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2019

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This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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### Abstract

Child welfare supervisors have a unique vantage point, leading local service delivery efforts while representing a larger organizational bureaucracy. They also play a key role in workforce stability, as high caseworker turnover remains a real problem that affects clients, communities, and agency budgets. Using a qualitative thematic content analysis to analyze data collected from a sample of public child welfare supervisors in a southern state (n=117), findings from this study provide suggestions for systematically addressing workforce turnover through the unique perspective of the child welfare supervisor. Supervisors made recommendations to improve agency infrastructure, organizational climate, and organizational culture as areas for immediate consideration to address this significant problem.

*Keywords:* child welfare, supervision, turnover, retention, workforce stability

## Retention of Child Welfare Caseworkers: The Wisdom of Supervisors

### **Introduction**

Public child welfare professionals are directly responsible for addressing traumatic situations experienced by our nation's children and their families. A competent and committed child welfare workforce is an absolute necessity for assuring that effective protective and treatment services are provided to those in need (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015). Significant financial and human costs are incurred when public child welfare caseworkers choose to prematurely leave their positions.

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (2017) estimated that the financial cost for every child welfare caseworker leaving the workforce is \$54,000. However, of greater concern, are the human costs resulting from caseworker turnover. As caseworkers exit, they often leave investigations, placement recommendations, and other essential case tasks unfinished. These undone tasks add to the workloads of remaining child welfare staff, community partners, and others who are working to effectively serve families and meet case requirements. If these tasks are not completed, safety risks increase, as do the potential for additional trauma and unnecessary delays in case progression or reunification (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2003).

### **Factors Influencing Workforce Turnover and Retention**

With the stressful and highly complex nature of the child welfare profession, it is no surprise that caseworkers do not stay long. Ellet, Ellis, Westbrook, and Dews (2007) pointed out that some of the stressors child welfare caseworkers experience are related to 1) the expectation they serve growing numbers of children with increasingly complex needs (e.g., mental health issues, chemical dependency, multi-generational trauma, etc.), 2) regularly entering dangerous neighborhoods to make home visits and entering homes where violence has become a factor in living (e.g., drugs, domestic

and gang violence, etc.), 3) a work environment of public mistrust and negative views of child welfare staff and of public agencies, 4) large and often unmanageable caseloads, and 5) low pay, to name a few. According to Edwards and Wildeman (2018), the median child welfare caseworker remains on the job for 1.8 years and is responsible for 55 cases per year. The median child welfare supervisor stays slightly longer at 2.5 years. The authors also estimated a median annual turnover rate of 14-22% of the entire child welfare workforce, indicating that about one in five caseworkers and supervisors leave the child welfare workforce each year. Turnover estimates have been noted to range from 30-40% nationwide (GAO, 2003), yet variable regional rates are common. In the southeastern state referenced in this study, the annual turnover is noted to have risen from 15% in 2010 to 67% in 2015 (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018).

Research on factors contributing to caseworker retention and turnover is robust, and a meta-analysis by Kim and Kao (2014) identified four different areas that have been found to predict turnover (i.e. demographic, work-related, work-environment, and attitudes and perceptions). Work-related predictors, such as workload, have long been identified as an important factor to consider. On one hand, Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, and Lane (2005) found reasonable workloads contributed to retention. On the other hand, workloads for child welfare workers are higher when compared to social workers in other settings (Kim, 2011). In a study by Williams et al. (2011), only 12% of the sample of Georgia public child welfare workers felt that their workload was reasonable. Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, and Dews (2007) used focus groups with 369 child welfare workers and found that extremely large caseloads led to turnover. Additionally, Gonzalez, Faller, Ortega, and Tropman (2009) coded open-ended responses and found that of the 69 departed child welfare workers participating in the study, 52% stated that they would have stayed with the agency had they had a manageable workload.

An additional work-related predictor is that of job stress, which influences the stability of the child welfare workforce. Research has identified stressful working conditions as negatively impacting job satisfaction (McCrae et al., 2015; GAO, 2003) and workers' self-reported physical and mental health status (Griffiths, Royse, & Walker, 2018) which may lead to leaving the field prematurely. Considerable concerns about safety (Kim & Kao, 2014), high levels of emotional exhaustion (Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011), and too much work with not enough time to do it (Barth et al., 2008; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006) are all major stressors that contribute to intent to leave child welfare positions.

