Simulation Lab Program in Child Welfare

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child abuse, negligence from parents, and mistreatment have been some of the common challenges affecting children in California. In a broader context, child abuse exists in the form of physical, psychological, or sexual mistreatment directed toward children by their parents or other caregivers. Multiple strategies have been employed by governments and other agencies in the past to promote child welfare by addressing the specific issues that result in child abuse and neglect. Some of the programs already in existence have been effective in enhancing child welfare in their respective counties. The primary focus of this paper will be to present the benefits of a simulated lab program that can be adopted by agencies, such as Family Children Services within the City of San Francisco, and to promote quality engagement for child welfare in a county and agency setting. The research presented is based on an evaluation of the Alameda County Social Services Agency Simulation Lab program.

The Training and Consulting Team (TACT) in the Alameda County Human Services Agency is committed to establishing a simulated program that will help in improving child welfare workers' competency levels. With a clear understanding of the various forms in which child abuse and neglect in society exist, the agency is committed to establishing a program that will offer the most appropriate strategies that can be employed in promoting child welfare through advocacy, promotion of children's rights, and providing for children's educational needs. Thus, the agency aims at using a simulation lab to equip staff members with the necessary skills and tactics to promote child welfare in society and to prepare new hires to make better assessments and interventions. The simulation lab also serves as a great training tool for supervisors to assess levels of quality engagement and cultural humility.

KEYWORDS: Child welfare, simulated lab, child abuse, child welfare program

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Introduction

Alameda County's Training and Consulting Team (TACT) developed an innovative, in-house simulation lab—commonly referred to as the Sim Lab—for the purpose of facilitating cross-departmental training, primarily to be used during inductions. The mission of the Lab is to enhance staff development and training, increase workers' safety awareness, and improve overall skill acquisition by using groundbreaking technologies and interactive techniques to augment the training of essential job-related skills in a simulated atmosphere. The program's vision is to enrich the overall training environment for child welfare staff, maintain high standards of training, and retain a skilled workforce through innovative methods of high quality, interactive, competency-based training (Bhakta-Quezada, 1998).

The TACT Sim Lab is aimed at evaluating how managers and professionals can use evidence generated from different sources, such as program evaluations, personal experiences, and performance measurement systems, to enhance the operations of the agency. The Sim Lab started in 2014 with the Child Welfare Department and then extended to Workforce Development, Adult Protective Services, and most recently, to leadership and the Board of Supervisors. All newly-hired Child Welfare workers and Adult Protection workers are trained through the Sim Lab. Alameda uses two rooms (measuring 16′ x 20′) traditionally used for training for the Sim Lab environment. Each room is furnished as a typical living room with all the elements of an average home that social service agencies might enter. TACT uses real-life examples of conditions witnessed by protective services workers to set the scenes developed by the Sim Lab Committee. The committee meets every two to three months, depending on the need. All scenarios are constantly updated with every new induction training cohort. The scenarios are housed in a platform called SharePoint. Four cameras cover the entire room, and the trainers are certified Sim Lab actors who portray the clients during a simulation.

To become Sim Lab-certified, an employee completes a day training from UC Davis on acting and character development in addition to a three-hour technical training. TACT has up to 32 certified trainers so that someone is always available. The certification program defines Sim Lab training standards that can be used by a diverse workforce, maintains a pool of skilled actors to lend realism to the Lab experience, increases TACT's ability to develop simulation scenarios that are in line with state and county regulations and best practices, and uses coaching to guide the entire process. TACT not only certifies employees but also agency partners and community organizations to participate in simulations. Stakeholders can also attend the training to become certified. TACT has clearly defined the expectations for Sim Lab specialists so that every employee understands what is expected of them during training. All actors review their character with subject matter experts to assure authenticity. The trainee is given a referral developed by the committee and goes to the "home" to knock on the door. From the knock on the door, cameras are rolling and all interactions are captured. The exercise is then stored and played back for all participants.

