprofit field. Some are burned out and leave the field to go to other types of social work positions.*

Low pay and high workloads, causing stress and burnout were cited as additional reasons that employees left their agency. This caused some workers to seek employment in a different field and others to move to a different agency.

- *Pay is not enough for the time spent at work. A lot of hours, huge caseloads with a lot of activity. The stress of the job.*

Other respondents stated that workers left their agency due to bad relationships with

supervisors, feeling unappreciated and having family priorities as additional reasons.

**Question 2:** What might improve retention of staff in your agency?

A clear job description, which describes the position within the agency in great detail, respondents thought would lead to greater retention. This paired with extensive training for new employees would help decrease stress and the feeling that the job does not meet the workers' expectations.

- *Have people better understand the job, making sure that new people are connected to agency and paperwork. Make them better aware of what job entails before they take it.*

Lowering caseloads was also offered as a suggestion to improve agency retention. Other respondents thought that increasing the pay for the position would help to draw people into the field and help them to stay there.

Training, again, was mentioned as an important part of child welfare worker retention. Respondents felt that additional training for new and seasoned staff would help to decrease turnover. Open communication and frequent and good supervision was mentioned again. Both of these appear to be key to increasing agency retention.

## Individual experiences of agency

**Question 1:** Do you feel emotionally and physically safe at work?

Most workers felt both physically and emotionally safe at work. Supportive co-workers and administrators added to the

feeling of safety workers had. Emotionally, work groups and open communication between workers and supervisors helped workers unload and discuss anything. Co-workers and administrators also helped workers to realize and understand potentially dangerous situations, both emotional and physical.

- *Yes, the team I supervise is close and if a boundary is crossed to where I don't feel I am safe, I am going to tell you. The openness of the teams to know how you feel and they respect that. I feel physically safe.*
- *Yes, emotionally safe. People who work here have a sense of integrity, not backstabbing, people care. Physically, the building is safe, and they always try to make it safer.*

Physically, safety precautions were in place that made most workers feel safe. Workers who had access to cell phones and walkie-talkies stated this added to their feelings of safety. Other agencies had safety procedures, locked doors and security systems at doors.

- *Most of the time I feel physically safe. No incidence here where I have been at risk. Safety committee where I lead. A couple of incidents that unnerved that have put precautions around. Administration makes it clear that you can take someone with you if you feel uncomfortable.*

### **Question 2:** What are the top stressors of your job?

Large caseloads and limited time to complete them was the top stressor for most respondents. State mandates, court proceedings and large amounts of paperwork

for each case, increased the sense that workers did not have enough time to complete their work. This increased when there were limited resources to try to meet the needs of the client.

- *Not having enough time to do something the way that it needs to be done. I struggle with needing to be more efficient. Too many meetings, too much processing.*
- *The amount of work. Deadlines for reports, court hearings, meeting all of foster home visits. So many monthly duties.*
- *Too much to do and too little time. So many requirements for so many sources. Workers are in the middle of the conflict. Replacing kids from foster home to foster home. Court inconsistencies, hit with curve balls I can't anticipate. Some judges are hard to understand with their decisions. It is stressful to be a helper and an enforcer at the same time.*

Dual roles were stressful for some respondents. Trying to be both a manager and a direct care provider caused stress for workers. Other stressors were disruptive clients, problems with staff, fear and stress that clients feel.

### **Question 3:** Do you feel you are able to maintain a balance between your work and personal life?

Most workers were able to maintain balance between their work and personal life. Flexible schedules, reducing caseloads and hours worked decreased stress for workers. When workers had the realization that "everyone can't be saved," it helped them to have greater balance at work. Others found



ways to separate work from home life and ways to “leave work at work.”

- *Yes, I got rid of the save the world badge. It took me a couple of years to create balance.*
- *Yes, because of the flexibility. There is a lot of work to do but being salaried the compensation is flextime, it is so important.*

Personally, family support and hobbies helped to reduce stress in workers. Taking time off to do non-work-related activities also helped workers to feel balanced. Faith and church assisted some workers to keep the personal balance they needed in their lives.

Other workers stated that they were feeling burned out and were not always able to maintain balance. It is a constant effort to keep work and personal life separated. Some workers stated that they try to not let the two co-mingle, keeping them very separate physically helped to mentally keep them separated.

- *I don't bring work home. Generally, I keep work and home separated. My husband has no idea what I do at work.*

**Question 4:** Do you experience a sense of connection and belonging at work?

Most respondents feel a sense of belonging and connectedness at their agency. Informal gatherings with co-workers, regular team meetings, worker recognition and formal work events fostered a sense of connection and belonging at agencies.

