

Making the Career Transition from Child Welfare to Adult and Aging Services: A Teaching Case

KRISTEN GUSTAVSON, MIKE MCCONNELL,
AND RANDY MORRIS

Introduction

This teaching case emerged from conversations among Adult & Aging Services Directors who participate in the Northern California Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) when it was noted that several of the members had built their careers in Child Welfare before transitioning to Adult & Aging Services. This teaching case identifies some of the themes emerging from those mid-to-late career executives who made the transition from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging Services. It takes into account the workforce challenges that are prevalent in the field of aging (Hussein & Manthorpe, 2005; Kovner, Mezey, & Harrington, 2002; Lee, Dooley, Ory, & Sumaya, 2013; Lin, Lin, & Zhang, 2015) and is based upon in-depth interviews with six individuals (see Note 1). Several elements emerged from the interviews with these county executives who drew upon 20+ years of human services experience. The elements are organized into the following overarching themes: 1) *Facilitated Transitions* (Being Mentored or Encouraged; Macro Practice Comfort Zone; and Transferrable Social Work Skills; 2) *Valuing the Professional Challenge* (Acquiring New Subject Matter Expertise; Being an Outsider & Upgrader; Advocacy & Empowerment; and Funding Constraints in Adult & Aging Services), and 3) *Retrospective Reflections* (Less Stressful Work Environment and No Regrets).

FACILITATED TRANSITIONS

As with many transitions, these Directors of Adult & Aging Services who moved over from Child Welfare were assisted in that career change in several important ways. First, all of those interviewed made the career-altering choice after listening to the advice and experience of others.

Many reported having mentors who encouraged them and believed the move to Adult & Aging Services was good for them. In a similar vein, others reported the encouragement of colleagues as part of the reason they felt confident to make the move. Most of the participants reported having a mentor and emphasized the importance of that mentor relationship in their career decision-making. As Jasmine, Erik and Lenny noted below, they were being mentored and encouraged:

JASMINE: “She [my mentor] saw skills in me that I didn’t see in myself at the time. She said, “you have [this] background,” and I said, “no I don’t.” She said, “I’ve done this, and I know you can do it.” She gave me the permission to not have to be the [content] expert – knowing that when I needed [something specific], someone on the staff could do it. She helped me see the position as more about developing teams, new deliverables, bring leadership to the department, etc. I put her off for over a month, but she gave me a deadline and I didn’t want to disappoint her – it was a leap of faith.”

ERIK: “[I] wasn’t aware of the job opening – a friend approached me, who was also recently promoted to a director approached me and asked, “Have you thought about this?”. “No not me!” My mentor had encouraged me to the Division Director position in CW as they were planning to retire

Kristen Gustavson, LCSW, PhD, Assistant Professor, Social Work, California State University East Bay;

Mike McConnell, JD, Division Director, Adult Services, County of Santa Cruz, Human Services Department;

Randy Morris, MSW, Assistant Agency Director, Adult & Aging Services Department, Alameda County Social Services Agency

1. All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality of study subjects

in 4-5 years. I thought I was perfectly content in my position. But then there weren't people in Adult & Aging who were applying for the position. There wasn't someone really in the running, so with all of those things it somewhat became a calling . . . I knew I could learn the programs and had enough human services experience for the rest of it."

LENNY: "A couple people I'd worked with had gone over to Adults & Aging, so I thought it would be a good move for me . . . they said it was a good work environment with good leadership."

Even with careers that ranged from 19 to 25 years in Child Welfare among all the participants, they did not view themselves as primarily Child Welfare Workers but rather as macro practice social workers focused on systems change and improvement. This broader perspective on their career identity helped them perceive the move from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging as being in line with their social work skills, knowledge and expertise and provided them with the confidence needed to make such a career-shifting move. They generally considered themselves to be practitioners who wanted to make an impact, or as advocates or community engagers. Some participants talked about their work and expertise in terms of administrative, macro or systems social work. Marty, Laura, and Jasmine provide examples below of this broader social work identity:

MARTY: "When I started, I thought I'd be a direct social services worker, but over time I realized I am more of a systems/macro social worker."

