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Child Welfare and the Courts: An Exploratory Study of the Relationship Between Two Complex Systems

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ABSTRACT. This exploratory study focuses on the relationships between professionals working in the juvenile dependency system, including judicial officers, attorneys, social workers, and court-appointed special advocates. It includes an examination of the quality of professional relationships, factors contributing to tensions, the consequences

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of difficult relationships, and strategies for improving relationships. It utilizes interviews and focus groups with professionals and focus groups with clients involved in the juvenile dependency system. The major findings address: (a) the nature and quality of professional relationships, (b) the structural and operational factors contributing to tension in those relationships, (c) client perceptions of professional relationships, and (d) respondent recommendations for improving professional relationships. This study is a contribution to the small but growing literature on the complexity of the interface between public child welfare services and the court system.

KEYWORDS. Child welfare, dependency courts, interorganizational relations

INTRODUCTION

The professional relationships among social workers, lawyers, and judicial officers in the juvenile dependency system are an issue of persistent concern for child welfare agencies and the courts. Evidence of difficult relationships among social work and legal professionals in the dependency system can be found in studies conducted over 30 years ago (Sloane, 1967; Fogelson, 1970). Though we did not find current empirical studies of professional relationships between lawyers and social workers for this literature review, a 1994 practice guide for child welfare workers attests to continuing difficulties (Katz, Spoonemoore et al., 1994).

Child welfare workers and legal professionals involved in the adjudication of dependency cases have been required to work together more often since the passage of the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act and 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act. Both of these acts increased judicial oversight of child welfare agencies, and added to the number of hearings necessary to settle a child dependency case. Following the passage of this legislation, the call for understanding and improving these professional relationships has grown.

In 2001, in response to a growing awareness of the difficulties that social workers and legal professionals were experiencing in promoting collaboration, the directors of ten Bay Area county social service agen-

cies sponsored an exploratory study of these professional relationships. The goal of the study was to identify the factors that contribute to professional conflict and to find ways to promote more effective collaboration between legal and social work professionals. The study used focus groups and interviews with judicial officers, attorneys, and social workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the prominence and persistence of tensions between child welfare practitioners and court-related personnel, there has been little empirical study of professional relationships in the juvenile dependency system. Schwartz, Weiner, and Enoch (1999) noted that "academic, practitioner, and policy debates have mainly focused on the relationship between juvenile delinquency and the juvenile court rather than the relationship between child welfare and the juvenile court" (p. 10). The following review of the literature frames the major issues for the study: (1) organizational culture, (2) professional status, (3) resource availability, (4) role definition, and (5) job stress.

Differences in Organizational Culture

Legal and child welfare professionals belong to distinct organizational cultures. The social service culture stresses a biopsychosocial perspective in which the individual is seen in his or her developmental, social, political, and cultural context. More specifically, the NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection require that social workers frame their interventions from a systems perspective (NASW, 1981). Legal culture, on the other hand, tends to emphasize the individual's rights; his or her acts may be seen as discrete and unrelated to the environment or relationships (Weinstein, 1997; Bailie, 1998; Galowitz, 1999; Hutchison and Charlesworth, 2000; Forgey, Moynihan et al., 2001). While the ABA Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases direct attorneys to consider a range of physical and emotional factors relevant to the child's best interest, and advise state administrative offices of the courts to provide training on issues such as family dynamics and available services and resources (http://www.abanet.org/family/reports/standards_abuseneglect.pdf), these guidelines run contrary to the

broader legal culture and attitudes which shape legal education and practice.

Some have argued that social work stresses acceptance of ambiguity and allows for professional discretion, while law stresses conformity to more concrete rules (Gaskins, 1981; Weinstein, 1997). Kearney and Taylor-Sellers (1997) state that the court system has a "masculine organizational culture," while Freedberg (1993) argues that social service organizations reflect a "feminine ethic of care." Finally, the social work profession values collaboration in problem solving, while the legal profession tends to emphasize the adversarial process as a means of protecting individual rights. Social workers are usually not trained in the adversarial process, and may not be comfortable with it (Weil, 1982; Herring, 1993). Conversely, some lawyers may be unaccustomed to sharing responsibilities and information as is common in social work (Galowitz, 1999; Forgey, Moynihan et al., 2001). The NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection require that social workers be knowledgeable about the legal profession and collaborate with other professionals. Although the ABA Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases state that the child's attorney "may seek the advice and consultation of others," they also emphasize that the child is a "separate individual with discrete and independent views" and that the attorney "should zealously advocate a position on behalf of the child." Agency attorneys, in contrast, are directed to cooperate and communicate with other professionals, treat all with professional courtesy, and work to resolve conflict (http://www.abanet.org/family/reports/standards_abuseneglect.pdf).

