

Caseworker Turnover Hurts Kids and Agencies

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Everyone intuitively understands it – child welfare workers, their supervisors, the courts, even the kids. A revolving cast of caseworkers is not good for children in foster care. It's not so great for anyone else involved, either, including taxpayers. A new study has taken a big step toward documenting the costs of caseworker turnover.

The report, "Review of Turnover in Milwaukee County Private Agency Child Welfare Ongoing Case Management Staff," found that caseworker turnover during one 21-month period from 2003 to 2004 cost the county more than \$1.4 million and drastically reduced or even statistically killed the chances for one out of every four children to find permanent homes.

The study was conducted by Jess McDonald, former director of the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services and now director of a partnership program at the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois, and his colleagues, Connie Flower and Michael Sumski.

In presenting the findings to policy-makers and child welfare professionals, McDonald says he often illustrates the consequences of turnover with a story about a foster teen he interviewed. The youth insisted there was no need to learn his newest case manager's name. McDonald recalls, "When the caseworker introduced herself to the boy, he said, 'I'll just call you 10.' "

'Just-In-Time' Analysis

Last year, Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle (D) invited McDonald, Flower and Sumski to examine staff turnover in the county-level Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW)

and the three private agencies contracted by the bureau to provide foster care and safety services. McDonald says the researchers performed the study for free.

Doyle's request came on the eve of a large-scale overhaul of the county's child welfare system that will reduce the number of service sites from five to three and place the contracts for the three remaining sites up for bid to private agencies. That process is set to begin this month.

Some people who deal with the bureau worry that the change could disrupt hundreds of cases by increasing caseworker turnover due to employment insecurity and by transferring open cases to new sites or agencies.

The researchers set out to correlate existing data from BMCW, qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with front-line staff and supervisors and quantitative results from a survey administered to the focus groups.

The team gathered all the information in less than 45 days. The write-up took just a little longer.

"We were asked to do a very quick turnaround that could be put to use right away," McDonald says. He defines the study as a "just-in-time" analysis that involves "operational research" that's "not just about academics."

Key Findings

The team found that turnover rates for ongoing case management staff at the three private agencies ranged from 34 percent to 67 percent from January 2003 through September 2004. In 2003, the Annie E. Casey Foundation estimated the annual turnover for child welfare workers nationally was about 20 percent.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that the cost of employee turnover is one-third of the exiting worker's annual salary. What that figure fails to reflect for child welfare agencies, according to the new report, are financial penalties and the withholding of funds for poor performance evaluations, morale problems and the cost of ongoing care for children whose permanency placement is delayed by productivity losses.

“When children stay in foster care because no one can successfully work with them and their families to attend to permanency goals ... the cost of the system soars,” McDonald says. “Stabilizing the work force could save a lot of taxpayer dollars, and that savings could be reinvested in the system.”

Most importantly, the researchers found that children assigned to only one case manager during the study period were returned to their families or placed in permanent homes in 75 percent of the 659 cases studied. That compares with 18 percent of those who had two case managers, 0.3 percent to 5 percent among children with three to five case managers, and 0.1 percent among those who had six or seven case managers.

The findings illustrate “the most important issue for children and their well-being. That is that the number of case managers any child is assigned has direct ... bearing on that child’s chance at a permanent home in a reasonable period of time,” says Linda Davis, chair of the Milwaukee Child Welfare Philanthropy Group and a long-time children’s advocate. “The severe drop ... is startling.”

Value of Talking With Staff

McDonald was impressed by the amount of data readily available at the Milwaukee county bureau, including statistics on turnover rates by agency, compliance items (such as the amount of worker contact with kids) and the results of electronic exit interviews with caseworkers who had left their jobs.

But the former caseworker understood the value of speaking directly with front-line workers and supervisors. His team conducted focus groups with one-quarter of the approximately 230 case managers in the county, and with nearly two-thirds of the 45 supervisors.

“Focus groups helped us better understand what we saw in the data,” he says. Everyone in the focus groups completed an Employee Environment Survey, which was developed by the Gallup Organization to measure employee engagement – a factor “highly predictive of retention, productivity and other business outcomes,” according to the report.

The survey was composed of 12 statements intended to measure the recurring sense of achievement among workers. It asked workers to respond to the statements on a six-point scale, ranging from “Disagree Very Much” (one) to “Agree Very Much” (six). For example, for the statement, “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day,” 75 percent of supervisors and 47 percent of case managers responded that they agreed moderately or very much.

The researchers correlated those responses with information from the focus group discussions. They attributed much of the turnover, along with most of the frustration revealed in the surveys, to workers’ concerns over low salaries, a lack of professional regard, an oppressive organizational culture and inadequate training. Among the specific findings:

- Starting salaries for private agency staff are routinely less than those offered by BMCW to its own workers performing comparable duties. The lack of a career ladder or timely salary adjustments within the agencies caused the pay gap to widen over time.
- Staff members feel they are not viewed as professionals, particularly by court officials who refer to them as “lay people.” Caseworkers saw little value in gaining social work certification, because it is not tied to salary increases. More than eight in 10 lacked certification, although 96 percent of those interviewed were eligible.
- Supervisors described a lack of autonomy from the bureau concerning their agencies’ day-to-day operations, salary issues and emerging needs, and a perception that their contracts with the bureau were rigid and inflexible. Case managers and supervisors rarely reported praise or recognition for good work, and staff members expressed little confidence that their co-workers were committed to doing high-quality work.
- Staff reported that previously offered intensive court training was no longer available, and that most of the other training being offered is too broad or focuses on compliance issues, rather than on helping workers spot substance abuse issues, assess family dynamics, construct service plans or engage family members.

How to Make Change

The recommendations? “Hire the right staff, pay them fair wages, and support them with intensive training and solid supervision,” McDonald says. Those are hardly new ideas. The problem at many youth-serving agencies lies in implementing such concepts. Acknowledging that “the right strategies often seem out of reach or too costly,” the researchers suggest “reasonable and affordable” strategies for standardized, competency-based hiring interviews; training pipelines; salary schedules; guaranteed step and merit pay systems; and overarching quality assurance and improvement plans.

Davis, of the Milwaukee Child Welfare Philanthropy Group, says some Milwaukee private agencies embraced the report immediately and are seeing changes in staff morale. Others continue to struggle, but hope to incorporate the recommended changes. The governor’s office says it will include the report’s recommendations in the Request for Proposals for the new case management contracts being bid on this month.

That responsiveness appears to buck a national trend. “Everyone in leadership – local, state and federal, as well as advocates – has abandoned the work force,” McDonald says. “They seem to miss the analysis that the cost of the child welfare system in terms of outcomes and dollars is in the hands of the work force. We abandon them at great risk.”

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