LAURA: "I never connected as a Child Welfare worker (not my identity) – but I found ways for my work to be meaningful by seeking change/impact . . . It wasn't what drove me [to move] there, but I feel passionate about older adults. Land of haves & have-nots. So much money to serve women & children. It's inequitable in Adult & Aging just to get a little piece of the pie. So older adults weren't represented – they're the underdog & that fires me up. I'm always going to take that on. Children's always got so much attention – more appealing – but I saw such a need in Adult & Aging Services."

JASMINE: "Mind you, my passion is really around this kind of macro, systems social work. Other's perceive my passion as Child Welfare given the

duration I spent in that area. I went into my MSW knowing I was really a macro social worker at heart. I knew I'd enjoy community organizing . . . I do love Children's, but more than anything I just love doing social work. "

The last element in the theme on facilitated transitions includes the transferability of social work skills. From the perspective of those interviewed, much of the social work skills, knowledge and expertise that they acquired in Child Welfare were fully transferrable to Adult & Aging. This understanding of their social work skills and knowledge enabled them to move from one service arena with self-assurance even after a long career in Child Welfare. Instead, of viewing their careers as serving a particular population or as a subject-matter expert, they perceive themselves as capable, with their social work background, of working in many different service domains. Marty, Erik, Jasmine, and Jessica illustrate below their experience with the transferability of social work knowledge, skills and expertise.

MARTY: "Interagency work has been very translatable. Starting with a non-mandated former foster youth advisory board. Then transferring to trying to get voices of older adults. Very similar work. Politics of that process was similar and engaging consumer voice is similar."

ERIK: "As a result of those learnings in child welfare, (which were really in their infancy in Child Welfare as well) we are making a much more purposeful effort to include older adults in the decisions we make . . . Supervisory and management skills and learnings also transfer . . . How supervision works is very similar across divisions/units and the basic skill-building efforts are not unique. The structures of the organizations have also all been the same, pretty much. "

JASMINE: "Some of what I specifically brought from children's services is that legality/oversight lens . . . It's been important to have adult services social workers be more mindful of clear policies and procedures . . . Those are the lessons learned from children's. Mind you that is a huge shift here in Adult Services, because that hasn't been their reality. It's bringing more checks and balances, which we are currently exploring how to implement right now . . . So, while there are learnings, I also knew it wasn't apples to apples. So, some of

what I brought from children's is actually my general social work knowledge on empathy, engagement, understanding strengths and challenges, listening, etc."

JESSICA: "I had a lot of managerial experience but none in Adult & Aging Services. In child welfare, I did admin work – contracts, fiscal, management. A lot of that work was transferable – beyond operations experience. From social worker to supervisor to social work manager. It all is useful to my current work."

VALUING THE PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE

The second major theme includes *Valuing the Professional Challenge* in which the interviewees commented on their growth and learner mindset. None of them made the move from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging with the idea that the work would be easier and they could then take it easy in their mid-to-late career. On the contrary, they embraced and valued the professional challenges "as welcome opportunities" with regard to the following four elements: acquiring new subject matter expertise; being an outsider & upgrader; advocacy & empowerment; and dealing with funding constraints in Adult & Aging Services

As part of valuing a professional challenge, they were challenged to *Acquire New Subject Matter Expertise*, especially since they did not view their human services careers in terms of specific service populations. And yet, viewing one's career broadly does not lessen the task of learning an entirely new subject matter area when moving from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging Service. These executives welcomed that learning opportunity, and expressed considerable trust in their abilities to learn the context and content of their new practice arena in Adult & Aging services. In other words, these executives are life-long learners who seize opportunities and enjoy challenges as well as pursue promotions or new work assignments. For example, one of the interviewees actually asked the county for a job assignment where she was most needed. For others, seizing opportunities took on the pursuit of advanced degrees (one participant a PhD, one an MBA, for instance). The following reflections by Jasmine, Erik and Lenny provide illustrations of this theme:

JASMINE: "Obviously, the adult population is unique and engaging with these clients is different and something I have needed to learn and continue to learn. But moving into contracts and procurement taught me the importance of my

leadership and managerial skills, over and above the subject matter expertise. I knew I could learn the content."