Work-environment factors are also important, such as salary, a variable that has been known to influence child welfare turnover (Ellett et al., 2007; McCrae et al., 2015). Low salaries can lead to low self-efficacy (McCrae et al., 2015), and salaries that match or exceed those of other disciplines may also help retain MSWs (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009). Additionally, the Child Welfare Employee Feedback Scale was used in a statewide study of child welfare caseworkers, and those who identified an intention to leave the agency in the next 12 months ("leavers") reported significantly less satisfaction with workload, salary, peer support, professional development, recognition, accomplishment, and supervision (Griffiths, Royse, Culver, Piescher, & Zhang, 2017).

### **Importance of Supervision**

Research is clear that the child welfare supervisor is a key component in the facilitation of services, outcomes, and workforce stability (Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Lietz & Julien-Chinn, 2017; McCrae et al., 2015; Quinn, 2017; Zinn, 2015). Training and intentional mentoring are important aspects of effective supervisor support that increase the skills and self-efficacy of the workforce (Chenot et al., 2009), yet many supervisors receive little support in how to

supervise others (Bogo & Dill, 2008). While inadequate training and preparation for work in child welfare are often cited as reasons for leaving the field (Child Welfare League of America, 2002), it is imperative that training needs are adequately addressed for all members of the agency.

Child welfare employees may choose to leave the profession due to a perceived lack of respect from the organization, policy makers, and the general public (Ellett et al., 2007). Supervisors can establish a positive work environment through providing reinforcement of strong caseworker performance and accomplishments (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). According to Chenot et al. (2009), the initial three years of service in the field is the most pivotal time for longevity decisions with supervisory support having the strongest effect on staying in both the agency and the field.

Collins-Camargo and Royse (2010) found that “As the effectiveness of supervision increases, the organizational culture is significantly more characterized by evidence-based practice” (p. 15). Basing social welfare practices on evidence ultimately leads to better outcomes for children and families. Unfortunately, despite a recognition of the importance of supervision in retention of child welfare workers (Chiller & Crisp, 2012; Collins-Camargo & Royse, 2010; Ellett et al., 2007), limited support for supervisors seems to be the norm (Bogo & Dill, 2008). Previous research has indicated that supervisory support may alleviate the effects of job stress, especially during periods of high personal stress (Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Antle 2009; Kickul & Posig, 2001), increasing employee retention rates. Landsman (2007) found that strong support from coworkers and supervisors can increase organizational commitment thereby increasing the likelihood of staying with the agency.

Mor Barak et al. (2006) found that one of the strongest direct predictors of intention to leave was exclusion from the organizational decision-making process while Renner, Porter, and Priester (2009) provided evidence that creating a work environment where front line workers' suggested innovations are valued and implemented increased retention. Importantly, promotion of evidence-based practice in an organization increases self-efficacy in child welfare workers (Gambrill, 2003), yet Bogo and Dill (2008) describe a situation where supervisors do not believe that they can generate or lead change efforts. They describe themselves as middle managers caught between the senior administrators and caseworkers with an "illusion of power" rather than agents of organizational change. This unfortunate state of affairs must be remedied.

Further, supervisors occupy a unique vantage point from which to examine the needs of the child welfare workforce. With their ability to explore the inner workings of both the organizational structures and individual employee perspectives, supervisors may be uniquely positioned to recommend effective changes to address workforce issues. Integrating supervisors' insight is both informative and helps to increase the agency's constructive culture, which significantly improves team member attitudes and service quality (Glisson & James, 2002).

### **Purpose of the Study**

In response to a pilot study where former child welfare caseworkers mentioned that they would have remained at the agency if they had a greater voice (Griffiths & Royse, 2017) the state's child welfare agency supported a statewide effort to collect employee feedback and inform efforts for systematic improvement. While this endeavor has already led to a number of important research findings (Griffiths et al., 2017; Griffiths, Royse, Piescher, & LaLiberte, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2018), the purpose of the current study is to utilize the statewide effort to address a major gap in the child welfare literature. Few investigations have explicitly ascertained the



recommendations of public child welfare supervisors for improving the retention of the child welfare workforce. Yet, child welfare supervisors have a unique vantage point into the perspectives of the child welfare workforce and the intricacies of the agency structure itself. Supervisors' understanding of the personal and organizational factors that play out in the workplace as well as their experiential wisdom to propose real-world strategies for implementation is a strength they bring to this issue. Recognizing these supervisors' critical role with respect to service provision, workforce development, and employee retention, this study explored supervisors' suggestions for improving the retention of child welfare caseworkers.

