

IMPACT OF CASEWORKER TURNOVER ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

This video, filmed and edited by a youth in care who appears in the second part, contains interviews with youth talking about their experience of worker turnover. Their personal experiences are supported by research evidence.

Relationships: Worker turnover limits the caseworker ability to establish and maintain relationships with children and families (GAO, 2003). When young people experience multiple changes in relationships, they tend not to trust, not to communicate. They feel what's the point of telling my story again to another person who's going to leave me. Not wanting to be hurt again, they put up a wall to becoming open and vulnerable.

An essential part of the caseworker job is to gather information to make decisions. Gathering information requires trust, but due to turnover this trust is disrupted making it more difficult for caseworkers to elicit the information necessary to ensure appropriate care. When staff change, caseworkers may have to reestablish information to update the case record, frustrating all parties involved.

Children in foster care often feel worthless and of little value. All of the young people in the video said that they thought that caseworkers left because of them. Linked to the feeling of poor self-esteem, these young people feel that they have little control over their lives. This results in feelings of disempowerment and helplessness. The issues of separation and loss are the primary stressors for foster children (Folman, 2000). Worker turnover compounds these feelings. Each time a worker leaves, the child re-experiences loss of continuity of a caring adult in his or her life.

Outcomes: In addition to the impact on the relationship with the child, which in turn affects the child's emotional well-being, worker turnover has an impact on safety and permanency outcomes.

Turnover has a detrimental effect on the ability to make well-supported and timely decisions on child safety (GAO, 2003). Turnover and high caseloads means that caseworkers cannot meet frequently and consistently with their clients; they are often not sufficiently familiar with case histories to detect patterns of risk to children; their limited training and experience further handicap their ability to do so.

Turnover results in delays or changes to permanency decisions. Sometimes caseworkers feel pressure to make permanency decisions without thoroughly investigating options. This type of unsupported decision making results in placement disruptions, foster care re-entry, or continued abuse and neglect (GAO, 2003).

In a recent study (Flower, C., McDonald, J. and Sumski, M., 2005), increases in the number of worker changes were correlated to lessening the chance of permanency achievement. Children entering care who had only one worker achieved permanency in 74.5% of the cases. As the number of case managers increased the percentage of children

achieving permanency substantially dropped, ranging from 17.5% having two case managers to a low of 0.1% having six and seven case managers.

Caseworker turnover has an insidious and exponential impact. There's a lateral impact on coworkers and supervisors resulting in additional work for already overloaded staff; and an impact on the agency placing it in a constant maintenance model of recruiting, selecting and training new staff rather than providing the specialized in depth training and attention that experienced workers need and deserve. But the most critical impact is on the nature of the relationship between caseworkers and clients. When a caseworker leaves, the child reacts -- either by turning in and building a wall, by acting out or sometimes both -- making the case more difficult for the next caseworker. Often the next worker is inexperienced and unable to deal with the more complicated issues presented and the difficulty of breaking through the barriers that the youth have erected to protect themselves. This spiral makes the work increasingly difficult and less rewarding, causing others to leave.

But the good news is that one caseworker, given time, can make a difference. So the challenge for us all is to try to stem the tide -- to create a system where young people can experience continuity through a consistent caring relationship with a caseworker. As we do so, it's critical that we listen to the voices of children who are most impacted by its current failures.

References:

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This video is a product of the Maine Child Welfare Training Institute, a collaborative partnership between the Office of Child and Family Services, Maine Department of Health and Human Services and the Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine. Project: Developing Models of Effective Child Welfare Staff Recruitment and Retention Training, Project Director: Freda Bernotavicz.

This production was made possible by grant #90CT0112/01 from the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not represent the official views or policies of the funding agency. Publication does not in any way constitute and endorsement by the Department of Health and Human Services.

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