Studies conducted in the 1960s found that social workers perceive lawyers to be overly analytical, inflexible, and uncaring (Sloane, 1967; Fogelson, 1970), while lawyers perceive social workers to be too emotional and unprofessional (Sloane, 1967). In contrast, Smith (1970) found that lawyers and social workers held fewer negative attitudes about each other, but discovered that their perceptions were grounded in stereotypes. Social workers were described as having more concern for others, while lawyers were described as more assertive.

Professional Status

Lawyers and judicial officers who work with child dependency cases are frequently paid less and have lower professional status than those who work with adults (Edwards, 1992; Hardin, 1996; Weinstein, 1997; Bailie, 1998; Ross, 1998; Katner, 2000). Juvenile courts often employ

magistrates or commissioners rather than judges, which further emphasizes the lower status of juvenile courts in comparison with adult courts (Edwards, 1992; Edwards, 1994). The lower status accorded to both social work and legal professionals in the juvenile dependency system, combined with the difficulty of the work itself, can undermine their ability to work effectively together (Weinstein, 1997). Moreover, as the social work profession has historically been linked to serving people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ehrenreich, 1985), social workers are frequently not viewed as professionals, particularly by lawyers (Sloane, 1967; Smith, 1970).

Resource Availability

Chief Justice Ronald M. George (2001) notes that "juvenile and family courts often are considered of lower status than other court assignments. Calendars in those courts frequently are overcrowded and emotionally taxing, and the use of novice judges combined with the rapid turnover of those who do serve in those assignments often creates problems of lack of expertise and continuity" (p. 3). Similarly, for child welfare agencies, "primary prevention and placement prevention services remain inadequately funded, and the general child welfare caseloads remain inordinately high" (Pecora, 2000, p. 34). The child welfare system is overburdened, under-funded, and overwhelmed by rising caseloads.

Increasing caseloads, resulting in heavy court calendars, provides a significant challenge for juvenile courts to provide effective oversight of child welfare cases and requires that cases be moved through quickly (Boyer, 1995; Weinstein, 1997). However, agencies may not complete work with a family in a timely manner due to agency inefficiency or service shortages (Hardin, 1996). Courts may also respond to inadequate resources by engaging in what Neubauer (1996) terms "assembly-line justice." These factors may increase tensions between social workers and the courts. Rubin (1996) states that social workers complain about long waits for scheduled court hearings, lack of prompt calendaring of hearings, and judicial interference with case plans, while judges complain about poorly prepared testimony and inadequate reports.

Due, in part, to low professional status and pay, many child welfare professionals, judicial officers, and lawyers are inexperienced and not adequately trained for collaborative work in the child welfare court system (Edwards, 1992; Herring, 1993; Weinstein, 1997). This is compounded by short tenure for judges and attorneys, who are ro-

tated quickly into higher status assignments, resulting in a loss of experienced court personnel (Weinstein, 1997).

