

A Study of Personal and Organizational Factors Contributing to Employee Retention and Turnover  
in Child Welfare in Georgia

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **Executive Summary**

Professional work in public child welfare is one of the most difficult, psychologically demanding, publicly scrutinized, but important jobs in the service of children and families in need in Georgia. Professionals in public child welfare (CW) are charged not only with providing critical and needed services to children and families, but also with assisting in the process of making life altering decisions for *involuntary clients* (e.g., removing children from their families, foster care placement, termination of parental rights, adoption). The difficulties in working in public CW are exacerbated by occasional, high profile abuse and neglect cases that receive attention from the mass media (e.g., serious injuries, or child fatalities) combined with a broad misunderstanding by the general public about what the proper roles, functions, and limitations are of those who work in public child welfare

Researchers and child welfare leaders are beginning to recognize that the workforce may be the most important variable over which agencies and policy makers may have some control. The agency has little control over the nature of clients served, and even less control over the external environment in which the agency is embedded. A key workforce issue in Georgia is the high CW employee turnover rate. The high turnover rate in Georgia is an indicator of a complex constellation of personal and organizational factors that contribute to child welfare employees' lack of persistence in CW, and their decisions to leave public child welfare for other positions.

The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) commissioned a study in 2002-2003 to obtain information and insight about the issues relevant to retention and turnover of child welfare staff. In order to accomplish the vision of Safe Futures for Georgia's children, a key component of success is the stability of the child welfare workforce. Therefore, this study was commissioned by DFCS and support was provided by the Annie B. Casey Foundation to complete an investigation of factors contributing to retention of the child welfare workforce in Georgia. The study was completed under contract with the University of Georgia Research Foundation through the UGA School of Social Work. The need for the study was indicated by the high rate of annual employee turnover each year in Georgia (44%), which is over twice the national average in state agencies (20%). High employee turnover in DFCS creates a tremendous loss by the citizens of Georgia of investments in human, educational, and financial resources. Most importantly, high employee turnover disrupts the continuity and quality of services to Georgia's children and families in greatest need of CW services. *This study is the largest known, most comprehensive statewide study completed at all levels of a state CW organization, about personal and organizational factors that contribute to employee turnover and retention in child welfare.*

Over the past two decades numerous studies on employee *turnover* in (CW) have focused on employee turnover and *burnout*. These studies provide some insights into the psychological stress associated with work in CW and the role such stress plays in employee turnover. However, few comprehensive, statewide studies have been completed that include an additional, important focus on personal and organizational factors that contribute to *employee retention in public child welfare*. The study summarized here, and described in greater detail in a comprehensive final project report (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003), focused on public CW professional employee turnover and retention, and a larger set of issues related to the education, recruitment, employment, mentoring, and professional development of CW employees in Georgia. The study was also concerned with the continuing need to further professionalize public child welfare in Georgia.

The study used mixed methodologies (statewide survey and focus group interviews) to collect comprehensive information from DFCS professionals (Case Managers, Supervisors, District Directors, Area Field Directors, State Office Staff) to address the existing problem of high DFCS employee turnover in Georgia, and to develop a set of recommendations for strengthening DFCS employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare in DFCS. Several survey measures were developed to collect DFCS employees' perceptions of: a) intent to remain employed; b) work morale; c) professional organizational culture; d) human caring; e) self-efficacy beliefs; f) collective efficacy beliefs; g) efficacy expectations; h) job satisfaction; i) factors contributing to leaving employment in CW; and j) factors contributing to remaining employed in CW. These measures were administered to **all** CW professional staff in Georgia. Subsequently, focus group interviews were completed with a sample of 385 CW staff representing all geographical areas of the state and the DFCS State Office. Included in these interviews was a group of experienced, long-term employees described as the *Committed Survivors*. Completed surveys were received from 1423 employees of the total population of Georgia CW professional staff (N=2250). The survey return rate (63.2%) is considered rather strong given the length of the survey (198 items).

### Synthesis of Major Findings

Analyses of the quantitative (survey) and qualitative (extensive, statewide focus group interviews) data were completed to refine the study measures, to examine relationships among the study variables, and to make group comparisons of particular interest. The results of these analyses show the following:

- the level of ***professional commitment of child welfare (CW) employees to child welfare was clearly the strongest predictor of their decisions to remain employed in CW;***
- elements of work morale and alterable factors affecting general job satisfaction (e.g., salary, caseload, benefits, promotional opportunities), explained additional variation among DFCS employees' intentions to remain employed in CW;
- staff with social work (SW) degrees and those supported with IV-E experiences had higher intents to remain employed in CW than those without SW degrees and non- IV-E participants;
- less than 20% of CW staff have social work degrees and 10% have a high school diploma or a GED;
- many new employees lack requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions to deliver effective services for children and families;
- high caseloads and workloads many workers and supervisors who work 50-60 hours per week (80% of caseworkers have caseloads that exceed CWLA standards);
- staff report having to neglect their own families to accommodate DFCS work demands;
- there is no overtime pay and most employees cannot take comp time because of the hectic work schedules;
- the annual evaluation system does *not* permit fair and accurate assessment of employees and

the quality of their work;

- excessive paperwork consumes 50-75% of work time;
- lack of professional mentoring and support (particularly in the early years of employment);
- insufficient professional development and few promotional opportunities in DFCS;
- personal perceptions of staff of being *devalued* by the larger DFCS organization and the general public;
- lack of available work-related resources and resources for children and families (e.g., not enough foster families and mental health services);
- problems with the courts and particularly with SAAGS representing DFCS in court;
- problems with other agencies in coordinating and providing services to children and families (e.g. DJJ, schools, mental health);
- a *fear factor* related to workers' perceptions of their potential civil and criminal liabilities in their work with, and professional decisions about, children and families;
- compensation/career concerns was the most important factor contributing to decisions to leave CW,( e.g. few promotional opportunities, low salaries);
- 36.3% intend to leave DFCS employment within 5 years;

The results of the study were discussed in view of their implications for preparation, practice and policy in child welfare.

