

background

Report # 72

Pennsylvania's Child Welfare Training

July 2005

Caseworker education pays dividends

Pennsylvania training program helps to strengthen child welfare system

Among the challenges of improving the child welfare system is building a steady workforce of highly-trained caseworkers to play a key role in looking out for the well-being of dependent children, mending broken families, and finding permanent homes for foster children so they can avoid the disruption of having to spend years in the temporary care of others.

In Pennsylvania, one of the nation's most comprehensive child welfare training programs is building such a workforce, making significant contributions to efforts to meet stricter federal standards for placing abused and neglected children in safe and stable homes.

When it comes to child welfare systems, there is much room for improvement across the nation. No state fully complies with the federal standards.

Pennsylvania, for example, falls short in categories such as the stability of children's foster care placement, goals for finding them permanent homes, and meeting their educational needs, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

One of Pennsylvania's strengths, however, is child welfare training – a critical ingredient for improving child outcomes – thanks in large part to the Department of Public Welfare's steady commitment to several training programs bundled into an initiative known as the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Child Welfare Education and Research Programs.

Last year, grants supporting the training initiatives were renewed and a

new 40,000-square-foot building is being built near Harrisburg to accommodate the growing program, which has seen its annual budget soar to \$33 million.

"Pennsylvania has taken the position that the best client outcomes depend on the best trained staff," said Edward W. Sites, PhD, a professor in the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and principle investigator of the programs that fall under the child welfare training initiative.

"The better trained, the more professional the staff is, the more likely outcomes will improve. Pennsylvania is pouring this money into training in order to strengthen the services provided children."

Child welfare services are in high demand. Poverty, the dissolution of the family, drug and alcohol abuse, and other factors contribute to the steady flow of dependent children into the

As with every state across the nation, Pennsylvania has ample room to improve its child welfare system. One of its strengths, however, is child welfare staff training – a key to better child outcomes.

child welfare system. Allegheny County alone, for example, sees more than 8,000 dependent children a year.

Across Pennsylvania, well over \$1 billion is spent on child welfare services each year.

Caseworkers Play Key Role

Some of the ways outcomes of children in the child welfare system are measured include looking at adoption rates; length of time they spend in out-of-home placement, such as foster care; whether they've been protected from further abuse and neglect; and whether their health and educational needs have been adequately met.

Child welfare staff play a role in each.

The system, however, has been plagued by problems, such as high staff turnover within agencies. High turnover is corrosive, disrupting continuity, diminishing oversight, and adding to the caseloads

(Continued on back)

(Continued from front)

of colleagues who are already over-worked.

Better-Trained Workforce

The University of Pittsburgh initiative bundles several educational programs designed to help counties strengthen their child welfare staff, curb turnover rates, and ease vacancies by encouraging social work undergraduates to look at public child welfare work as a career option.

- **Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL)**, begun in 1995, offers graduate-level education for child welfare workers, who can attend the University of Pittsburgh or another of the seven Pennsylvania schools of social work affiliated with the program. They receive up to 95% of their salary in addition to tuition and other benefits. In return, they agree to work with the sponsoring agency for at least two years.
- **Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB)**, begun this year, offers social work degrees with child welfare content to undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh and 13 other state schools in an effort to strengthen child welfare agencies. Students receive tuition and fees for their senior year, a stipend and book allowance. In return, they agree to work at a public child welfare agency for at least one year.
- **Competency-Based Training** program, begun in 1991, was this year placed under the direction of the University of Pittsburgh. The program provides legally-required pre-service and in-service training for 3,800 Pennsylvania child welfare caseworkers and administrators.
- **State Automated Child Welfare**

Information System training, begun in 1996, was placed under the direction of the University of Pittsburgh in 2001. The program provides training in the use of the statewide child welfare information management system.

- **Independent Living Program** training for staff who work with dependent children who "age out" of the child welfare system at age 18, but lack the support and skills needed to succeed on their own.

These programs provide about 20,000 days of training to agency staff a year at 15 sites across the state and train some 9,000 foster parents as well.

Evaluation is built into the initiative to determine what trainees take away from the training and whether they have used them as part of their daily practice.

For example, the program follows up on the learning plan trainees are asked to draft after they have been trained. So-called transfer of learning staff – seasoned child welfare workers – visit the trainee's office, check on how the plan is being used, evaluate how effective the training was, and work with trainee and supervisor on refining the techniques learned to improve everyday practice.

Turn-over Rates Drop

One result has been dramatically lower turnover rates among child welfare staff across the state.

In some of the larger counties, retention has been relatively high. Allegheny County retained 80% of workers over 10 years and Philadelphia has retained 85.5%.

Among workers who have received a master's degree under the program, the turnover rate is only 3% per year.

Some 10% of Pennsylvania's child welfare workers have earned a master's degree under the program.

"A large part of that is the more you know, the more skills you have; the more skills you have, the better job you do; the more satisfaction you get, the more satisfying your job is; the more likely you are to stay, all things being equal – good supervision, reasonable salary, decent agency climate to work in," Dr. Sites said.

Success will ultimately be determined by whether the outcomes of dependent children in the child welfare system improve. "It's too early to tell, right now," Dr. Sites said. "But we are light years ahead of many states because we have invested in this training."



references

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work's child welfare web site at <http://www.pitt.edu/~pittsw/centers.html>

contact s

Edward W. Sites, PhD, professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work.
Contact: Sharon Blake, University of Pittsburgh Senior News Representative:
phone: 412-624-4364; Fax: 412-624-4895; blake@pitt.edu

Children, Youth & Family background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall, PhD.

background Editor: Jeffery Fraser, e-mail: jd.fraser@comcast.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, 400 N. Lexington Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

This report and others can be found on the Internet by visiting: <http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/backgrounders.asp>