Definition of Roles

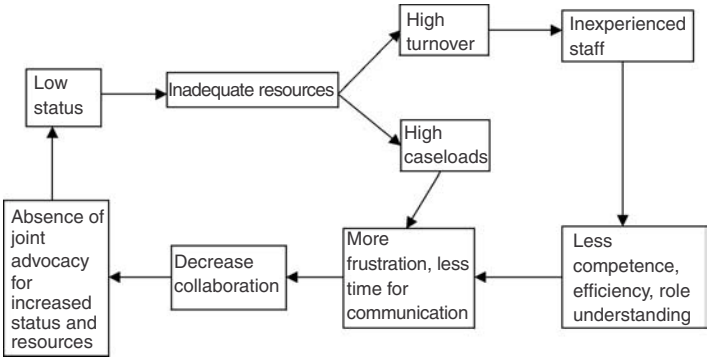
The boundaries of responsibilities between juvenile courts and child welfare agencies can be unclear, even though statutes may designate functions as either judicial or administrative (Boyer, 1995). Sources of confusion may include inadequate regulatory guidelines and the pressures associated with responding to ongoing legislative reform (Weinstein, 1997; Schwartz, Weiner et al., 1999). Increased role conflict becomes more likely when responsibilities and areas of expertise overlap among professionals working in an interdisciplinary environment (Davidson, 1999). The court's expanded monitoring role may create tension with child welfare agencies, particularly as the courts adjust to an increased workload and agencies attempt to meet mandates with insufficient resources (Boyer, 1995; Schene, 1998). Professional roles may be inherently ambiguous as well, with juvenile judges addressing social problems, and attorneys for agencies and clients balancing multiple interests (Herring, 1993; Lynch and Brawley, 1994). Several studies have found that role clarification and cross training could reduce overall conflict and improve the working relationships between legal and child welfare professionals (Smith, 1970; Weil, 1982; Russell, 1988; Herring, 1993; Johnson and Cahn, 1995).

Job Stressors

Finally, the emotionally challenging nature of juvenile dependency work may strain professional relationships. Edwards (1992) and Ross (1998) observe that professionals who work with child dependency cases may be at risk of burnout. Empirical research has examined factors contributing to job satisfaction and job burnout among child welfare workers (Horejsi, 1994; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1994; Landsman, 2001). Landsman (2001) concludes that there is a need for further research to examine job stressors among child welfare professionals; this should include the consequences of job stressors for the relationship between child welfare and legal professionals.

Based on the literature review, Figure 1 was developed to summarize the key factors contributing to strained professional relationships and maps out relationships between these factors. In order to describe the

FIGURE 1. Interrelationship of Factors Affecting Professional Relationships



flow of Figure 1, the following description begins in the upper-left corner and continues clockwise and the italicized text corresponds to the boxed items in Figure 1. The juvenile dependency system is a *low status* system in our society, unable to garner public support for *adequate resources*. As a result, agencies and courts are unable to hire sufficient personnel, causing *caseloads to rise* and working conditions to deteriorate. *Staff turnover* increases as lawyers and social workers seek less stressful employment. The constant influx of new personnel to replace those who have burned out can result in the affected organizations being staffed by *inexperienced professionals*. New staff members struggle to develop *competence, efficiency, and understanding* of the juvenile dependency system, including the roles of the various players. However, professionals interacting with newcomers are likely to experience *frustration*, and less likely to seek opportunities for *collaboration*. In the absence of collaboration, initiatives to educate the public and *advocate for increased resources* are unlikely to arise.

RESEARCH METHODS

The factors identified in the literature on the relationship among legal and social work professionals provided the foundation for the qualitative research questions posed in the interviews and focus groups with professionals. The following major questions guided the interviews and focus groups, along with multiple probes:

1. How would you define your own professional goals and values, and those of the other professionals engaged in juvenile dependency work?
2. How would you define your role and the roles of the other professionals engaged in juvenile dependency work?
3. How would you describe the character of your relationships with other professionals?
4. Are there features of the juvenile dependency system or court process or characteristics of clients that affect professional relationships?

The first question was aimed at exploring the professional cultures of the participants. The next question examined the issues of role definition and role confusion within and across groups. The third question sought to explore the quality of relationships, and the final question addressed structural or other system issues that might affect the quality of relationships. These questions sought to identify potential job stressors, as well as resource and status problems that might contribute to tension or conflict.

The research subjects were recruited and contacted in the spring of 2002 from the following five groups: (1) judges or commissioners, (2) social workers, (3) county counsel, (4) minor's attorneys, and (5) parent's attorneys. Consent materials explained confidentiality protections in detail. The ten-county region in which the study took place included a wide variety of counties (urban, suburban, rural) with differing child welfare and court system structures serving a racially and ethnically diverse population (Lopez, 2001).