### **Recommendations**

A large number of specific recommendations (n=37) derived from the results of the study were made in view of the need to better prepare, recruit, select, support and retain professional staff in child welfare in Georgia. Among the most important recommendations were the following:

- ***The state needs to increase allocations and fully fund Case Manager and Supervisor positions to reduce the high caseloads that staff are currently assigned.*** Current caseloads for 80% of CW staff in Georgia exceed caseload standards recommended by the Child Welfare League of America. For direct services workers, caseloads far exceed these standards and were reported as high 98 in this study. Heavy caseloads, when combined with other difficulties of working in CW, greatly diminish the quality and equity of services to children and families, and make strong contributions to employees' decisions to leave employment in DFCS. Heavy caseloads, as high as 88 for one new worker, are a particular problem for new employees not yet proficient in the many skills required to deliver effective services.
- ***DHR/DFCS need to develop, over a period of time, a career ladder model for the preparation, licensing, support, evaluation, and enhanced compensation of***

***professional CW staff in DFCS.*** A new professional career model for child welfare staff in Georgia is needed. Currently, there are few requirements to be employed in CW in Georgia and only a small percentage of CW employees have a degree in social work (BSW, 13.5%; MSW, 6.1%). There is currently no state licensing procedure for CW staff and there is a strongly identified need to provide support for new staff during the early years of employment. Salaries paid to CW staff in Georgia are considerably lower than those paid in other states, and salaries are considerably below those of other professional occupations as well (e.g., teaching, nursing). There is also a need to provide extra compensation for employees who are *on call* or who work overtime. Employee selection *and* evaluation procedures need to be developed that better reflect the requirements of professional work in CW and the findings of this study. In addition, a firm and clear policy assuring due process in personnel actions needs to be developed and implemented. Currently, there are few career promotional opportunities in DFCS. Developing a career ladder for CW in Georgia that *systemically* addresses these needs, is an important element of workforce and job redesign that can enhance the retention of employees in the CW workforce.

- ***DHR/DFCS needs to work with the General Assembly and the Board of Regents to expand existing and fund additional state university BSW and MSW programs to meet the need for child welfare staff.*** At a time when employee credentialing in CW is minimal, employee turnover in CW is high, and caseloads are ever increasing, it seems imperative that DFCS work closely with Georgia's colleges and universities to prepare more professionals for CW employment in DFCS. Included in this preparation should be a provision for Supervisors and Administrators to obtain the MSW degree and to participate in ongoing professional development opportunities. The results of this study show that participation in a pre-employment internship or IV-E program is an important part of professional preparation for work in child welfare. IV-E programs should be expanded to increase opportunities for CW staff to obtain the MSW degree. It is further recommended that the existing Georgia DHR/DFCS Education Consortium with Georgia universities with accredited social work programs, be continued.
- ***DHR/DFCS needs to work with the courts and other agencies (e.g., DJJ) to develop a clear policy that specifically defines and differentiates cases that are DFCS responsibilities for services/custody (i.e. abused/neglected children) from those that are not DFCS responsibilities.*** Currently DFCS has ended up with responsibilities for services and custody of youth with mental health needs or juvenile delinquency. When these additional cases are assigned to DFCS, they are viewed as inappropriate and unnecessary increases in caseloads that should be assigned to other agencies. These assignments create a significant diminution of DFCS resources to abused and neglected children.
- ***The State of Georgia needs to replace SAAGS with an adequate number of attorneys employed by DFCS to represent DFCS in the multitude of mandated court proceedings related to child abuse and neglect, foster care review, permanency, and termination of parental rights hearings.***
- ***DHR/DFCS needs to develop and implement a statewide public relations campaign about the positive, professional, and necessary work that CW employees perform to***

**counter act the largely negative view of CW held by the general public and often exacerbated by the mass media in high profile cases.** The results of this study well document DFCS employee concerns about existing negative public perceptions and devaluing of CW staff, and lack of public understanding of, and lack of appreciation for, the difficulties and stresses of work in CW. This public perception of CW in Georgia is a strong contributor to many DFCS employees' low work morale and decisions to leave employment in CW.

- **DHR/DFCS needs to develop, disseminate, and clearly explain policies about employees' legal rights and responsibilities when employees are charged with criminal or civil offenses as a result of carrying out their mandated job duties and responsibilities.** There was much confusion among DFCS staff *at all levels* in this study about their liabilities in different work situations, DFCS policies related to these liabilities, and the extent to which DFCS would provide legal representation to employees charged with criminal or civil offenses when performing assigned job duties. This confusion is a source of great tension among DFCS employees and is a contributor to the decision of many CW staff to leave employment in DFCS
- **DHR/DFCS needs to increase resources for both CW employees and clients.** The lack of resources for CW staff (e.g., no state automobiles, poor computer/information technology system, lack of security devices such as cell phones, lack of office space, lack of clerical support) and clients (lack of foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, and mental health services) was a strong factor contributing to low work morale among DFCS child welfare staff. When given a choice, many DFCS employees gave priority to increasing resources for clients over increasing resources for staff.

The complete final report (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003) provides a detailed description of this statewide study of retention of employees in the CW workforce in Georgia and additional information to support these and other recommendations as well. Results of this study and the recommendations offered are consistent with those of other national studies of CW workforce recently completed by the American Public Human Services Association (Cyphers, 2001) and the General Accounting Office (2003).

## References

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