



**Written Testimony of
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**For the
Human Resources Subcommittee
U. S. Committee on Ways and Means**

**Hearing on
BUSH ADMINISTRATION FOSTER CARE FLEXIBLE FUNDING PROPOSAL
June 11, 2003, Washington, DC**

ORGANIZATIONAL DESCRIPTION

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world, with nearly 150,000 members. NASW works to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain standards for the profession, and to advance sound social policies. NASW also contributes to the well-being of individuals, families and communities through its work and advocacy.

Ninety-one percent of NASW members hold master's degrees in social work, and 92 percent maintain some type of license, certification, or registration in their state; 70,000 also hold advanced credentials from NASW.

Nearly 40 percent of NASW members say that mental health is their primary practice area; eight percent practice in child welfare or family organizations; eight percent practice in the health sector; six percent practice in schools; and another three percent work primarily with adolescents.

OVERVIEW

The social work profession has a long tradition of involvement with the child welfare system, and welcomes the opportunity to participate in the current debate about how to restructure system financing to improve outcomes for children and families.

Among NASW's major concerns with the outlines of the President's flexible funding proposal is the possible loss of federal support for educating and training the child welfare workforce. Without the current Title IV-E financing structure, which provides three federal dollars for every state/local dollar, training is not likely to remain a priority—especially when states are facing record budget deficits. Without a well-trained, competent, and stable workforce, it is nearly impossible to deliver uniformly high quality services.

A number of studies have documented the critical connections between training, competency, and quality services.

- In 1982, a study based on an analysis of the data from the “1977 National Study of Social Services To Children and Their Families” found that workers with social work education were more effective in service delivery than workers with bachelor of arts (BA) degrees or other graduate degrees.¹
- In 1987, Booz-Allen & Hamilton Inc. found that the “overall performance of MSWs [master’s in social work] was significantly higher than non-MSWs,” and that “education, specifically holding an MSW, appears to be the best predictor of overall performance in social service work.”²
- In 1990, a study of social service workers in Kentucky found that staff with social work degrees, either BSWs or MSWs, were better prepared than those without social work degrees.³
- In 1992, a study on the “Effectiveness of Family Reunification Services” found that, in nearly 40 percent of the cases reviewed, insufficient or inadequate caseworker training or experience was a contributing factor in preventing family reunification.⁴
- Those findings were confirmed in a 1993 study that found child welfare staff with BSW and MSW degrees were more effective in developing successful permanency plans for children who were in foster care for more than two years.⁵

The connection of workforce quality to family outcomes was further documented in a March 2003 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). The report, “HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff,” states, “A stable and highly skilled child welfare workforce is necessary to effectively provide child welfare services that meet federal goals. [However] large caseloads and worker turnover delay the timeliness of investigations and limit the frequency of worker visits with children, hampering agencies’ attainment of some key federal safety and permanency outcomes.”⁶

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) concurred with the GAO’s findings, saying, “ACF’s initial analysis of the CFSR [Child and Family Services Reviews] data involving the first 32 States reviewed makes it abundantly clear that sufficient staff to make regular, substantive contacts with the children and families in their caseloads is essential. A direct relationship was found between the consistency and quality of caseworker visits with the child and family and the achievement of case outcomes evaluated in the CFSR.”⁷

CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE

As it should, the public has high expectations for the child welfare system. Everyday, these agencies make life and death decisions for children and families with complex needs, while striving to meet extensive legal mandates. Much of the burden of these decisions falls to front-line workers and their supervisors.

Child welfare positions are particularly demanding and stressful, often involving unreasonable workloads and low pay, in comparison to jobs in other sectors that require comparable amounts of education and responsibility. Consequently, it is difficult to attract the most qualified employees, those with professional training and experience, and turnover and vacancy rates among child welfare agencies are often alarmingly high.

Standards and policies for child welfare practice that are promulgated by the Child Welfare League of America, the American Humane Association, and NASW recommend that child welfare administrators

and supervisors have a master's degree in social work (MSW) and previous child welfare experience, and that direct service workers have at least a bachelor in social work (BSW) degree.⁸ However, these standards contrast sharply with reality.