### **Methodology**

Approved by the university and agency Institutional Review Boards, and using a descriptive research design, the researchers collected feedback from the state's child welfare agency in 2016 as a means of providing employees with an opportunity to voice their concerns and satisfactions. An electronic survey including both open and closed-ended items was launched through Qualtrics. Encouraged to participate by a preliminary email from the new Commissioner of the agency, employee respondents were notified of the confidential and low risk nature of the study, and the research team's affiliation with local universities. A week later in a separate email, a lead agency administrator distributed through their listserv an email containing a cover letter and hyperlink to the electronic survey. Approximately two weeks later, a one-time reminder email was sent. A total of 877 employees in various agency capacities participated in this large study.

**Sample.** While employees working in a variety of capacities responded to the survey, the sample in this study was composed solely of public child welfare supervisors. These supervisors were stationed at local offices and were responsible for the direct supervision of child welfare

caseworkers who were tasked with investigating child maltreatment and providing ongoing services associated with dependency, neglect, and abuse. Of the possible 268 agency supervisors employed at the time of the survey, a total of 117 (43%) participated.

The sample of supervisors primarily identified as female (87.2%), and white (91.5%). A small proportion of supervisors identified as African-American (6.8%), biracial (0.9%), “other” (0.9%). They reported a mean age of 41.70 years (SD 7.91) and were experienced, having worked at the agency for an average of 15.51 years (SD 6.47). Over half of the supervisors (n=61) reported having an undergraduate degree in social work. Most supervisors reported having a graduate degree, with more than half of the supervisors (n=59) reporting they had an MSW and an additional 16 reporting they had a graduate degree in an “other” area. The majority of supervisors worked primarily in a rural area (74.1%), and had no prior child welfare experience before working at the agency (66.4%).

**Data analysis.** Data from one open-text item in the electronic survey for supervisors (“Provide any ideas you have that might help [the agency] retain employees in terms of benefits, training, workload, supervision, support, and recognition.”) was analyzed for the current study. A qualitative thematic content analysis ensued, following the guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2006) and using MaxQDA12Plus qualitative data analysis software for coding participant responses. Themes were created inductively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), and the validity of the first author’s initial coding was affirmed by co-authors through investigator triangulation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014).

## **Results**

Ninety-four percent (n=110) of the 117 child welfare supervisors participating in the study responded to the open-ended text item. A total of 405 comments were extracted and coded;

three broad themes emerged: *Infrastructure*, *Organizational Climate*, and *Organizational Culture*. Subthemes under each major theme also emerged during the coding process (See Table 1).

**Infrastructure.** *Infrastructure* included specific recommendations directly relating to needed improvements in policies, procedures, and other structures that impact organizational day-to-day functioning. In this theme – the largest theme to emerge – supervisors identified issues within the current infrastructure that served as barriers to retaining child welfare caseworkers. A total of 205 comments comprised this category and eight subthemes became apparent as supervisors described areas where the agency might be able to improve workforce stability and assist in retention.

Three subthemes were the focus of the largest number of comments by supervisors. Supervisors first and foremost identified *the necessity for improving salary and benefits*. Many supervisor responses simply noted a need for a “pay increase” or a “salary that is competitive.” Other responses addressed the current retirement system and advocated for hazardous duty pay “due to the dangerous situations workers go into every day.” Supervisors also identified *unmanageable caseloads* as hindering retention, requesting “equitable and reasonable caseloads” and asserting that the “workload and expectations are unrealistic.” One supervisor questioned, “How many years can you continue to hear that you need to do more with less?” Supervisors pled for *additional staffing*, identifying the need to “increase worker numbers” as well as the need to hire “additional support staff (aides and secretaries)” to manage daily responsibilities and establish workforce stability.