Analysis

Data is collected through the Sim Lab rubrics and evaluation tools. The trainee gets feedback from playback viewing and from the actors. TACT uses the Delta Plus model, which is a framework for first providing feedback positively and then providing constructive feedback on what could be improved. Trainees and their supervisors are surveyed after completing a simulation. Overwhelmingly, trainees report feeling more prepared to go out into the field and less anxious about what to look for and how to better engage clients. Supervisors have reported that the simulations are excellent tools to point out where best practices can be used and to identify an employee's strengths or needs for additional training.

Simulation labs were found appropriate for Child Welfare and Adult Protective Services as they enable the participants to have a relevant, reality-based simulated experience, thus making it easy to draft changes that can be incorporated in a program to promote excellence. By mimicking the conditions and experiences faced by children and the elderly under different circumstances such as abuse, agency professionals can acquire better skills that can result in better outcomes in attending to a family's assessed needs. The Lab directly helps trainees meet training objectives.

TACT has a limited budget for Sim Lab and has moved out of the two rooms into one big room about 20′x 30′. The larger space allows for more props in scenarios but limits the availability and use of the space. Alameda County has put their Simulation Lab program together very efficiently. All the furniture was donated, the four cameras cost $500 in total, and the murals to set screens cost approximately $1000. Their system cannot be downloaded; therefore, playback can only happen where there are facility installations. Recently, TACT leadership recognized how the Board of Supervisors' leadership could benefit in using the Sim Lab for conflict resolution training, and such scenarios are in the process of being developed.

Findings

Participants articulated a broad array of experiences that can be used to shape an agency program to facilitate quality services in child welfare and adult protection. Based upon the different roles played in the simulation, each participant can identify some program improvements to be incorporated into a child welfare and/or adult services program to achieve excellent services.

Correlating Forms of Child Abuse and Practical Solutions

Evidence from the Simulation Lab showed that there was a close relationship between understanding a child's needs and establishing the best-suited solution for a given situation. Most participants noted that for an effective child welfare program, provisions must be in place to meet the diverse challenges facing different children across California. According to the actors involved in the child welfare simulations, each child's case was unique; although some cases were similar, the perfect solution for each case was different (Mignon, 2016). For instance, there are various forms of negligence that children face that need to be addressed differently if the program is to work effectively. A child who is neglected emotionally has different needs from one neglected physically, and the two, though closely related, demand different solutions.

Investing More on Information Sourcing in Child Abuse Response

Most child welfare workers rely on information about general family needs based on the characteristics of the vast majority of child welfare cases. Consequently, vital child needs can get left out of intervention planning, leading to child welfare programs not realizing their optimal performance. Although there are many generalities that can be accurately made about families, child welfare workers are increasingly relying on assumptions rather than evaluating the unique needs of the family in front of them. Moreover, most such generalities

are made by workers from dominant cultures or racial/ethnic groups, therefore failing to respect the differences and the full humanity of each individual family.

Discussion

A simulation lab provides an acted experience that represents a potential real-life situation (Raiso et al., 2020). A simulation lab can be a significant tool to help social workers gain comfort and familiarity to interact with families of different backgrounds from themselves and to train workers how to have cultural humility. In Alameda County's Simulation Lab for child welfare, actors portray the familial nuances that should be included in a child welfare program to ensure that training addresses specific needs of each child. A simulation lab can demonstrate how children's needs vary significantly based on multiple factors. For instance, most children involved in child welfare cases experience at least one form of abuse or negligence, which may call for a specific strategy in addressing it. Thus, for a program to effectively address a child's need, it must target the specific challenge to which the child is exposed. Additionally, a simulation lab provides the opportunity to preview the actual experience of visiting a family's home on a welfare check. Therefore, the identification and implementation of the most appropriate strategies to addressing issues become easy (Asoğlu et al., 2016). In other words, social workers get to experience best practices and appropriate interventions first-hand, making the process of selecting the best strategy out in the field more likely to occur.