- *Yes, we have morale boosters and community boosters. One time a*

*month we celebrate birthdays and one time a year we have a wellness day at the YMCA.*

- *Yes, through talking with staff. We share personal stories with each other, coffee breaks, go out every couple of weeks for lunch. Our personalities are similar and generally we like each other, we have similar values. Supervisor is committed to getting feedback and all suggestions are valued, good to work with. The director has the same commitments.*
- *Yes, I think of this as my family. My husband and I socialize with people from work, but don't discuss work.*

Again, supportive and available management and supervisors were a key factor in workers feeling connected at work. When feedback and input was valued and management was accessible and open, workers felt connected.

### Child welfare training recommendations

**Question 1:** Please describe those courses or educational experiences that best prepared you for your work in child welfare.

Respondents stated that courses in psychology, child psychology, sociology, child development, criminal justice, human behavior, behavior management, family systems theories, human resources, business, clinical, social work and social problems and social relationships best prepared them for work in child welfare. Internships were also stated to be a beneficial educational experience in preparation for work in child welfare.

**Question 2:** What would you have liked to have more of in your formal educational experience to better prepare you for your work in child welfare?

Before entering the child welfare field, workers would have liked more preparation in, or knowledge regarding, child development, child welfare system, court system, writing, computer skills, working with abused children, group care, diversity and avoiding burnout.

**Question 3:** Tell me about the most helpful training you have received.

The following training topics were helpful to respondents: supervisory skills, attachment and loss, skills on new program start up, court system, anger management, sexual offender training, how to deal with group home situations, adoption, play therapy, ADHD and impulse control, special education laws, foster care, child welfare institute, grant implementation and diversity and human relationships.

**Question 4:** What type of child welfare training would you like to see more of and why?

Respondents would like more training regarding: turnover reduction, diversity training, communication with children,

working with families, program specific training, forensic interviewing, casework, anger management, sexual abuse, disorders in adolescent girls, group home, teen drug problems, parenting, peer pressure, court system and supervision.

**Question 5:** In your opinion, what curriculum content is absolutely necessary to improve supervisor's and program manager's recruitment and retention of child welfare staff?

Respondents would like training to cover: interpersonal skills, staff motivation and empowerment, diversity training, staff hiring, team building, court system, handling staff complaints and problems, clinical practice, stress management, writing skills and organization and communication skills.

**Question 6:** In your opinion, what is the best way to deliver this training?

Preferred formats for training included: role play, practice, hands on, to be trained along with supervisors, one-on-one approach, energetic, expert teaching, mentoring, workshops, formal classroom training, child welfare institute and video instruction. Both on- and off-site training were offered as good training options.

## Summary and conclusion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to learn about factors related to worker and supervisor resiliency that

could be translated into training curriculum and recruitment and retention strategies. A number of lessons were learned:

**1** The recruitment process can be aided by offering volunteer and internship opportunities to acquaint people to the agency and its work. Also, there may be a group of individuals with a special knowledge and commitment to child welfare because they had personal experience with adoption, the foster care system, or the broader field of child welfare.

**2** The recruitment process begins early on as workers are attracted to an agency because of its mission, values and reputation. They form an impression from the applicant interview and are impressed when the agency is well-organized, friendly, has good benefits and salary, and is clean!

**3** The retention of workers and supervisors is enhanced by an organizational climate that is friendly and flexible. Retention may correlate with a sense of accomplishment and success by seeing positive change through one's work.

**4** The motivation and satisfaction of workers is associated with optimism, a sense of humor, a positive attitude and positive feedback within the agency.

**5** The support of one's supervisor and colleagues may be particularly important in the worker's first year with the agency.

**6** For some workers, a sense of spirituality and/or special dedication to serving children and families serves to motivate and support the worker.

**7** The type of supervisor who promotes resiliency, retention and worker motivation, is one who has the ability to be attentive

but not micro-managing; is knowledgeable and gives advice but trusts workers by supporting the workers' decision-making. Other valued traits include being open, available and encouraging; inspiring confidence; being organized and having clear and realistic expectations; and giving timely feedback. The most effective supervisors also are flexible, dependable and listen well.

**8** The type of agency that workers value promotes employee autonomy, cares about children and families, and is caring and supportive of workers.

**9** The reasons that workers leave an agency were noted as advancing their education or their position in the agency or another agency, and low salary and high workloads. Paperwork was also cited as a job stressor.

**10** Other factors noted as promoting resilience included: explanations of policy, clear job descriptions, job shadowing and extensive training for new workers. Lower caseloads, higher salary, training, workshops, and attentiveness to prevent burnout contributed to the retention of veteran workers.

These findings reinforce existing knowledge in management and social services literatures. The development of the project curriculum incorporated this information about the qualities of supervisors and managers that can be addressed in training to enhance resilience and retention. The lessons learned from resilient workers has the potential to assist agencies in the training of its staff and leaders and in the development of an organizational culture that attracts and keeps the most competent workers, those committed to children and families. ■