

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The University of Michigan
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Recruitment & Retention of Child Welfare Professionals Program

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1. What brought you to your job in your agency?
2. What keeps you in your job in your agency?
3. What factors help you do your job?
4. What factors are obstacles to doing your job?
5. How effective is DHS in handling issues of diversity?
6. In what way does working with the courts make your job harder or easier?
7. What about other agencies in the community?
8. What about the client population?
9. What about the responsibility of the job?
10. What about your supervision?
11. What about agency policies and procedures?
12. What About Workload?
13. What about the agency atmosphere/climate?
14. How about working with ethnically/racially different client populations?
15. What about issues of race/ethnicity in the agency?
16. In thinking about co-workers who have recently left, what do you think were their reasons for leaving?
17. (Supervisors and Managers Only) What factors help workers do their jobs?

18. (Supervisors and Managers Only) What factors impede workers from doing their jobs?

“WHY DID YOU LEAVE YOUR JOB?”

Recruitment and Retention of Child Welfare Professionals – Exit Interviews

- **Child Welfare Work**
 - o Some people leave because of the nature of the work. Child welfare work is inherently difficult. It is emotionally challenging, there are unsafe working conditions, there are many tasks to juggle including visiting unwelcoming homes, removing children, writing reports and appearing in court. And, there is a lot at stake. These are static characteristics. Workers who leave solely because of the nature of the work cannot be effectively retained since the characteristics of the work cannot be changed. From the exit interview data, question 4 (What would make you stay?) about 9% said “nothing.” I think this is a good estimate of how many leave because of the nature of the job. This is good news – that means up to 91% of leavers could have been retained if other conditions improved.
 - For the vast majority of workers, the problem with child welfare work is how it gets filtered through necessary but changeable factors – the supervision they receive, the climate of the agency in which they work, the behavior of the agency organization, and the workload the worker carries.
 - o **Supervision**

Some workers leave their supervisor, not their job. Poor supervision, including little support, little guidance, implicit or explicit unfair treatment, or unempathetic responses, directly impacts the worker on a daily basis. Workers seek from co-workers the guidance and support they need or may even attempt to acquire a new supervisor by moving to another unit. But if these efforts fail, the worker’s only choice in solving this problem is to leave.
 - o **Agency Climate**

The environment of the agency sets the tone of the work. An unsupportive, negative, uncaring, competitive, political, or punitive climate can make a social worker miserable. These negative climates are inconsistent with social worker value and causes the worker additional stress.
 - o **Agency Behavior**

The organizational behavior of a public child welfare agency can frustrate an already difficult job. Workers feel they are unable to serve children and families well when the agency is overly bureaucratic, it wrongly emphasizes process over progress, and it disconnects policy from practice. This feeling of ineffectiveness makes workers question why they put up with all the negative aspects of their work if they are not making a difference, and they leave.
 - o **Workload**

Child welfare work is doable if the worker has a reasonable level of assigned work and is supported with resources and training. The worker becomes overwhelmed when the workload is too large, the hours are too long, the resources not available, training

is inadequate, the unit is understaffed and there are unrealistic expectations from the administration.

- **External**
For reasons wholly outside a child welfare professional's job, a worker may decide to leave. However, our data suggests that when an external reason arises, many use it as an excuse to leave child welfare work. That is, if the job were better, the external reason would not have caused the worker to leave.

-Impact on the Individual

- Most workers cited several of the above reasons why they left their job in child welfare. When these negative factors accumulate, the impact on the individual can be too much. Workers experience extreme stress, anxiety, depression or other mental illness, and in some cases they experience major health problems like heart attacks or strokes. The workers feel burnt out, emotionally drained, unappreciated and disrespected. The result of these conditions is unnecessary loss of workers.
- **Resign**
Workers choose to leave the job when they are approaching the breaking point or decide it just is not worth it.
- **Fired or Forced to Leave**
Poor performance may be the result of an individual experiencing one or more of these factors, which leads to them being fired or forced out.
- **Retired**
Some leavers retire because they meet the minimum requirements to do so, but they may not have chosen to retire if the working conditions were better and the impact on them was not so great.

“WHAT WOULD HAVE MADE YOU STAY IN YOUR JOB?”

Recruitment and Retention of Child Welfare Professionals – Exit Interviews

- **Change in Child Welfare Work**
Some respondents said there was nothing that could have changed that would have made them stay in the job. There is no effective way to retain this group of leavers.
- **Change in Supervision**
Some workers said they would have stayed if they had a better supervisor or a different supervisor. Workers are looking to be treated fairly by their supervisors and to be given adequate guidance and support. This problem can be addressed through supervisor trainings.
- **Better Work Climate**
Workers would like to be appreciated, trusted, and respected more, and to work in a more empathetic and less hostile, less punitive environment.
- **Change in Agency**
 - o Workers want less bureaucracy and better awareness within the agency of the real issues of child welfare, and they would like to be able to serve children and families effectively and see kids kept with their families more.
- **Manageable Workload**
 - o Workers want small caseloads, more staff, more resources, more support, better training, less hours – and realistic expectations from the agency about what a worker can accomplish.
- **External**
 - o Life factors outside of the job caused some workers to leave. Examples include having small children at home, moving, or being offered a different job.
- **Change in Impact on Self**
 - o Workers want less stress and less mental and physical health problems that result from their work.