The modern child welfare system started in the 1960s when government agencies began accepting responsibility for child abuse and neglect. In 1961, foster care was funded, and fundamentally legislators were not at first in favor of children being adopted by families of origin due to stringent placement regulations aimed at protecting the children. In 1974, the federal Child Abuse Act gave funding toward mandated child abuse and neglect reporting. Since then, overwhelmingly, mandated reporters have disproportionately reported on poor people and people of color, specifically Native Americans, Black families, and immigrant or undocumented Latinx families. A 1977 US Supreme Court decision decided that foster parents could not oppose children's removal or expect a default preference for keeping their families intact, as birth families could, no matter how long-lasting and deep the ties are between foster parents and children. It was not until 1978 that the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed, giving rights to Native Americans to keep children within their tribes when children are removed from a home due to child welfare concerns. In 1980, the federal Adoption Assistance Act subsidized adoptions and favored children being adopted outside of their families. According to the National Statistics on Child Abuse, approximately 700, 000 children are abused in the United States every year, and approximately 80,000 of those children are subsequently adopted each year (Smolenski and Ingerman, 2018). Black and Native American children are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system. Black children make up 14% of the general population in the United States but are 26% of the child welfare system nationally (US Department of Health and Human Services). In San Francisco, the general Black child population is 4.9% but Black children make up 46.4% of child welfare cases, with biracial black children not even counted if the mother was not Black (2018 Kidsdata.org). This disproportionate representation of Black children in San Francisco's child welfare system has been consistent since the 1980s. San Francisco has participated in numerous projects to address this problem. However, in San Francisco, only 10 out of 60 child welfare workers providing reunification services to families and only 4 out of 30 child welfare workers making assessments on when to remove children from homes are Black. Standardized tools such as Structured Decision Making (SDM) for hotline, safety, risk, and reunification analysis, are used to minimize biases, but these tools do not eliminate bias completely, nor do they increase cultural, class, and racial humility.

Locally, nonprofit organizations have increased their capacity to address the growing needs of poor communities of color, but there is still a need to strengthen and grow community-based organizations to work collaboratively to address these needs within each child's own community and home. Challenges faced by public child welfare agencies prompt the need for robust and interactive training programs that produce social workers who can accurately assess abuse and neglect and make appropriate recommendations to alleviate safety issues while keeping children with their families when possible. A simulation lab could be an excellent tool in San Francisco to create opportunities to practice working with families of different cultural backgrounds. Most social workers in San Francisco do not speak the unique style of English that many poor urban Blacks are most comfortable speaking. Much trust and connection is therefore lost for both sides in the realm of communication. Most social workers are not familiar or comfortable with urban Black culture and therefore use their personal lenses, perspectives, and values when assessing the families served by the Child Welfare Department. Simulation Labs can address this issue by featuring authentic vernacular of populations served within a given jurisdiction to better prepare trainees to understand and become more comfortable serving specific populations.

Conclusion

Alameda has produced a low-cost but highly effective simulation laboratory to prepare their workforce for the realities of their jobs and to give trainees practical, hands-on experience making non-biased assessments, utilizing best practices, and complying with regulations. The San Francisco Human Services Agency could greatly benefit from establishing a similar simulation laboratory for child welfare workers. A simulation lab would provide existing staff with tools on how to effectively engage the populations we serve, increase staff investigative skills, standardize staff assessments of families, reduce bias, reduce staff anxiety through increased knowledge, and make supervisors aware of staff performance levels or where specific coaching is needed. If also extended community-based organizations, access to a simulation laboratory could give community partners valuable insight on the complexities of county child welfare services and could nurture deeper, more meaningful connections with local communities of color. The cost for creating a lab would be minimal. San Francisco already has a workforce development unit, so implementation could be assigned to that team. Web-based cameras cost less than $1000 for total room coverage, furniture and props can be donated, and staff can accurately portray families we serve with minimal training. San Francisco could utilize available space at the 3120 or 3125 Mission Street offices to begin training existing employees and new hires when it is safe to do so following a return to work from after COVID-19.

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