ERIK: "I have a high tolerance for change for one thing. There's two aspects – I'm not a career climber. I'm not good at setting the next goal in terms of career advancement, purely. I've always been content where I am and just learning what I can. But then when it comes to learning something new, I have the energy for it. I have a comfort/discomfort relationship with that. Sometimes being the least knowledgeable challenges one's comfort and confidence, but then there are only so many opportunities for learning if you remain in that posture. Gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation is the driver to not becoming stale to be able to continue to meet the needs of the community. Intentional curiosity – not career mobility driven. Two years ago I would've said there was no way I'd change divisions, and yet here I am."

LENNY: "It wasn't a difficult transition for me – no more of a learning curve than when I came into Children's Services all those years ago with a law degree."

The second element of valuing the professional challenge is *Being an Outsider & Upgrader*. All of the respondents reported that their Child Welfare experience gave them the "outsider" knowledge and vision to see the needs in Adult & Aging Services. They were not viewed by Adult and Aging staff as outsiders because they brought with them their extensive departmental experiences related to human resources as well as contracts and procurement that tended not to be the experiences of those in the existing ranks of Adult & Aging Services staff. In several counties, more than half of their management staff in Adult & Aging Services had transferred from Child Welfare despite the fact that there are a variety of opportunities for supervisor, lower, middle and upper management opportunities across myriad Child Welfare programs. In contrast, one of the appeals of working in the smaller division of Adult & Aging services is that the organizational hierarchy is "flatter" with fewer opportunities for advancement. Most of the county Child Welfare divisions have more than double the size of the staff in the Adult & Aging Services divisions. This Outsider perspective is reflected in the following examples provided by Laura and Erik:

LAURA: “I don’t think I could’ve done the leadership that I’ve done without the Child Welfare experience. It was all part of it. Everyone should have good bosses and bad bosses. I had more opportunities to grow leadership & management skills in Child Welfare. Adult & Aging is flatter as an organization, so it’s harder to grow the same opportunities for advancement.”

ERIK: “[I had] multiple roles in Child Welfare—each one had difficulties and obstacles and challenges. That range gives you confidence to go into a whole new agency. Any one of the supervisory or management roles I had presented different types of challenges and opportunities to lead people through different obstacles. Having the range of those has certainly given me some confidence to experience any manner of that in a different agency.”

This *Outsider* perspective is connected to the notion of being an *Upgrader*. Specifically, these social work county executives shared the view that Adult & Aging was really behind the practices found in Child Welfare (like “going back in time”, “stepping into a time machine, “being in a time warp”). There was a shared view among the interviewees that the assessment, tracking, data management and systems within Adult & Aging Services were quite far behind that of Child Welfare. For example, the interviewees reported that Adult & Aging Services did not have a regular training/continuing education culture (like the extensive Title IVE national/state training funding in Child Welfare) and did not use data effectively, especially lacking robust data tracking or developing an understanding of program or client outcomes. They did not have systems like Quality Assurance and other program infrastructure support. Their *Outsider* status gave them the perspective to see these contrasts in ways that those within Adult & Aging were not able to notice. As a result, the interviewees saw themselves as systems upgraders. From their perspective, the Adult & Aging workers and managers in those programs had no idea of how to engage in systems improvement. In essence, the *Outsider’s* perspective was crucial for becoming an *Upgrader* to help the field of Adult & Aging Services move forward. The following quotes from Lenny and Laura illustrate how the *Outsiders* also became *Upgraders*:

LENNY: “Compared to Child Welfare, measuring outcomes was primitive or non-existent – I was

aware of this from my work in HR, so I knew this going in. Adult & Aging Services stood out as not very forward-focused, lacking consistency or any real standards.”

LAURA: “You can’t undo what you know or your experience, so it made it hard to step back in time. I had to slowly make changes to help bring Adult & Aging into the 21st century.”