The interviews were conducted by a team of four graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley. The interviewers were trained to use the open-ended interview and focus group instruments developed by the project coordinator. The interviewing team met frequently to discuss problems encountered in the interview process, and to ensure consistency in the data gathered. Extensive notes were taken during interviews and focus groups by the interviewers. These notes were then entered into a word processing program by administrative assistants and checked for accuracy by the original interviewers.

Sampling and Recruitment

Legal Professionals. In-depth interviews of approximately one hour were conducted with four legal professionals in each of the ten study

counties: a judge or commissioner, county counsel, attorney for minors, and attorney for parents. (There were two counties in which this sampling strategy was altered. In one county, although the judicial officer did not explicitly refuse to participate, we were unable to schedule an interview, and interpreted this as a refusal. In a second county, two judicial officers were interviewed to capture current and historical experiences.) A total of forty legal professionals were interviewed for the study.

Using a purposive strategy to identify informed respondents, dependency court clerks were asked to identify judicial officers and attorneys with substantial experience in juvenile dependency work in order to select the most knowledgeable individuals.

Conducting focus groups with legal professionals was considered to obtain a broad range of experiences and increase comparability of findings with those from the social worker focus groups described below; however, it was not feasible for a variety of reasons. First, unlike child welfare workers, most legal professionals do not work full-time in one child dependency office. This complicates planning a focus group with legal professionals as their schedules and work locations may vary from day to day. Second, in smaller counties, there may be only one or two children's attorneys, parent's attorneys, or county counselors, thus making a focus group impractical. Third, many legal professionals who present cases in child dependency court do not specialize in child dependency law. Several counties assign cases to a panel of private attorneys with a variety of specialties; some of these attorneys may have relatively little experience with dependency court. Interviewing purposively selected legal professionals ensured that only those with significant dependency law experience were included in the sample.

Social Workers. As with the sampling of legal professionals, we requested that our liaison in each county social service agency recruit individuals with a broad range of experiences related to the courts to participate in focus groups. Capturing a variety of experiences was critical to understanding child welfare workers' perceptions of professional collaboration because each member of a child welfare team carries cases at different stages of the dependency process (i.e., emergency response, adjudication, permanency planning). Due to time and resource constraints, focus groups were the best method for gathering information about child welfare workers' roles and professional relationships over the course of a case, and most focus groups included representatives from these various branches of child welfare services.

The size of the ten focus groups ranged from 4-15 social workers (total N = 98) who met at the child welfare office in each county. The focus groups lasted approximately an hour and a half.

Data Analysis

The data analysis utilized a grounded theory approach to content analysis of the interviews and focus group data (Merriam, 1998). The authors of this study focused on organizing the data by using two central themes: factors contributing to difficult relationships and the nature of these relationships as perceived by different groups. These and other themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups conducted by the members of the research team. Each interviewer tracked these themes for a group of interviews (for example, one interviewer analyzed interviews involving children's attorneys while another focused on judicial officers) and then shared results with the rest of the project team. During analysis meetings, the team utilized member checks, triangulation, and peer examination to ensure that assertions were supported by the data (Merriam, 1998). The project coordinator completed the final analysis, checking the work of the entire team for accuracy and completeness. The data related to the recommendations made by respondents were analyzed in collaboration with county child welfare directors, in order to assess the relationship of the recommendations to current operations and pending legislative reforms.

Limitations

It is important to point out an important limitation of this study relating to generalizability and potential bias. First, as a result of the non-random sampling strategy, these findings do not represent the experiences or perceptions of all professionals in the systems studied. However, by conducting the study in multiple counties, we believe we were able to capture a wide range of perceptions, and identify themes that are common in a range of settings. Second, in order to generalize from the findings in this study, it would be important in the future to test the representativeness of the study findings with a larger, random sample of study respondents. Third, while multiple strategies were utilized to insure internal validity of the data collection and analysis, inconsistencies between interviewers' note taking and analysis strategies may have influenced the findings.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The findings from this exploratory study confirmed that the five factors identified in the literature review contribute to the following difficulties in collaboration between social workers and legal professionals: (1) organizational culture, (2) professional status, (3) resource availability, (4) role definition, and (5) job stress.