In the 1950s, close to 50 percent of child welfare staff were professional social workers.⁹ By the 1980s, only 28 percent of child welfare staff had either a BSW (15 percent) or an MSW (13 percent) degree.¹⁰ A survey of the child welfare workforce conducted in 1998 found that fewer than 15 percent of child welfare agencies require caseworkers to hold either bachelors or masters degrees in social work.¹¹

In the late 1980s, the failed commitment to employing well-trained child welfare staff was coupled with rising foster care caseloads, rising rates of child abuse and neglect reports, increasing numbers of class action suits, and increased media attention resulting from a number of child deaths.¹²

By the mid-1990s, 90 percent of states reported difficulty in recruiting and retaining caseworkers.¹³ The major challenges child welfare agencies face in recruiting and retaining front-line workers and supervisors include: low salaries, high caseloads/workloads, administrative burdens, risk of violence, limited and inadequate supervision, and insufficient training.¹⁴

Worker Turnover

The GAO found that turnover rates of child welfare staff—which affect both recruitment and retention efforts—has been estimated at between 30 percent and 40 percent annually nationwide, with workers' average tenure being less than two years.¹⁵

Turnover rates vary greatly among agencies. In a child welfare workforce survey conducted in 2000, 36 agencies reported annual turnover rates between zero and 20 percent, while 23 agencies reported rates between 50 percent and 600 percent.¹⁶

One Texas state official reported that because of high turnover, caseworkers with only three years of experience are commonly promoted to supervisory positions, which has caused additional problems. Some newly promoted supervisors have requested demotions because they feel unprepared for the requirements of their jobs, and the caseworkers they supervise have complained of poor management and insufficient support.¹⁷

In Arizona, a wide gap developed between the demand for child welfare services and the availability of qualified staff to meet this demand. Because of personnel shortages, the Department of Economic Security (DES) was, in some recent years, unable to respond to as many as 25 percent of child abuse and neglect reports deemed appropriate for investigation statewide.¹⁸

Inadequate Training

The good news-bad news about turnover is that, according to a 2000 workforce survey, states estimated that nearly 60 percent of turnover is preventable.¹⁹ One way to prevent turnover, which has been documented by a number of studies, is by hiring better-trained staff.

- A study based on the 1987 National Study of Public Child Welfare Job Requirements found that turnover is consistently higher in states that do not require any kind of degree for child welfare positions, and is consistently lower in states that require an MSW.²⁰

- A 1990 study in Florida found that workers without educational preparation for child welfare work were most likely to leave within one year of being hired.²¹
- A 1994 study in South Carolina found that social work education (particularly graduate social work education) reduces workers' burnout, a major cause of staff turnover.²²
- A 1995 study in Ohio found that, among nine variables predictive of worker retention, three of the most important were: training; having had an internship in public child welfare as part of preparation; and agency support (including strong supervision).²³
- A 1998 study examining the reasons child welfare workers remain in their positions longer than two years found that—in addition to concern for, and satisfaction in, helping children—the two most decisive factors in employee retention were social work education and the climate of the work environment, including supportiveness of supervisors and peers. More than 80 percent of those who stayed beyond two years had completed at least one social work degree.²⁴

Low Salaries

Another major obstacle to recruitment and retention is the fact that child welfare agencies often are forced to compete for workers with institutions that pay higher wages and offer safer and more predictable work environments.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' national wages survey reports that elementary and middle school teachers earn, on average, about \$42,000 annually, while "social workers" earn about \$33,000. One county official in Texas reported that teachers now earn starting salaries of about \$37,000, while entry-level caseworkers earn about \$28,000 annually, a difference of about 32 percent.²⁵

One private agency in California reported that foster care workers with MSWs who worked in group residential care facilities, which provided structured living arrangements and treatment services for children with complex needs, earned \$5,000 to \$30,000 less than school counselors, nurses, and medical- and public-health social workers.²⁶

According to the 2000 workforce survey, the average annual salaries for public child protective services workers is \$33,000 and, for private agency staff, \$27,000. For child welfare supervisors in public agencies, the average annual salary is \$42,000 and, in private agencies, \$40,000.²⁷

High Caseloads/Workloads

In California, Illinois, Kentucky, and Texas, agencies reported that their inability to retain staff has contributed to their existing unmanageable caseloads.²⁸ Those four states are not alone.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recommends a caseload ratio of 12 to 15 children per caseworker, and the Council on Accreditation (COA) recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 children per caseworker. However, a national survey found that caseloads for individual child welfare workers ranged from 10 to 110 children, with workers handling an average of about 24 to 31 children each—double the recommended number.²⁹

Contributing to the workload problem is the increasing complexity of cases. Drug and alcohol abuse most often co-occurs with a finding of abuse or neglect, but it is rarely the only serious issue. Poverty, substandard housing, mental illness, domestic violence, and HIV/AIDS are also often present.³⁰

One former private agency worker in Delaware reported that, although caseloads were manageable, the complexity of each case was a problem. And one former county worker in California said that cases are becoming increasingly difficult, and caseworkers are no longer able to do “social work.” This caseworker also said that the amount of work and stress is endless, and limits the amount of time she has to perform her job well.³¹

