

DEVELOPING A CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE USING A COMMUNITY APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper is a brief summary of how the state of Colorado, counties in Colorado, and universities work together to address the critical need for child welfare social workers. This is a challenge in all parts of the state, but especially in rural areas. The role of each key stakeholder, the need for collaboration, and current innovations in the facilitation of the IV-E stipend program such as part time stipends, rural incentives, and online education are addressed. Agency commitment as a key factor to worker retention is also discussed as a feature of how the stipend program is administered by the IV-E stipend committee. Opportunities for additional innovations, such as international exchange with child welfare social work students in Romania are also raised.

Keywords: child welfare workers, Title IV-E, retention, Colorado, Romania

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how Colorado is challenged with developing a resilient child welfare workforce in all parts of the state, with a focus on the challenge of rural areas. Central themes addressed are: the roles of the State and Counties, the roles of the Universities, how collaborations are critical, and the role of technology in workforce development and education. Colorado, like many states, struggles to recruit and retain competent workers (Alwon & Reitz, 2000). In 2010, a report to the governor of Colorado from the Child Welfare Action Committee recommended that child welfare educational stipend program be expanded to 150 social work students (Colorado Department of Human Services, 2010). There is a challenge of identifying and training these workers. Should these workers come from within communities or be recruited to serve in child welfare?

Should these workers be new to the field or should these workers have demonstrated a commitment to the children and families? Meanwhile, the workers who are serving the children and families in these roles need to be supported. How can Colorado keep qualified workers in their jobs?

About Colorado

Colorado is one of the ten top fastest growing states and the population is increasingly diverse, primarily due to increases in the Hispanic population. The eastern counties are mostly rural and communities revolve around livestock and agriculture. The Front Range, composed of the Interstate-25 corridor, is home to the urban centers of Colorado (Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, and Fort Collins). The Western counties are again more rural, but rely more heavily on tourism, livestock, and the oil and gas industries. Colorado's population is primarily located in eleven counties along the front-range, but twenty-seven of the counties have fewer than 10,000 people. The distribution of social workers is reflective of the population of the state, with several rural counties having no identified professional social workers (The Behavioral Healthcare Workforce in Colorado, 2010). A major challenge is to support the development of the child welfare workforce in rural Colorado. Forty-seven of Colorado's sixty-four counties are designated rural; eighty percent of the land mass of Colorado is defined as rural, but only one fifth of the population live there.

State and County Efforts to Develop the Child Welfare Workforce

The Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Welfare is responsible for overseeing the child welfare programs, services, and workers in Colorado. It consists of a group of services intended to protect children from harm and to assist families in caring for and protecting their children. Taken together, these programs comprise the main thrust of Colorado's effort to meet the needs of children who must be placed, or are at risk of placement outside of their homes for reasons of protection or community safety. The delivery of Child Welfare Services in Colorado is primarily a state-supervised, county administered system. The philosophy of the Division recognizes Child Welfare Services constitutes a specialized set of services that are intended to strengthen the ability of a family to protect and care for their own children, minimize harm to children and youth, and ensure timely permanency planning. Services are aimed at stabilizing the family situation and strengthening the family's capacity to care for their children. When safety is not possible within the family, services are focused on the child's need for a stable, permanent home as quickly as possible.

Colorado's child welfare system is one of only nine states (of 50 states in the United States) that utilize a state-supervised, county administered system. Thus, the state has the challenge of oversight and compliance with state and federal regulations, and the counties (64) have the challenge of implementing systems that

are responsive to the needs of their communities. Because of the dramatic cultural differences between the rural and urban counties, this can be a significant challenge. The Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Welfare (CDHS-DCW) along with the Training Steering Committee (TSC) have made significant investments in supporting its current child welfare workforce with recent restructuring of the Colorado Child Welfare Training System (CWTS). Prior to 2013, the majority of training for new child welfare workers, as well as seasoned workers, was being offered in the Denver area. However, to make training more accessible to workers from all over the state, CDHS- DCW & TSC created four regional centers, three outside the Denver metro area. CDHS-DCW has also intentionally developed its on-line learning capabilities. CWTS was developed to provide a Strength Based, Family Centered, Competency-Based training program for Child Welfare Professionals and Para-professionals by delivering specialized courses for caseworkers, supervisors, case services aides, foster parents and other child and family serving personnel. By providing more accessible training, both for new and seasoned workers, the State has invested significantly in the professional formation of workers, giving them the tools necessary to be successful.

University Efforts to Develop the Child Welfare Workforce

Universities in Colorado with social work programs have been long been invested in supporting child welfare workforce development. By providing classes specific to child welfare practice and field internships with county agencies (16 hours per week for BSW students and 20 hours per week for MSW students as required by CSWE), Universities are engaged in the complex task of providing the formation needed for child welfare workers to be successful. Research on child welfare practice indicates that there are multiple benefits to hiring staff with social work degrees, particularly a MSW, including lower agency turnover rates (Albers, Rittner & Reilly, 1993) and a deeper commitment to child welfare (McGuire & Lay, 2007). There is also evidence that staff with social work degrees (graduate and undergraduate) are better at making permanency plans for children in foster care two years or more (Albers, Rittner & Reilly, 1993). Also, staff with MSW degrees are more prepared to manage the complexity of problems in child welfare practice (Dhooper, Royse & Wolfe, 1990).

