

"Improving Retention Among Public Child Welfare Workers: What Can We Learn from the Insights and Experiences of Committed Survivors?" by Tonya Westbrook, Jackie Ellis and Alberta Ellett, Administration in Social Work, Vol. 30 (4), 2006.

This article summarizes focus group interviews with 21 highly regarded veteran supervisors and caseworkers employed in public child welfare agencies in the United States in 2003. The authors refer to these veterans who averaged 19.6 years of employment in child welfare as "committed survivors", language which presumably reflects the authors' view of public child welfare agencies as hazardous environments. Despite this dramatic way of referring to veteran child welfare staff involved in this study, the authors found these 'committed survivors' to be "more calm, less emotionally charged, and more reflective and considered in making their comments and contributions to the focus group discussion" than other child welfare staff interviewed by the same authors in another large study. These child welfare staff worked for urban, suburban and rural agencies in an unidentified state, probably in the south. All of the child welfare staff were women; 14 were Caucasian and 6 were African American. Three staff had MSWs and 2 had BSWs; one person had a PhD. Twelve were caseworkers and 9 were supervisors.

These veteran staff were asked global open ended questions such as "How have you managed to stay (with the agency) when so many workers are leaving?" and "What organizational factors have contributed to your longevity as a public child welfare employee?" and "What personal factors have contributed to your longevity as a public child welfare employee?" Two researchers compared their notes following the focus groups and then completed a written summary which characterized the participants' responses to these 3 questions.

Participants in the study remembered a time (not that long ago) when the organizational environment was far better from a practitioner's standpoint than at the time of the interview (2003). The public agency they worked for had become more risk averse in response to tort litigation and highly publicized child deaths. According to the authors, "In the past, policies and procedures were less specific which allowed workers more discretion in making case decisions based on individual client situations and practice wisdom. These interviewees believed that policies and procedures now dictate who should be interviewed and under what circumstances and in what order, what questions should be asked, which goals should be included on the family case plan, and sets strict time lines for all these events." The authors continue "Thus any failure to strictly comply with policies and procedures are considered mistakes and are not tolerated." Participants in the focus groups stated that there had been a sea change in the agency in the late 1990s following a child death in which policy violations were allegedly involved. "The agency's response generated rigid policies and procedures,

heightened work scrutiny and accountability, without providing needed resources to reduce high caseloads, uncompensated after hours work, and improve supervision," according to these veteran staff.

These 21 veterans commented on a number of personal characteristics they believed were essential for productive employment in child welfare: time management and organizational skills, a non-judgmental attitude, self confidence and a strong sense of self efficacy, compassion combined with firmness, intuition, an ability to work both independently and in a team, enjoyment of problem solving, flexibility in thinking and an ability to "make your needs known". The participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance between the demands of work and one's personal life and of having a sense of humor; "humor seemed to serve as an expression of camaraderie," and certain forms of humor (i.e., gallows humor) "were reserved only for peers", the authors state.

Child welfare staff from urban offices stressed the importance of occasional job changes within the public agency as a survival strategy. These veteran staff talked about the importance of supportive, flexible, well informed managers who could run interference in conflictual interactions with the state office. "One supervisor described her primary role in the agency as "supporting my people." "As described by the participants, supportive and caring supervisors and administrators made it their business to be aware of especially difficult cases, took the time to listen to their workers "war stories" and were willing to pass along their own practice wisdom." Caseworkers valued supervisory interest in their safety and emotional well being as evidenced by taking the time to talk with them regarding their experiences and feelings and being sensitive to the effects of trauma or secondary trauma on themselves or their peers.

These veteran staff wanted their administrators to fill vacancies as quickly as possible and to listen carefully to their views before making decisions in cases which have moved up the chain of command. The authors comment that "These interview findings suggest that effective administrators treat case managers and supervisors as competent employees, and work to strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs, job-related skills, and practice judgments and decisions." "In addition, they place more emphasis on people rather than policy..." Local administrators were admired for their ability to "run interference" and "serve as a buffer between local staff, state administrators and the larger community."

These veterans' comments reflected a strong concern with the preparation of new staff. "On-site, on-the-job training was described as making the greatest contribution to strengthening retention and enhancing the competence of new worker," the authors state.

In summarizing, the authors comment that "those we interviewed believed that the context of work in public child welfare had changed considerably during their careers, but not always for the best." "Many comments were made about child welfare becoming more influenced by bureaucratic rather than professional concerns,"

according to the authors. These bureaucratic changes included "tightened, top down communications structure," "policy and compliance focus," increased documentation requirements, reduced autonomy in decision making, less competitive salaries, high caseloads and uncompensated work.

The authors underline the importance of local office managers who create "an organizational climate and professional culture that centers on the priority of caring for children and families." The authors believe that "Local administrators should ensure that each new employee begins a career in public child welfare with many positive experiences that can strengthen self - efficacy beliefs in capabilities to do this difficult work." The authors emphasize "the importance of clinical supervision practices to professional learning and development, and to employee retention as well." Supervisors must be "proficient mentors and professional role models for workers, particularly new workers." The authors assert that "Our findings clearly support the need for more personalized supervision that accommodates individual differences among workers and that addresses the emotional and teaching functions... (of supervision)."

Veteran staff believed personal recognition for hard work was an important factor in staff retention. "Visibly sharing information about workers' and supervisors' efforts and successes via the news media, agency newsletters, public forums, staff meetings, and in many other ways" are approaches that managers can utilize to communicate the value and achievements of outstanding employees within the organization and in the community, these authors believe. In addition, frequent, informal communications and feedback to employees regarding performance "strengthen employees' commitment to child welfare." In other words, these veteran staff believed that retention rates would improve when organizational environments become more rewarding, especially in the recognition of work well done.

These staff recommended "giving greater attention to personal characteristics of new hires such as strong levels of human caring, altruism, and a commitment to children and families and to the larger profession of child welfare." The authors recommend that child welfare agencies create dual career paths which allow increase in salary and responsibility without advancing up the chain of command. The authors also recommend that social work curricula teach students about the characteristics of large bureaucracies and "help students develop skills to successfully navigate barriers, and to negotiate and resolve conflicts within these complex organizational systems."

This study indicates the value of qualitative research which asks practitioners to identify what it takes to improve both staff retention and child welfare practice. Hopefully, studies like this one will become more common.