Risk of Violence

Another difficulty facing today’s child welfare workers is the constant risk of violence. According to a 1998 national study of front-line caseworkers, more than 70 percent had been victims of violence or threats of violence in the line of duty. In a peer exit interview process conducted in one state, 90 percent of its child protective services employees reported that they had experienced verbal threats; 30 percent experienced physical attacks; and 13 percent were threatened with weapons.³²

According to public agency caseworkers in Texas, their salaries do not reflect the risks to personal safety they face as part of their work. These caseworkers reported that, given the safety risks they are exposed to daily, they should be given hazardous duty pay, similar to workers in other high-risk professions.³³

FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE

Federal support for child welfare workforce began with enactment of the Social Security Act (SSA) in 1935. The U.S. Children’s Bureau awarded SSA grants to states to strengthen child welfare services and promoted professionalism of child welfare employees by encouraging educational leave for workers to study in schools of social work. As of 1939, at least 35 states and Hawaii had granted educational leave to people to attend graduate schools of social work.³⁴

Today, the federal government’s primary support for training continues to be through its funding of two Social Security Act programs—Title IV-B, Section 426 and Title IV-E—both still administered by the Children’s Bureau.

Title IV-B, Section 426 Child Welfare Training Program

The Title IV-B, Section 426 Child Welfare Training Program was formalized in the SSA Amendments of 1962, as a response to a perceived workforce shortage for graduate level social workers who are prepared for—and interested in—working in public child welfare.³⁵

Under the IV-B program, grants are awarded to public and private nonprofit institutions of higher learning, usually social work education programs, to develop and improve the education, training, and resources available for providers of child welfare services. These grants are used to upgrade the skills and qualifications of child welfare workers through their participation, full-time or part-time, in training programs focused specifically on child welfare practice.

Guidelines for the program vary from year to year, depending on the Children’s Bureau’s analysis of need. Priorities for fiscal year 2003 grants, which were announced earlier this month, include practice in rural communities, training for American Indian and/or Alaskan Native public child welfare staff, effective models for staff recruitment and retention, and training for healthy marriage and family formation.³⁶

The Section 426 program is the only one of six child welfare discretionary grant programs managed by the Children’s Bureau with a specific emphasis on staff training. In fiscal year 2002, even after funding increases in the late 1990s, the training program received the second smallest share—nine percent—of the Children’s Bureau’s total discretionary funds.³⁷

Program funding reached a high of \$8 million in 1978, was cut by more than 50 percent (to \$3.8 million) in 1982, and stayed at that level for many years. Funding was not increased until 1995 when it jumped to \$4.6 million and then was cut again in 1996 to \$2 million. Strong advocacy resulted in an increase to \$4 million in 1997; \$6 million in 1998; and eventually to \$7 million, where it stands today.

According to a leading expert on the program, “The 426 program has served as an important catalyst for innovations in child welfare training and to stimulate the preparation of social work students for child welfare careers. However, the competitive nature of the grant program, the narrow categories for which applicants are sought each fiscal year, and the limitations of a \$7 million annual appropriation restrict its beneficiaries to a small cadre of states and social work education programs.”³⁸

Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program

The Title IV-E child welfare training program represents a much greater federal investment in the child welfare workforce than Title IV-B. Created as part of the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980, Title IV-E is a valuable tool to address the child welfare-staffing crisis and ensure that staff have the competencies necessary to perform their jobs.

Under the program, the federal government demonstrates its support for training by providing an enhanced federal match of 75 percent (other administrative costs are matched at 50 percent) to fund training programs both for current and prospective child welfare staff. In addition to short-term and long-term training and direct financial assistance to students, this funding also may be used for curriculum development, materials and books, and incentives for recruitment.

Although the program was created in 1980, it was not until the early 1990s that Children’s Bureau staff became aware of the real opportunities provided by Title IV-E training funds.³⁹ In fiscal year 1990, Title IV-E provided about \$44 million to states to train child welfare workers.⁴⁰ By fiscal year 2001, 49 states received \$276 million in Title IV-E training reimbursements. These reimbursements ranged from a low of approximately \$1,400 in Wyoming to a high of more than \$59 million in California, with the median reimbursement approximating \$3.1 million.⁴¹

University-Agency Training Partnerships under Title IV-E

According to the GAO report, the university-agency training partnerships, funded by Title IV-E, present promising practices for addressing the staffing crisis in child welfare. It is a finding with which HHS concurred: “[A]lthough few in number, the ACF funded university and State child welfare agency partnerships referenced in this report have had a positive impact on State child welfare agencies’ ability to recruit and retain child welfare staff.”⁴²

These partnership programs are designed to prepare social work students for careers in the child welfare profession, and to develop the skills of current workers. The programs require that students receiving stipends for the study of child welfare commit to employment with the state or county public child welfare agency for a specified period of time. The length of the contractual employment obligation—usually one to two years—and the curriculum content each program offers, differ by state and sometimes by university.