Organizational Culture

Most respondents confirmed the significant differences between the legal and social work cultures. A judicial officer stated that the traditional role of a judge is to take the information presented and make a decision. However, she takes a more active role by encouraging people to work together and "buy into" the process. One social worker stated that legal professionals do not understand the mindset of social workers. The judge's efforts to nurture a respectful courtroom culture was seen by the majority of respondents as important for fostering good relationships.

Professional Status

Most respondents commented on the low status of dependency work within their professions of law and social work. Many cited this perception as a reason for inadequate resources and the perception of lower competence of professionals in the system as compared to those working in other fields. A parent's attorney stated that there is a tendency to put inexperienced attorneys in juvenile court because it is "Kiddy Court" and not taken that seriously. Additionally, social workers reported that they hold the lowest professional status in the juvenile dependency system (describing themselves as "peons in the courtroom").

Resource Availability

Both human resources and material resources were identified as inadequate by all participants. The high turnover of child welfare and court personnel has led to the increased involvement of inexperienced professionals as well as an increase in the amount of disruption of professional relationships. One attorney for minors observed that the turnover at the child welfare agency is so high that it is difficult for new staff to receive sufficient court-related training. Another argued that juvenile

courts deserve well-trained, compassionate judges who can stay for more than two years. However, turnover can also remove difficult personalities. For example, a social worker complained about the negative atmosphere created by a group of judicial officers, but felt there was no way out until this group moves on.

The inadequacy of material resources was frequently identified as a factor that contributed to the tensions in professional relationships–namely, low pay, unmanageable caseloads, and insufficient tools. As one judicial officer phrased it, this job is like "people with teaspoons trying to empty the ocean and then fighting about whose job it is."

Role Definition

The respondents frequently noted the ambiguity or tensions inherent in the roles of many professional groups. A social worker noted that "there is a dual responsibility to the court and the family; as a result, social workers spend so much time doing paperwork and court reports that they can spend only one hour of time with families." An attorney for minors stated that she "tries to do what she thinks is best *as well as* express the opinion or position of the client." Social workers and legal professionals also identified the importance of understanding one another's roles. One social worker suggested that attorneys, social workers, and judges switch roles for a day to gain a better understanding of how the roles differ.

Job Stress

The study participants described four aspects of their work that increase job stress: (1) lack of communication; (2) the adversarial process; (3) interpersonal relations; and (4) inadequate training. Many respondents viewed *communication* as critical to promoting understanding and cooperation; however, there were frequent breakdowns in communication. The failures to communicate were attributed to inadequate time, suspicion of professionals from the other discipline, and negative attitudes about cooperation. The suspicion that lawyers and social workers have of one another may be inherent in the sensitive nature of the issues being addressed. As one social worker commented, "attorneys interpret the social worker's reluctance to share sensitive client information as 'keeping secrets.'" The respondents also noted the benefits of frequent and open communication. One social worker observed that

the colleagues who interact less frequently with lawyers tend to go to trial more often because they have fewer opportunities to resolve issues out of court.

Given the problems created by an *adversarial approach*, many respondents stressed the need for collaboration. One judicial officer stated, "What we are doing should be a collaborative effort. Verbally beating people over the head is not effective." However, there were others who supported the value of an adversarial system in order to protect individual rights and provide a check on governmental agencies. A parent's attorney argued that the adversarial system is necessary to protect the rights of all parties, and that in a non-adversarial system, the people who would get "the short end of the stick" would be the people most unlike the people making decisions (potentially contributing to a bias against low income and ethnic minority groups).

Some respondents noted that individual personalities and *interpersonal relations* created friction. One county counsel noted that relationships with the attorneys for parents were generally satisfactory, but that these relationships varied from attorney to attorney due to individual personalities. In one county, social workers felt that the decisions of judicial officers were greatly influenced by individual personalities, attitudes, and their perceptions (like or dislike) of certain workers, stating that "some workers will always win and some will always lose in court."

