

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Context

When developing ways to improve retention among front line child protection workers it is important to keep the following in mind:

- Generally social workers see child protection as an entry level position, almost a rite of passage into the profession. WCFS is considered to be the most significant social work employer in Manitoba. Many of those who start with WCFS take a job in child welfare because it is available and considered within the profession to be a very valuable experience. Therefore many social workers accept these jobs with no interest in or intention of staying in the field.
- Working in child welfare is very stressful. Some people do not have a personality which is compatible with the demands of the job, while others find the work too difficult to do for more than a few years.

Conclusions

- This research indicates that good supervision is the most crucial determinate of whether a social worker stays in child protection or moves quickly on to other areas of the profession. New social workers who are interested in remaining in child welfare and those who have worked for five years or more in the field all emphasized the important role their supervisor has had in encouraging them to continue working in child protection. Similarly most former child protection workers cited poor supervision as one of the principal reasons why they left.
- All participants defined a good supervisor as a supportive supervisor, most importantly someone who builds or sustains professional confidence. For new child protection workers a supportive supervisor is one who helps orient them to the job, answers their questions in a patient, positive way, gives advice and direction on complex issues, builds a team within their unit and ultimately backs their staff when they make decisions. Experienced social workers conclude that a supportive supervisor respects and values their professional training and experience, gives them autonomy in decision making, seeks and takes their advice, provides advice when asked, trusts that they are hard working professionals that don't have to be personally monitored, and helps build personal bonds within their staff.
- Professional confidence is a key factor in determining whether a social worker stays in child protection. Training and orienting new child protection workers is essential to ensuring these social workers believe they are capable of doing their jobs and are therefore confident enough to stay in the field. New child protection workers said they received no training or orientation when they started at the Agency. Instead they were thrown into high

stress, crucial, difficult jobs without the security of knowing what was expected or how to do their jobs. As a result many left child protection when given the opportunity to do so.

- Social workers' job satisfaction is dependent on the extent to which they believe they can help their clients make positive changes in their lives. Participants believed that good placements for children in care, counseling, therapy and family support services are too often not available to their clients. Social workers also concluded that their caseloads are so large that they don't have the opportunity to develop relationships with their clients or help them to improve their lives. As a result many feel frustrated and dissatisfied with their jobs.
- WCFS social workers do not feel valued. They believe they are underpaid for the work they do and the stress they endure. WCFS hires untrained workers to do social work, employs social workers doing non-professional work, doesn't provide social workers with offices, maintains computer templates that don't work and requires social workers to take time away from clients and/or their private lives to do paperwork. These circumstances contribute to workers feeling undervalued by the Agency.

Recommendations

Every effort should be made to reduce caseloads. This would reduce stress among social workers and greatly improve their job satisfaction. It is also important to note that social workers do not feel they are fairly paid considering their responsibilities, job stress and what other professionals, such as teachers, are paid.

- The selection and training of supervisors should be improved. The Agency should ensure that supervisors are aware of how to support their social work staff and how to successfully build a team within their unit. Practices should be introduced whereby supervisors are monitored to make sure they are effective managers.
- Steps should be taken to increase opportunities for social workers, especially those working in the same unit, to socialize together. This builds crucial bonds between workers and helps relieve stress.
- New child welfare workers should be fully trained and oriented by the Agency before they take on child protection responsibilities to ensure they fully understand the expectations, procedures and practices associated with their job. New workers should have easy access to a senior social worker or supervisor who has the time to assist them.
- Mentors should have their caseloads reduced so they have the time to assist and support new workers.
- Less costly, non-social work staff should do much of the non-social work tasks currently performed by social workers. Clerical personnel should do some of the routine paperwork. A pool of support workers could be created to do things such as childcare, evaluating places of safety, and transportation which is currently done by social workers. Consideration

should be given to determining if non-social work staff could take on some court responsibilities.

- Functioning, consistent computer templates should be developed to speed up the completion of paperwork. Steps should be taken to reduce social workers' paperwork requirements.
- Social workers should have private offices so they can have private conversations, think, complete paperwork and have some refuge from their stressful jobs.
- Caseload coverage should be available when social workers take training or vacations. Many social workers are discouraged from taking training and find the return from vacation very stressful because their families didn't receive services in their absence.
- The University of Manitoba's social work program should be changed to make it less theoretical and more relevant to the reality of working in child welfare.
- It was recommended that regular consultations with social workers should be undertaken, for example every six months, to monitor difficulties and changes. This is particularly important during changes precipitated by devolution.
- Only those with university social work degrees should be employed as social workers by the WCFS.
- There should be as much stability as possible in the Agency's organization. Re-organizations cause confusion, stress and tend to reduce social workers' commitment to the organization.
- Social workers should be kept fully informed on the progress toward devolution. However, existing communications, which social workers feel focus on uncertainty regarding the future of child welfare, are not very useful.
- Attention should be paid to building and ensuring support for supervisors who social workers felt are often caught between senior management's concern for reducing spending and pressure from social workers to ensure services for clients. Several people mentioned that steps were now being taken to provide this support.¹
- Social workers should be encouraged to make greater use of the Employment Assistance Plan to help them cope with their work related stress.

¹ This comment and the one that follows were made at a meeting following the groups where social workers reviewed this report.