The remaining subthemes – while less often endorsed – also provided strong suggestions for infrastructure improvement. Supervisors noted the *limited opportunity for worker*

*advancement* as a barrier to workforce stability. One supervisor stated that “there needs to be a career ladder of some sort to maintain seasoned staff” and another supervisor suggested that the agency needs to “implement ways in which workers can be promoted throughout their careers.” With their unique and important perspective, supervisors suggested a need for *improvements in agency hiring processes* themselves. With respect to the hiring process, supervisors made a number of substantial comments addressing the slowness of the hiring process by requesting that the agency “make the hiring process quicker” and have “positions being filled timely.” One supervisor stated, “it takes several months to have new employees ready to work and each time other staff have to take up the slack and then try to recover from that, again.” One other supervisor shared that “The entire hiring process is cumbersome and doesn't effectively choose appropriate staff. The interview committees’ asking the same rote questions of everyone is not working. The inability of the hiring panel to direct the area in which a recommended candidate works is not working. The long long long process that personnel goes through to approve new hires is not working.”

In addition to challenges associated with hiring and promotion, supervisors shared that *improvements to paperwork and policy* would assist in child welfare caseworker retention. Supervisors stated that “workers are overwhelmed by the paperwork,” and requested administrators to “stop giving workers new hoops to jump through in the completion of their duties.” One supervisor mentioned “insanely useless SOP [Standards of Practice] requirements” as a barrier and another called for action wanting someone to look “at the system and trying to combine things as some things are so repetitive.” Supervisors were also concerned that the agency was top heavy, suggesting *structural realignment*, and reporting the need for “less middle management” (persons in the agency hierarchy above them); supervisors also suggested that “we

are hiring too many specialists and not enough frontline staff.” Finally, *upgrading technology* was identified by supervisors as a barrier to child welfare caseworker retention. Supervisors complained “our computer system is too slow it takes up hours and hours of worker's time that they could be devoting to actually helping their clients.” Also, they wanted “better technology so we are not constantly trying to find information in paper files” and to “provide all workers with the tools to do their jobs such as laptops.”

**Climate.** Glisson and James (2002) have defined organizational climate as an aggregate, shared perception of the impact of work environment on the well-being of the employees in a work unit. While individuals may each have their own perceptions, the aggregate is termed “organizational climate.” Climate is the property of the individual. An example of a climate factor is recognition. With positive recognition comes a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of being that valued that will increase well-being. Climate was the second largest theme (n=115) that emerged and contained seven subthemes. *Financial recognition* was largely focused on the need to reward veteran workers for their commitment and service to the agency; while the core element of this subtheme revolves around salary, it goes over and above salary recommendations described previously, as differences in pay within the agency had a direct impact on organizational climate. At the time of the survey, newly hired workers were the recipients of a recent salary increase but those already in the agency’s workforce had not had a salary increase in a number of years. Supervisors identified the need for raises for supervisors and “more pay across the board for not just entry level employees.” One spoke of the need to “give pay increases to the seasoned staff, not just new workers” and another identified that “the lack of raises has been demoralizing for [our] staff, and while changing the entry pay is good there still

needs to be a decent separation for veteran workers and supervisors.” In summary, a salient comment provided depth to this circumstance, as a respondent stated:

“I think that it is great to be able to increase starting pay for new hires but that is where the [agency] stops trying. There is a major problem when those employees that have been here 10-20 years are making the same or less than new workers... however they are the ones that have stayed and been the dependable staff. They are the ones training new staff and taking care of cases when others leave. This job is not for everyone and paying new staff is not the only problem. If the state took better care of their seasoned workers, then the new workers would have a reason to stay. They would want what the seasoned workers want. They would see the job satisfaction that the seasoned workers have.”

*Improving the current training and education system* was another subtheme that emerged as a set of ideas affecting the work environment. Supervisors had a number of suggestions for better preparing those hired. They made comments such as “the material used to train must be REAL!” and “hands on.” One supervisor stated that “we need to be trained for changes before the changes occur.” Another supervisor identified a perception of need, requesting that a “safety/self-defense training” would help with employee retention.

