Championing the Role of Child Welfare Professionals

Child welfare professionals have a deep and often quiet impact on children's lives—working to connect families with resources, determining appropriate placements, and responding around the clock to address emergencies. The complex story of child welfare work is hard to convey to the community; while most people can describe the careers of professionals with whom they interact—police officers or nurses, for example—the day-to-day efforts of child welfare professionals are often invisible from public view. Child welfare professionals, bound by confidentiality, cannot explain the details of their work. In addition, they typically become involved in a family's life during a crisis, or during events for which there might be multiple, conflicting stories.

People get most of their information about child welfare from the media (Douglas & Gushwa, 2015; Gainsborough, 2010; Landsman, 2001; Franklin & Parton, 1991). The general public's perception of the child welfare system and its workforce is influenced significantly by news stories, often focused on the relatively small number of tragic cases (Chenot, 2011). When systemic failure is perceived as a contributing factor, negative perceptions of child welfare professionals are reinforced, which can, in turn, impact families' willingness to engage with services (Schreiber, Fuller, & Paceley, 2013). Negative perceptions also can impact social work practice, and can contribute to work-related stress, secondary trauma, and staff turnover (National Association of Social Workers, 2004; Chenot, 2011).

As a result, some states are choosing to proactively champion the positive impact that child welfare professionals have on children and families, structuring internal systems to support job satisfaction and commitment, and working to engage the public in a deeper and more positive understanding of the child welfare system.

Creating an Organizational Climate That Champions Social Work

Multiple studies have linked effective child welfare practice and workforce retention to organizational climate (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Claiborne et al., 2011; Glisson & Green, 2006; Social Work Policy Institute, 2010; Williams & Glisson, 2014). Claiborne et al. (2011) found a link between job satisfaction and several organizational factors. Child welfare professionals tend to be more invested in the job and committed to the agency when they are able to do their work and make decisions with some degree of autonomy, when their training and skills support challenging work, and when the agency actively solicits staff feedback and participation in problem solving (Claiborne et al., 2011).

In an effort to improve child outcomes, Baltimore City's child welfare agency engaged in a results-based leadership approach. The initiative used a strengths-based accountability approach and promoted the perception of staff as change agents, capable of leading from every position and able to collaboratively make decisions (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). The approach not only boosted staff morale, it resulted in improved permanency outcomes for children.

Tips for Success

- ▶ Solicit staff and stakeholder feedback to develop or refine core agency values and principles for practice, and then embed them in policy and procedures. **Reward** and **publicly recognize** staff for reflecting those values and principles in daily practice.
- ▶ Ensure that frontline workers have consistent access to well-trained and effective supervisors (Government Accountability Office, 2003).
- ▶ Implement specific processes to maximize morale, including targeted professional development and training linked to job functions, incorporating the results of staff surveys into organizational change activities, and appropriately incentivizing outcomes through rewards (Claiborne et al., 2011).
- ▶ Prioritize a culture of respect and leadership, focused on strengths-based accountability processes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011).

Building Public Awareness of the Role of the Child Welfare Professional

While the majority of public awareness initiatives related to child welfare have focused on increasing foster family recruitment, there are emerging campaigns seeking to reframe the child welfare system and the professionals within it (American Public Human Services Association, 2012).

Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) determined that a lack of public engagement in child welfare limited the public's understanding, trust, and support

of the agency. In response, DFCS is spearheading a successful campaign to engage the public and improve both the agency's reputation and its services. Its Blueprint for Change Initiative includes three areas of focus: developing a robust workforce, implementing a solid practice model, and engaging constituents. The initiative's "road shows" are designed to seek input from the media, the general public, and community stakeholders. The feedback harnessed through the road shows informs agency improvements and key strategies for improving child safety. DFCS credits the Blueprint for Change Initiative with the following outcomes (DFCS, 2017):

- Substantially increasing the percentage of on-time investigation completions from 56 to 95.5 percent
- Reducing the number of overdue investigations from 4,000 to 103
- Decreasing staff turnover from 36 to 32 percent in 1 year

Similarly, initiatives such as Systems of Care have demonstrated results in improving community collaboration, creating a shared sense of responsibility for child and family outcomes, and increasing community support for child welfare agencies and staff, particularly in the face of high-profile coverage of child fatalities (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010). Some jurisdictions have intentionally incorporated public awareness into their Systems of Care initiatives. For example, the Kansas Family-Centered Systems of Care collaboratively developed and implemented a social marketing campaign to improve the public's perception of the child welfare agency (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Some jurisdictions are beginning to use social media to build awareness and partnerships between child welfare systems and community stakeholders. For example, the Florida Department of Children and Families uses social media platforms, such as Twitter (https://twitter.com/myflfamilies), to disseminate information and parenting tips to families, as well as to build the community's understanding of and partnership with the child welfare system.