The importance of *training* was a common theme, especially cross-training in other disciplines and collaborative training. One judicial officer expressed a need for much more interaction between judges (as well as bench officers) and child welfare workers in terms of training, stressing the importance of a comprehensive orientation for judges that would include the active participation of social service personnel. A county counsel expressed a belief that training programs help lawyers and social workers to communicate and acquire shared understandings. Some respondents noted that social work and legal professional do not possess the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill their professional obligations. Despite the common acknowledgment that inadequate resources strain relationships, criticism of other professionals was frequent and focused primarily on competence issues. One attorney for parents noted that "as with all groups, there are competent social workers and less competent ones, and therefore the qualitative differences can be significant."

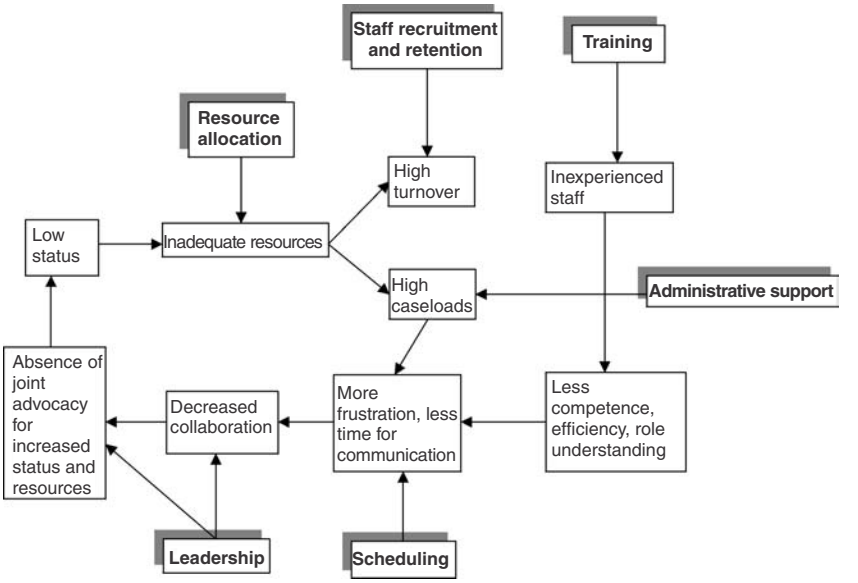
RESPONDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The second set of findings includes suggestions related to improving relationships among professionals in the juvenile dependency system. The recommendations are summarized in four categories: (1) leadership to promote communication and culture of respect, (2) resources and scheduling, (3) training, and (4) staffing. While Figure 1 synthesizes the literature and describes relationships between factors that contribute to difficulties in collaboration, Figure 2 notes the points of intervention, reflecting the multiple opportunities for interrupting the cycle of strained professional relations. In addition, strategies for implementing the recommendations are also noted.

Leadership to Promote Communication and Culture of Respect

All groups of participants, including the attorneys for children and parents, judicial officers, county counselors, and child welfare workers indicated that communication problems and a lack of respect needed to

FIGURE 2. Multiple Intervention Strategies to Improve Professional Relationships



be addressed both within the field and in the broader community. Difficulties in communication are related to the lack of resources as well as the perceived or real differences in professional cultures. Child welfare workers, lawyers, and judicial officers are often overburdened, and may feel that time spent meeting with other professionals can take important time away from their respective cases. Communication can be difficult given the pre-existing tensions and misunderstandings that emerge between members of different organizational cultures.

Taking time to develop professional relationships through formal and informal meetings may actually alleviate some of the burden that these professionals experience. More frequent communications can result from case conferences designed to expedite the management of cases and improve the services for children and families.

Specific suggestions for increasing communication include:

- Organize monthly lunchtime "brown bag" or other meetings to which all key stakeholders are invited and encouraged to attend.
- Hold quarterly meetings to discuss complicated and/or long-term cases.
- Adopt formal guidelines regarding timeliness of communications (i.e., forty-eight hours to return a phone call or e-mail) to which all parties agree.
- Host informal social gatherings to welcome new members to the team, recognize effective workers or teams, honor retiring workers, etc.
- Provide training on differences in professional culture to prevent misunderstandings and increase respect among professionals.

During the study, several counties had already begun to implement some of these strategies, and the response from social workers and legal professionals was overwhelmingly positive. For example, in one focus group, social workers made several remarks about how potlucks had helped them to feel more comfortable with legal professionals and eased their subsequent interactions with them.