Supervisors offered ideas for improving the organizational climate through the use of *incentives for personal recognition*. They listed a number of suggestions that were proactive and cost-effective such as: recognition of those completing an MSW or obtaining their license, small recognition gifts or certificates for meritorious work, earning points for a “rewards program” that could incentivize special efforts with tickets to a movie or theme park, a gym membership, or a day off. Supervisors also had suggestions for improving the organizational climate through

changes to the *current evaluation system of employees*. They described this system as problematic and affecting the organizational climate of the agency. Veteran supervisors described a need for “less punitive measures when workload is unmanageable as this is a result of lack of staff.” Some recommended “weighted caseloads,” and to also “change the evaluation system to quit evaluating on quantity and measure on quality.”

Another subtheme contained *ideas for flexible scheduling* that could positively improve the effect of the agency’s work on its workers. Supervisors recommended “flex schedules,” creating “another shift to assist with on-call,” the “option to work from home,” as well as providing opportunities to “allow some workers to work 2nd shift a couple days a week since all our families don't have an 8 am to 4:30 pm life.”

The last two subthemes under organizational climate suggested that retention could be improved through more individual level assistance. *Mentorship for child welfare caseworkers* was composed of recommendations such as “the current population of employees need to be mentored by seasoned staff or staff who are identified as highly competent and {who} role model effective ethical social work practices.” Lastly, supervisors described the *necessity for practicing self-care* and having mental health support. While some were very explicit and mentioned that the agency needs to “provide opportunities for self-care,” others provided suggestions like giving “a few hours of leave a week to exercise.”

**Culture.** Organizational culture refers to “the normative beliefs and shared behavioral expectations in an organizational unit” (Glisson & James, 2002, p.770) and is considered the property of the local work unit. Values and assumptions are part of the hidden inner layer of a culture, while the “shared behavioral expectations and norms are the outer, conscious layer” (Glisson & James, 2002, p. 770). Organizational culture includes high levels of peer

support/team building. In a strongly positive organizational culture, members of the organization offer support and positive recognition for peers and employees and these practices come to represent the values of the organization and expectations of employees.

The final theme of organizational culture (n=85) emerged with five subthemes. The largest category of comments emphasized the necessity for the agency to do more to *recognize and show appreciation* to its employees. Supervisors stated the need for “serious appreciation” and for employees to “feel positive feedback.” However, more substantial feedback was given by a supervisor who said that “the only recognition that employees normally receive is when they are behind or have done something wrong. The praise for any type of good work is also almost non-existent.” Capturing the notion of positive feedback, one supervisor asserted that “workers should be made to feel valued rather than simply a tool to constantly push out work.”

The second largest subtheme centered on the *lack of administrative support*. Supervisors consistently identified the “lack of support they receive from upper management” and the need for “a leadership team that is not toxic but leads by example.” This subtheme was fortified by a notable quote by a supervisor who proclaimed that “support needs to trickle down from the top, and the [agency] does not feel like it is a supportive place to work.”

Another subtheme associated with improving the agency’s organizational culture centered on the more intangible *perception of being valued by being asked for their feedback*. Supervisors suggested that if caseworkers had a greater voice, employees would feel more valued and more likely to remain. Suggestions included the need to “ask staff for feedback” and to “allow us to have a voice when we are wrongly targeted.” Also, supervisors believed that it would help worker retention if the agency would “allow for the frontline workers to have input into SOP [Standards of Practice]” and having “management that will listen to suggestions.”



Lastly, *interpersonal dynamics* were mentioned as needing improvement, as supervisors spoke of unhealthy interaction and a “culture of mistrust” that they believed persisted. To combat these challenges, three supervisors suggested team-building strategies. Approaches requested that the agency “provide time for unit team building” and to “bring back employee retreats.”

## **Discussion**

Child welfare caseworker attrition is a significant issue that negatively impacts the lives of clients, the larger community, and the child welfare system – including the caseworkers themselves. In order to truly understand the problem and implement meaningful solutions, all of the voices of those closest to the problem need to be fully considered. While the majority of research investigating factors that influence caseworker turnover has historically focused on the perceptions of the caseworkers themselves, the present study is distinct in that it explores another important piece of the puzzle – suggestions for addressing caseworker attrition through the lens of the child welfare supervisor.