Tips for Success

- Consider ways to engage proactively with the media, such as sharing weekly good news stories with local outlets and holding press conferences, or distributing press releases about new child welfare initiatives (Briar-Lawson, Martinson, Briar-Bonpane, & Zox, 2011).
- Cultivate transparency with the community; use high-profile cases as an opportunity to engage in collaborative problem solving (Briar-Lawson et al., 2011).
- Partner with universities to develop internal agency capacity in public relations and media engagement (Briar-Lawson et al., 2011).
- Consider using social media platforms as a tool to promote the role of social work within child welfare and to engage the community; the use of social media requires clear goals and a strategic plan with adequate capacity to implement (Chang, 2013; Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, 2011; Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013).
- Solicit feedback prior to implementation of new policies and practices to build consensus from stakeholders (DFCS, 2017).
- Provide regular focus groups and/or community forums to engage stakeholders (DFCS, 2017).
- Implement initiatives to increase retention of the workforce (DFCS, 2017).

References

American Public Human Services Association. (2012). *Communications reflective thinking guide*. Retrieved from http://www.aphsa.org/content/dam/aphsa/PPCWG/Reflective thinking guide/Communications/ Communications RTG.pdf

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2011). *Sharpening leadership skills to improve child outcomes in Baltimore, Maryland*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-SharpeningLeadershipSkills-2011-Full.pdf

Briar-Lawson, K., Martinson, K., Briar-Bonpane, J., & Zox, K. (2011). Child welfare, the media, and capacity building. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *5*, 185–199.

Cahalane, H., & Sites, E. (2008). The climate of child welfare employee retention. *Child Welfare, 87*(1), 91–114.

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. (2011). *CW360: Child welfare and technology*. Retrieved from http://cascw.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/CW360_2011.pdf

Chang, J. O. (2013). Social media use in child welfare. *Children's Bureau Express, 13*(11). Retrieved from https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=142&articleid=3728

Chenot, D. (2011). The vicious cycle: Recurrent interactions among the media, politicians, the public, and child welfare service organizations. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *5*, 167–184.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (n.d.). *Communication*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec/soctoolkits/communication/#phase=pre-planning

Claiborne, N., Auerbach, C., Lawrence, C., Liu, J., McGowan, B., Fernandes, G., & Magnano, J. (2011). Child welfare agency climate influence on worker commitment. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 2096–2102.

Douglas, E., & Gushwa, M. (2015). *2015 Massachusetts family impact seminar*. Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise. Paper 34. Retrieved from http://commons.clarku.edu/mosakowskiinstitute/34

Franklin, B., & Parton, N. (Eds.). (1991). *Social work, the media and public relations*. Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis.

Gainsborough, J. (2010). *Scandalous politics: Child welfare policy in the states*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Georgia Division of Family and Children Services. (2017). *Strategic plan state fiscal year 2017–2019*. Retrieved from http://dfcs.georgia.gov/sites/dfcs.georgia.gov/files/Strategic Plan STate Fiscal Year 2017-2019. pdf

Glisson, C., & Green, P. (2006). The effects of organizational culture and climate on the access to mental health care in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 33*(4), 433–448.

Government Accountability Office. (2003). *Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff*. Washington, DC: Author.

Landsman, M. (2001). Commitment in public child welfare. *Social Services Review*, *75*(3), 386–419.

National Association of Social Workers. (2004). *If you're right for the job, it's the best job in the world*. Washington, DC: Author.

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2010). *Systems and organizational change resulting from the implementation of systems of care*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/SystemsandOrganizationalChangeReport.pdf

Paek, H., Hove, T., Jung, Y., & Cole, R. T. (2013). Engagement across three social media platforms: An exploratory study of a cause-related PR campaign. *Public Relations Review*, *39*(5), 526–533. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.09.013

Schreiber, J., Fuller, T., & Paceley, M. (2013). Engagement in child protective services: Parent perception of worker skills. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(4), 707–715.

Social Work Policy Institute. (2010). *Professional social workers in child welfare work: Research addressing the recruitment and retention dilemma*. Retrieved from http://www.socialworkpolicy.org/research/child-welfare-2.html

Stanfield, D., & Beddoe, L. (2013). Social work and the media: A collaborative challenge. *Social Work Review*, *25*(4), 41–51.

Williams, N., & Glisson, C. (2014). Testing a theory of organizational climate and youth outcomes in child welfare systems: A United States national study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *38*(4), 757–767.

Children's Bureau