A survey conducted in 1996 found that 68 university social work programs in 29 states were accessing IV-E funds for BSW and MSW education.⁴³ Today, it is estimated that partnerships exist in over 40 states, and use more than \$50 million, to prepare workers for the challenges of child welfare service delivery.⁴⁴

While relatively few in number, available studies on the impact of Title IV-E training partnerships suggest that they improve both worker retention and worker competence.⁴⁵

Improved Worker Retention

One study, which tracked four groups of students who participated in a training partnership, found that 93 percent continued to be employed in the child welfare profession—and 52 percent remained with public agencies—well beyond the minimum required by their employment obligation.⁴⁶

Findings were similar in evaluations of programs in Kentucky and California. Evaluations in both states found that more than 80 percent of participants remained with the state agencies after their initial work obligations concluded. In Kentucky, whose collaboration includes nine of the state's undergraduate social work schools and the Cabinet for Families and Children, state officials attribute their retention rates, in part, to the intensive coursework, formal internships, and rigorous training included in the curriculum of the training partnerships. California's collaboration consists of the state's 15 graduate schools of social work, the Department of Social Services, county welfare directors, and the California Chapter of NASW.⁴⁷

In Texas—where six universities offer both BSW and MSW stipends, five offer BSW stipends only, and one offers only MSW stipends—graduates of one participating program were surveyed. The survey found that 70 percent of respondents were still employed with the agency after their contractual employment obligation expired.⁴⁸

Improved Worker Competence

The program evaluations in Kentucky and California suggest that the training partnerships improved worker competence. In both states, evaluations found that staff hired through specially designed Title IV-E programs performed better on the job and applied their training more deftly than employees hired through other means.

Controlling for undergraduate grade point averages, the Kentucky study found that those who completed the training scored better on the agency's test of core competencies. Kentucky supervisors reported that they considered students certified by the partnership to be better prepared for their jobs than other new employees.⁴⁹

The California study reported that students who participated in the partnership training scored higher on a test of child welfare knowledge, reported greater competency in their work, and had a more realistic view of child welfare work than those who had not participated.⁵⁰

In Louisiana, research found that Title IV-E participants score higher on child welfare competency exams than control groups, have higher rates of retention with the agency, and score higher on supervisor evaluations of their work preparation.⁵¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the years, NASW has advocated for a number of improvements to increase the effectiveness of the Title IV-E program. The association continues to support those changes, but believes they should be made within the current financing structure. Our recommendations for improvements include:

- (1) **Eliminating requirements for cost allocation based on the percentage of the Title IV-E eligible caseload:** All children in the system benefit by better qualified staff, not only children from families meeting the 1996 AFDC income test.
- (2) **Expanding eligibility for training content:** Eligible training should include all areas related to meeting the federal goals of safety, permanence, and well-being, and should not be limited to training related to out-of-home placement.
- (3) **Expanding access for reimbursement to private universities:** In many jurisdictions, social work education programs at private universities are the most geographically accessible for child welfare workers. However, direct financial participation by private universities is prohibited, which limits access to quality training programs for many child welfare staff.
- (4) **Expanding the 75 percent reimbursement rate to include all real costs of training, both direct and indirect, including the costs of administering the training program:** Current limitations significantly reduce the number of colleges and universities able to provide the required matching funds.

CONCLUSION

With or without the recommended improvements, it is clear that the current Title IV-E child welfare training program is critical to re-professionalizing the child welfare system. Continued strong federal support for this program and others designed to create a well-trained, competent, and stable child welfare workforce will be even more critical in the future, as states develop and implement Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) to meet outcomes measured in the Child and Family Services Reviews.

In response to the March 2003 GAO report, HHS noted that “a number of States have identified strategies that target workforce stabilization and reduction in caseloads as part of their PIPs,” but acknowledged that “the Federal government has limited resources to offer States in these efforts.”⁵² While additional resources are clearly needed, now is not the time to jeopardize the current federal funding available to assist states in their efforts to educate and train their child welfare staff.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to provide the social work perspective on child welfare financing, and look forward to participating in the debate as the issue moves forward.

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