The third element of valuing the professional challenge involves *Advocacy & Empowerment*, especially getting their local communities to pay attention to aging issues. This lack of interest or attention on the current crises occurring in the growing unmet needs of the aging population creates and opportunity for advocacy. While the interviewees did not want the over-regulation and stress of child welfare system, they wanted more public attention given to their programs and clients (especially media attention to advocating for adult & older adult programs). They noted the public sentiment that adults are to blame for their problems, whereas children are victims. These perceptions create and highlight the advocacy challenge of finding ways to feature the important issues and growing unmet needs in Adult & Aging Services. The following quotes by Lenny, Jasmine and Marty provide examples of this *Advocacy and Empowerment* challenge:

LENNY: “Now, the challenge is getting the community to pay attention to aging issues. Current demand/need for services is high and exponential growth that’s coming. APS exceeded CPS cases for the first time ever in [our] County . . . When something happens to an older adult, it rarely makes the paper (as opposed to something that happens to a child), so getting leaders in county government to pay attention and getting folks in the community to pay attention to the growing needs of older adults is an ongoing challenge.”

JASMINE: “We have a different reaction when we see a neglected child in our society versus when we see a neglected older adult. We need to give adult services more of a voice. Elderly don’t have a voice in our society, and they also aren’t as respected as they are in some other societies. So, what are the benefits to providing services? To investing in adults? We can and need to tell the investment story to an evolving and aging society.”

MARTY: “in Child Welfare I’m used to fierce & sometimes ugly advocacy, because children are suffering – there’s a fire in the belly of the advocate dragon. In Aging & Adult Services, everyone is so polite & nice, seemingly a bi-product of societal ageism. I kept waiting for someone to yell. It was a very striking difference. People need to advocate or they don’t get their slice of the pie. Aging & Adult Services needs a little more fire in their belly. Vulnerable older adults are society’s most important population. If people knew the state of some vulnerable elders, they would be angry and advocate. But there will only be awareness if we raise it.”

The *Funding Constraints* are another challenge when moving from well-funded Child Welfare to under-funded Adult & Aging Services. This reality is particularly startling given that in most, if not all, California counties, Child Welfare client rolls are shrinking while the expanding growth of the aging population is putting a strain on the funding of existing programs. This pressure to “do more with less” was expressed by all the interviewees and captured below by Jasmine, Jessica, Laura, and Erik:

JASMINE: “In our county, there is a perception that Children’s feels like they are “better” – sort of a “we’re dealing with real life and death issues over here” kind of notion. Children’s feels like they’re more privileged, get more resources because of the severity of the cases at play. Children’s feels like they are one up – it’s the nature of the complexity of the cases, working with courts, removals, etc. There is a step-child feeling for adults, “Why does Children’s get everything?”

JESSICA: “Adult services are not well-funded. Period.”

LAURA: “Not having funding, not having the same platform, a bit of a learned helplessness with the staff. I had to wake them up and teach them to demand more instead of “this is just how it is.” . . .Lack of support, meant that Adult & Aging hadn’t been a priority . . .”

ERIK: “Budget and funding are a challenge. Understanding the budget complexities are an enormous challenge and the constraints to fight for what we need to run our programs feels more

emphasized in adult and aging. There is not a constant flow of money into Adult & Aging Services – rather, fighting for what we need to run our programs. Increasing population of older adults and diminishing population of children have not kept pace with demand in Adult & Aging services. As a result, it’s a challenge to maintain workable caseloads. If we cannot keep pace, then we’ll have to refine what we do and we may not be able to provide some services in the future. Needs will continue to go unknown and/or unmet, which is a challenge for our service.”

RETROSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS

The third major theme relates to retrospective reflections that include the elements of a *Less Stressful Work Environment* and *No Regrets* [when social work executives speak about 20+ years of county human services work]. Most experienced public sector social workers and human services executives would agree that Child Welfare is a challenging environment in which to work. While half of the interviewees were fairly content in Child Welfare, in retrospect most of them were not aware of how stressed they were until they transitioned to Adult and Aging Services. As a result, most of them were looking for a change from such a challenging environment relating to the incredible pressure of caring for vulnerable children and the intense oversight and government regulation of every aspect of that work. To be clear, they were not saying that Adult & Aging social work was easy as it had its own challenges. However, the work environment of Adult & Aging, as noted by Jessica, Laura, Erik, and Marty includes much more autonomous practice than that of Child Welfare:

JESSICA: “I don’t think anything could’ve been worse than the child welfare job that I had . . . My whole training was in children’s & I just needed a change. I don’t think there could be a harder job than child welfare and frankly, I wish I had come over sooner. In looking back now, I can’t even imagine going back there as an executive staff. I tell people I wish I’d come over sooner. I’ve been in Adults for a while now. Adults feels like a good place to be. “

LAURA: “I again found myself working for another boss who fostered an oppressive and hostile work environment and was feeling so miserable. I wondered at this point, is it the people drawn to Child

Welfare or is it the pressure and related politics that create such a negative environment.” While she initially blamed the misery on the “horrible boss” at the time she made the move, in retrospect, she now believes that she simply needed to get out of the toxic environment of Child Welfare. “I’ve often speculated about the regulations, public pressure, higher stakes of child welfare – that it creates this tense, volatile environment, and as a result, tense volatile workforce . . . which makes it a difficult place to work and feel like you’re making a difference.”

ERIK: “All those regulations in CW were “starting to eat me up.” It was a challenge. Took the social work out of social work in child welfare. Hard to work in child welfare. It became a saving community versus a family preserving community, and I got unable to train people in this model. This is something that Adult & Aging gets – freedom of choice – people don’t need saviors in us; don’t need us to fix everything for them. That’s been quite a nice change. We need to trust the social worker. I know that Child Welfare wasn’t intended to go down that road – the regulations were intended to provide safeguards, but it’s unfortunate about how far it’s gone.”

MARTY: “there is a spirit of collaboration in Adult & Aging Services, that is impressive . . . advocacy [in Child Welfare] seemed less collaborative and venomous at times. I was initially just so shocked by how nice people in Adult & Aging Services were. I really appreciate the collaboration – when I attend these meetings, I feel like I’m going to a family reunion. There’s something special in the field of Adult & Aging Services that lends to this culture of collaboration and kindness.”

The second element in theme of *Retrospective Reflections* is the shared perception of *No Regrets* in moving from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging Services. They noted their high level of satisfaction derived from working in Adult & Aging Services made it difficult for them to envision a return to Child Welfare, especially the opportunities to innovate and create best practices in a growing field of social work practice. In addition, they did not know any staff member who transferred from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging Services who wanted to go back to Child Welfare, as noted below by Jasmine, Laura and Erick:

JASMINE: “I don’t have any regrets – no I don’t think so. I love what I’m doing. This move hasn’t been a career stopper by any means; I’m still making an impact. I’m all about impact. I love learning, and I’m learning a lot. I’m excited to see how we can tell our story a bit differently here in our county.”

LAURA: “. I don’t know people who came over who regretted coming over, “this is so much better,” was the prevailing sentiment. It’s not easier work – it’s really hard – but the environment is so much better. It’s not a place to put your feet up, but you can thrive as a social worker here in ways I didn’t/couldn’t in child welfare.”

ERIK: “Envious of not growing up in Adult & Aging world. I lack context – even still. [I] did a lot of the work in Child Welfare, so I had that context there. But no – no regrets. It’s an amazing place to work. It’s an amazing organization to lead . . . Don’t think I’ll ever return to Child Welfare . . . I don’t want to, for myself. There’s too much to correct in Child Welfare. In my career at this time, this is the right place for me to be and it became hard to watch things we did on a daily basis in Child Welfare that just felt wrong after a while.”

Lessons Learned

As noted in the introduction to this teaching case, the three major themes are comprised of nine elements. Several lessons can be identified that can serve as a foundation for the use of discussion questions to explore many different facets of the case. First, broadly defined career expertise and the ability to view social work skills as transferrable provided these practitioners with the conviction to move across practice domains. This lesson is important for organizations to retain a skilled social services workforce in light of the reality of shifting demographics; namely, decreasing Child Welfare rolls and increasing aging population demands for Adult & Aging Services (Beck & Johnson, 2015; Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade, et al. 2014). Another lesson buried in the theme of Valuing the Professional Challenge related to the element of Outsider & Upgrader experience is the continuous need for human service organizations to promote innovation and promote leadership. One approach is to plan for opportunities to encourage staff to move across practice domains.