In 2007, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) released a report on workforce development that noted three related themes: (1) The content of current training and education frequently is not relevant to contemporary practices, nor is it informed by empirical evidence; (2) teaching methods often are ineffective in changing the actual practice patterns of the people being trained; and (3) access to education is often quite limited, particularly in rural communities and for culturally diverse populations. These concerns were expressed about the education of line staff and about the continuing education of all members of the social work workforce (p.18). In rural areas, there are few professionals with

graduate, especially social work training, who work in child welfare agencies. By integrating the child welfare agency internship to the social work degree and providing a field agency seminar that links theories taught in the classes to practice skills that students are learning in their internships, the stipend program aims to address this disconnect.

The challenges of Colorado social work education for child welfare workers are rightfully entwined with the challenges of the state and counties in Colorado. The need for practice-informed education and research and research-informed practice depends on the partnerships between and among the universities, counties, and state.

State of Colorado, County, and University Partnership

It is broadly recognized by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the Children's Bureau that collaborations between social work education programs and child welfare agencies are critical to meeting the challenge of building and maintaining a healthy workforce (Zlotnik, 2008). Many states, including Colorado, utilize federal funding sources (Title IV-E) administered by the U.S. Children's Bureau that is used to educate child welfare social workers. Title IV-E funds are the major source of federal funding for educating and training the child welfare workforce. These funds are available to fund students' education, curriculum development, research and evaluation of the program and recruitment (Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980 P.L.96-272). Successful partnerships between university social work educators and child welfare administrators include a shared agenda, a long-term commitment, committed leadership, and positive outcomes for both the social work education program and the state and county agencies (Zlotnik, 2001).

The IV-E Colorado Stipend Committee, which provides the leadership and structure for the stipend student training program, is comprised of representatives of the State of Colorado, multiple counties of Colorado, and four universities in Colorado. The shared vision of this group is a robust and healthy child welfare workforce for all parts of the state of Colorado. Stipends are awarded to students who are selected from a rigorous application and interview process. Successful applicants demonstrate a passion for and a commitment to child welfare work. Students who are selected to receive a stipend agree to working in a Colorado child welfare county agency for twelve months for each academic year of funding received. Stipend recipients are also required to accept an internship in a county and complete the basic training required to be certified as a child welfare worker in Colorado. Thus, a key task of the committee is to ensure that stipend students have learning opportunities as interns in a county agency. Partnerships with counties,

especially those that are in rural areas is ongoing, to meet this need of both the students and the counties.

The coordination of the stipend committee is especially important considering that multiple studies have found that *organizational commitment is the most consistent predictor of how long workers actually stay in child welfare* (Barak & Nissly, 2001; Ellett & Miller, 2004; Zlotnik et al., 2005; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). Students in the child welfare stipend program have the experience of applying for the stipend, an internship, and going through the basic training with the support of the state, county, and university committee team supporting their success. In the payback period, the committee remains involved in their successful completion of the stipend program with the hope that this investment will reap a return of additional years of service in the child welfare workforce. (The minimum requirement is that stipend recipients work for the amount of time owed as a requirement of the stipend.) Ongoing program evaluation will continue to guide the work of the committee to support the workers' experiences from recruitment to the workforce into years of service.

Stipend experience vary by university, but in 2016, MSU Denver began offering incentives to students who would commit to serving in a rural county after graduation. This funding is calculated at 100% of student expenses (tuition, books, and fees) and therefore creates an opportunity for people living in a rural part of Colorado to attend the university without relocating. Also in 2016, part-time stipends were offered to students so that students who are currently employed in child welfare can pursue a social work education. It is the hope of MSU Denver that expanded opportunities for professional development will be received by students as organizational commitment to workers' success in the field and thus, contribute to the building of the Colorado child welfare workforce in a meaningful way.

The Emerging Role of Online Education in Developing the Child Welfare Workforce

One way to increase accessibility to university education and on-the-job training is to offer online delivery options for learners. This has been previously mentioned as one strategy that the State of Colorado used to improve the training system for current employees. In a parallel fashion, students living in rural areas who have difficulty traveling to campus can also take classes. Also, workers who are already employed in child welfare can manage the demands of school more effectively with online classes than with traditional on campus models of delivery.

In 2001, CSWE granted approval for MSU Denver to deliver the entire BSW curriculum via distance education. This innovative move to distance education was motivated by several factors which included: the geography of Colorado; the significant workforce issue in county child welfare departments in hiring and retaining qualified BSW social workers; and, the department and

University had capacity to deliver this program. In the last five years, students from over 25 counties in Colorado have enrolled in the BSW social work program, to date over 100 BSW students have been awarded Title IV-E stipends. In 2016, MSU Denver began offering a fully online delivery of its MSW curriculum as well. A child welfare track, with classes, internship, and expert instruction specifically in child welfare, exists with the MSW program.

Online delivery of the MSW program also allows an opportunity for the deepening of the dialogue between students in Colorado and students in Romania. Through the exchange of videos and instructor-facilitated dialogue, it is our aim that students will be able to expand their understandings of practice challenges in multiple communities. For example, we understand the need to belong and attachment as universal (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1979), but how we work toward permanency in our respective communities varies dramatically. Students engaged in critical thinking to understand the “other” culture will be better-prepared to think creatively about the specific challenges in their agencies of employment.

Conclusion

The task of preparing social workers for careers in child welfare is complex and requires inputs from multiple stakeholders. The IV-E funding opportunity is a mechanism that Colorado has used in order to address the critical need for child welfare workers. Administration of this funding requires the coordination of universities, counties, and the state. This coordinated effort is an opportunity for stipend students to experience organizational commitment to them as people who can make a difference. Child welfare workers can come from rural or urban communities, could be new to the field or be recruited to it, or be currently in the child welfare workforce, but seeking professional development opportunities. As commitment to workers is operationalized through additional delivery options for learning such as part-time stipends, on line training and education, opportunities for international dialogue, and additional financial support for rural workers, the workforce will be stronger.

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