Child welfare supervisors are strategically nested between caseworkers and the bureaucratic agency structure. With some having likely been child welfare caseworkers themselves, supervisors are in a position to identify stressors of the job as well as the macro level processes that affect the organizational milieu. This “middle management” perspective is especially valuable as it utilizes supervisors’ holistic understanding of the personal and organizational factors in the workplace as well as their experiential wisdom to propose real-world strategies for implementation. While research has examined different aspects associated with the important role of child welfare supervision (Lietz & Julien Chinn, 2017; Radey & Stanley, 2018; McCrae et al., 2015), few studies have explicitly focused on collecting supervisor suggestions for improving workforce retention (Ellet et al., 2007; Johnco et al., 2014). Findings

from the current study are unique in that they capture recent ideas for improving caseworker retention from a large statewide sample of child welfare supervisors. Additionally, the independent and anonymous framework employed by the researchers resulted in many detailed and practical tips that can immediately provide value for agency consideration.

Overall, supervisors' understanding of factors that influence turnover observed in this study mirror and reinforce those of previous research on caseworker intent to remain employed and intent to turn over. However, recent research has shown that not all factors identified have similar sized effects on caseworker intentions to remain employed or turn over. In fact, a recent meta-analysis of research found that predictors related to caseworkers' attitudes and perceptions were among the strongest predictors of caseworker turnover intention (Kim & Kao, 2014). This meta-analysis also revealed that stress-related predictors had medium to high influence on turnover intention, and perceptions of fairness and policy also had a relatively high effect on turnover intention. Supervisors in the current study honed in on these high-influence factors as they described needs with respect to infrastructure, organizational climate, and organizational culture.

Findings from the current study revealed that supervisors identify issues related to agency infrastructure as a significant barrier in retaining workers. Specifically, supervisors recommended addressing pay inequalities affecting veteran workers, reducing high caseloads, addressing the need for more staff, reducing cumbersome paperwork, and implementing better technology and data management systems to improve child welfare caseworker retention. Supervisors also suggested improving and expediting the hiring process, and felt that the agency was top-heavy. They consistently described these issues as contributing to caseworker overwhelm and, though not explicitly stated, a stressful working environment. The infrastructure

issues identified by supervisors are consistent with those identified by former caseworkers who left their positions, current caseworkers with various lengths of tenure in the field, and other supervisors (Ellett et al., 2007; Griffiths & Royse, 2017; Johnco et al., 2014; Kim & Kao, 2014; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). These findings also highlight the importance of understanding the interactional nature of challenging work demands and low compensation on both organizational issues and stress, which, in turn influence retention (Johnco et al., 2014; Wilke et al., 2018).

Supervisors also provided a number of recommendations for improving the organizational climate of the agency as a way to increase caseworker retention. Organizational climate refers to individuals' shared perception of the work environment and its impact on well-being (Glisson & James, 2002). The research evidence on the importance of a positive organizational climate on workforce retention is robust (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Kim & Kao, 2014; McFadden et al., 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009; Shim, 2010), and organizational climate is theorized to have direct and indirect effects on retention and turnover (Wilke et al., 2018). Supervisors in the current study recommended a number of ways to enhance the organizational climate within their agencies including improving training and education for caseworkers, offering incentives for excellent work, developing and implementing an improved evaluation system and a mentorship program, offering flexible scheduling options, and supporting self-care within the agency. They noted these factors as integral to creating an organizational climate where workers feel more valued and competent, thus reducing their likelihood of leaving when times are challenging and resources are limited.

Finally, supervisors identified the importance of building an organizational culture predicated on mutual respect within the agency. This type of organizational culture encompasses

not only the normative beliefs and shared behavioral expectations in an organizational unit but also the unit's underlying values and assumptions (Glisson & James, 2002). Organizational culture has been associated with worker well-being and intent to remain employed and turn over (Kim & Kao, 2018; Lee et al., 2010; Shim, 2010; Tham, 2007). Supervisors in the current study recommended a number of ways to improve the organizational culture of their agencies, including providing recognition and appreciation for caseworkers, greater leadership and support by agency management, inviting the feedback and input of caseworkers, improving the interpersonal dynamics of the unit, and implementing team building activities. Organizational culture is theorized to have both direct and indirect effects on retention and turnover (Wilke et al., 2018). Thus, providing caseworkers with a voice and facilitating real administrative and supervisory support may combat feelings of marginalization and help eradicate perceptions of a "culture of mistrust" where unhealthy interactions become the norm rather than the exception.