The cultivation of respect in the broader community for the difficult work involved with child dependency is linked to enhancing relationships within the field. Child welfare workers and the legal professionals often perform their duties under constant public scrutiny. While professionals may be reluctant to allocate precious resources for building a positive public image of child dependency work, increased community recognition of the work can alleviate some of the strain on the professionals involved, help to retain qualified workers, attract committed in-

dividuals to the field, and establish a basis for additional financial support.

Specific suggestions for enhancing the public image of child dependency work include:

- Make public image an agenda item for a conference, workshop, or brown bag and then brainstorm about ways to elicit respect from the community.
- Identify an organization in the community with a positive public image and request a casual, informational meeting with the person responsible for public relations to exchange ideas.
- Recruit volunteers from staff or from the community to create a task force that will work to enhance public image through letters to the editor of the local newspaper and participation in public health fairs or similar events.

Resources and Scheduling

All groups involved in this study commented on the lack of resources and scheduling problems as contributing factors to difficulties in professional relationships. Suggestions for increasing resources and managing scheduling at the county level include:

- Create a social work office in the courthouse; many social workers commented on the value of their lost time (without access to telephones, computers, and fax machines) while waiting for a case to be called.
- Consider hiring administrative social work assistants. In one of the counties we studied, social workers reported that the services provided by these administrative social work assistants (driving clients to appointments, completing routine paperwork, etc.) allowed them to work more efficiently.
- Foster an equitable atmosphere in the courtroom in which agreements about reasonable causes for continuances are established and applied to members of both disciplines.

Training

Like efforts to promote communication, allocating time and resources for training may seem like a luxury to overburdened workers. Our literature review indicated, however, that training can improve pro-

fessional relations and reduce conflict (Smith, 1970; Weil, 1982; Russell, 1988; Herring, 1993; Johnson and Cahn, 1995).

Specific training recommendations made by participants included:

- Address specific, job-related knowledge or competencies.
- Provide training directly relating to differences in professional culture.
- Offer cross training in the other disciplines.
- Develop collaborative training initiatives bringing together social work and legal professionals.

One county that participated in our study already organized a collaborative training day for legal professionals and social workers, with a particular focus on differences in professional culture. Preliminary evaluations suggest that this event was seen as valuable by attendees, and several workshop participants commented on the immediate applicability of the training to their work.

Staffing

Perhaps more than the other recommendations, managing staffing issues requires advocacy and coordination by administrators in both the court and child welfare systems. Study participants commented on the need for longer tenure and increased commitment in both social work and legal positions. For legal professionals, this would mean establishing guidelines for less frequent rotations through the juvenile justice system, and the development of strategies for encouraging dedicated legal professionals to continue working in the system. For social workers, retention needs to be increased through improved job satisfaction and identifying and responding to symptoms of burnout. Though there are no easy solutions to this staffing recommendation, we believe that working towards the other three recommendations (communication and culture of respect, scheduling, and training) can begin to alleviate some of the barriers to recruiting and retaining committed and competent workers.

CONCLUSION

As noted above, all of the strategies for improvement of professional relationships are interrelated. Efficient resource allocation can help

agencies, courts, and legal organizations make the most of limited funds and personnel. Improved recruitment and retention strategies and training can increase the competency and efficiency of staff. Administrative support can help overloaded professionals to focus on the core elements of their jobs. Similarly, improved scheduling can diminish wasted time, facilitating opportunities for communication and collaboration. Leadership on the part of judicial officers, agency directors, and the directors of legal organizations representing parents and children is essential to improving collaboration and fostering a culture of respect among professionals. Finally, these leaders need to engage in advocacy strategies that can improve the status of the juvenile dependency system and increase resources.

The implementation of the recommendations that emerged in this study calls for the development of local action plans by a leadership group comprised of judges, county social service directors, county child welfare directors, attorneys, and volunteers. Together they need to prioritize the recommendations as they apply to the unique aspects of their counties, identify objectives and target dates for implementation, identify the lead persons to facilitate the implementation process, and monitor the progress and outcomes on a regular basis (annually or semi-annually). Addressing these challenges is critical to promoting the best interests of children and families.

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