Given the workforce challenges that are prevalent in the field of aging, this teaching case captures some of the dynamics of the career trajectories of those boundary-crossers who made the transition from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging Services. One of the lessons learned is that Adult & Aging Services represents an organizational environment that includes exciting current and future social work challenges.

Discussion Questions

While there are certainly other lessons to be learned, the following discussion questions are structured to continue the exploration of career trajectories:

1. What, in your view, are the three most important lessons learned from this teaching case?
2. How would you identify a mentor or career facilitator related to current or future social work practice? How would you assess your own outreach help-seeking behaviors with respect to consulting with others?
3. Which characteristic do you think that human service organizations value more: the outsider perspective or the subject matter expert? What gives you this impression?
4. Is there anything in your family or personal background that might capture your interest in working with the aging population?
5. Why do you think that the vast majority of social work students want to work with children and families rather than aging adults?
6. How might this case change or influence your thinking about macro practice? On geriatric social work practice?
7. Do you believe county human service organizations are prepared to serve an increasingly aging society?

References

- Beck, L. & Johnson, H. (2015, August). Planning for California's growing senior population. Public Policy Institute of California. Retrieved online 8/15/2019: <https://www.ppic.org/publication/planning-for-californias-growing-senior-population/>
- Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade (2014). *New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research*. Anne C. Petersen, Joshua Joseph & Monica Feit, Eds. National Academies Press, Washington (DC).
- Hussein, S. & Manthorpe, J. (2005). An international review of the long-term care workforce. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 17(4), 75-94. https://doi.org/10.1300/J031v17n04_05
- Kovner, CT., Mezey, M. & Harrington, C. (2002). Who cares for older adults? Workforce implications of an aging society. *Health Affairs*, 21(5) 78-89. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.21.5.78>
- Lee, W-C., Dooley, KE, Ory, MG, & Sumaya, CV. (2013). Meeting the geriatric workforce shortage for long-term care: Opinions from the field. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 34(4), 354-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701960.2013.831348>
- Lin, VW., Lin, J., & Zhang, X. (2015). U.S. social worker workforce report card: Forecasting nationwide shortages. *Social Work*, 61(1), 7-15. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv047>

PROJECT METHODS

This teaching case emerged from a qualitative exploratory study involving in-depth semi-structured phone interviews with six participants (7 individuals were interviewed; one chose to withdraw from the study for personal reasons). Participants were mid-to-late career (20+ years county work experience) county social work executives from 6 of the 58 California counties. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. Interviews were recorded via Zoom™ and transcribed along with memos taken by the interviewer. All interviews were conducted by the lead author. While the interview process did not follow a specific sequence of questions in order to respect the interviewees' telling of their own story, a broadly-followed interview protocol was constructed to ensure most topics were ultimately covered. At the outset of each interview, the interviewer stated something like, "I am interested in the personal story of people who are currently working at a high level in Adult & Aging Services, but who came to those positions after a career in Child Welfare. I would like to hear your story and would appreciate any assistance from you to enable me to comprehend it as fully as possible." Participants were then asked broad, open-ended questions concerning their career trajectory, and any reasons for the move from Child Welfare to Adult & Aging Services. Participants were also asked to identify any skills or learnings they brought from Child Welfare that they found particularly relevant. The interview also involved an exploration of the differences between working in Child Welfare & Adult & Aging (culture, policy, funding, environment, etc.). Participants were

asked what made this career change possible and how their career has been affected by the move to Adult & Aging (for better or for worse). Participants were also asked to reflect on lessons derived from this career change. When necessary, the interviewer asked additional questions for clarification and elaboration. Following the completion of the interviews, the lead author created profiles (case stories) for analysis and description of career trajectory themes. Each

respective case profile was reviewed by the Adult & Aging Director for completeness and content. Transcripts and memos of the interviews were also shared with the respective study subject. The lead author developed the key themes in consultation with the BASSC staff director. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of California State University, East Bay for the protection of human subjects (protocol # CSUEB-IRB-2019-182-F).