Given their daily interactions with caseworkers (and for some, the experience of being a caseworker themselves), it isn't surprising that the recommendations supervisors provided for retaining child welfare caseworkers mirrored those found in previous research where caseworkers provided their own insights on caseworker retention and turnover. What is most significant is that the recommendations provided by supervisors focused on the issues most critical to caseworker retention (Kim & Kao, 2018). Some of the recommendations, especially those related to improvements in infrastructure (e.g., hiring more staff), are more difficult to implement given child welfare budgetary constraints. For some agencies, reallocation of funds may create opportunities to address these issues. In other agencies or at other points in time, this may not be fiscally possible. However, significant improvements to the organizational climate and culture can be made even in agencies experiencing financial hardship. Creating a more

favorable work environment for caseworkers may come at little to no cost to child welfare agencies. For example, addressing organizational culture by offering greater support from management and rewards/acknowledgement for good work are among the most salient organizational factors in decreasing workers' intent to leave (Kim & Kao, 2018; Shim, 2010; Tham, 2007).

It is important to note that while supervisors made a number of recommendations for improving retention within their agencies, they did not describe themselves as being in the role of a change agent within these recommendations – akin to research by Bogo and Dill (2008). Yet, supervisors are in the unique position of having daily interactions with caseworkers and frequent interactions with more senior management. Thus, they play a key role in informing and implementing changes within the agency. Some of the recommendations that supervisors made could be implemented directly by the supervisors themselves. For example, supervisors could make intentional efforts to provide greater recognition and appreciation for caseworkers, invite the feedback and input of caseworkers, work towards improving the interpersonal dynamics of the unit, and/or implement team building activities as part of their supervisory role. These activities would serve to improve the organizational culture of the supervisor's unit at no financial cost to the agency. Alternatively, supervisors could embark on a more comprehensive approach, such as implementing coaching or appreciative inquiry given the support and resources of senior management.

Individuals working in a managerial capacity within child welfare agencies should take particular note of the findings of this study. It is clear that supervisors not only have a deep understanding of the needs of caseworkers but also that they focus on the issues most strongly associated with retention and turnover. Child welfare managers and administrators have access to

this wealth of information within their own agencies and can use the expertise of supervisors to inform agency-level efforts that directly combat caseworker turnover.

### **Study Limitations**

While this study afforded a unique opportunity to hear recommended strategies for improving employee retention by a sample of child welfare supervisors, inherent limitations must be considered. First, while the sample size of 117 child welfare supervisors in one state was sufficient in this exploratory study, it was not large nor geographically diverse. Further, the cross-sectional design of this study did not capture perceptions of worker attrition by child welfare supervisors over time. Finally, supervisor perceptions and recommendations were provided via an open-ended item in an on-line survey thus preventing further exploration within the study design.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided an account of the perceptions of child welfare supervisors—a segment of the workforce that has often been ignored – on factors that may reduce caseworker turnover. Their voices and experiential wisdom for addressing the problem of high caseworker turnover provide practical suggestions for improving the child welfare professionals' employment experiences and satisfaction within their agencies. In the end, those who will benefit the most from such efforts to understand and reduce worker attrition will be those whom child welfare caseworkers so diligently strive to serve: the clients themselves.

**The description of the findings of this study are solely those of the authors. The authors would like to relay great appreciation to the agency for their support and assistance in this study. Data from this study was collected immediately following a change in**

**administration, and the new leadership is using employee feedback to facilitate systematic change.**

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Table 1. *Thematic Content Analysis: Themes, Subthemes, and Number of Mentions (n=405)*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>n</b>
Infrastructure		205
	Improving Salary and Benefits	71
	Manageable Caseloads	59
	Additional Staffing	31
	Opportunity for Worker Advancement	14
	Improvements in Agency Hiring Processes	12
	Improvements to Paperwork and Policy	7
	Structural Realignment	7
	Upgrading Technology	4
Climate		115
	Financial Recognition	33
	Improving the Training and Education System	32
	Incentives for Personal Recognition	23
	Evaluation System of Employees	9
	Ideas for Flexible Scheduling	8
	Mentorship for Child Welfare Caseworkers	5
	Necessity for Practicing Self-Care	5
Culture		85
	Recognize and Show Appreciation	36
	Administrative Support	31
	Being Valued	9
	Interpersonal Dynamics	6
	Team Building	3