

THE VALUE OF TRAINING AND TRANSFER OF LEARNING IN SONOMA COUNTY'S FAMILY, YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Cyndia Cole

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child welfare saw significant changes in 1997 with the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Since then, a series of new mandates and practices have been adopted in an effort to support child safety and create better outcomes for children and families. Child welfare workers have struggled to incorporate the new mandates and processes into their everyday practices while at the same time balancing the rigors of the job. This includes high caseloads as well as emotional exhaustion. Counties acknowledge it is difficult to retain child welfare workers.

Isolating the specific factors that contribute to staff turnover has been a challenge. While studies have correlated supervisory support in retention, the role of effective training programs has not been fully explored. In other fields, there are data that support the importance of investing in training and how that strategy impacts the retention of staff. Throughout the region, counties are investing in embedded training programs that support staff in the essential skills needed to be competent and confident in their jobs. This study examines how counties have designed training programs for child welfare staff and how Sonoma County would benefit from implementing a similar program.

THE VALUE OF TRAINING AND TRANSFER OF LEARNING IN SONOMA COUNTY'S FAMILY, YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Cyndia Cole

Introduction

Child welfare is a demanding field that requires committed and well-trained staff. The intensity of the work in child welfare results in high turnover rates as it can be challenging to balance personal lives with a job that often involves daily crises. The decisions social workers make that directly impact the safety of children are difficult and require high levels of training and support. In Sonoma County, between retirees, staff leaving the agency and the addition of new positions, there have been 54 new hires in the past two years --- with more anticipated. Looking at the demographics of staff hired, many of whom are of the millennial generation, one could anticipate a continued increase of staff turnover. This demographic group is less likely to stay at the agency for an extended period of times due to leaving for other jobs, moving out of county for more affordable housing, or starting families.

Counties need to consider what can be done to retain staff. Identifying specific barriers is challenging because there are so many other factors to consider, such as the attributes of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion and role overload. Workers have also cited a lack of supervisory support as a reason for leaving. Determining strategies for retaining staff can be difficult to isolate. Compensation and good supervisory support are both important. In reviewing a report by Annie E. Casey Foundation, it was determined that Title IV-E preparation serves as a "value-added" for retention strategies since IV-E initiatives reinforce the personal factors that support retention by recruiting participants who are committed to the profession and to serving children

and families. The Title IV-E participants in the studies in this review often already had tenure (experience) in the agency, had prerequisite education (through acquisition of a BSW or MSW degree), and had demonstrated efficacy. In addition, by offering this educational enhancement opportunity, the agency may be demonstrating that it supports and values its employees by providing the incentive to obtain an advanced degree, which may also open up new opportunities for staff for promotion and increased salary. While there is limited research that directly correlates training in child welfare to retention, other fields have demonstrated a relationship between training and retention.

A 2013 study on retention by the Case Business School supports the notion that good training makes a difference; training is considered important in developing a feeling of belonging among employees. Eva Kyndt, et. al. (2009) revealed that training has a potential to change turnover thoughts and is an important factor that contributes to the intentions of turnover. Employees that are highly committed to the organization have lower turnover thoughts.

Currently in Sonoma County, there is a reliance on the Regional Training Academy to provide new worker Core Training. Staff Development provides two days of orientation that are delivered within the first year of employment. Additional training coordinated by Staff Development includes training in line with state mandates. There is additional training, such as on Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) and still more identified in our Systems Improvement Plan (SIP). These trainings include all child welfare staff and are coordinated by Staff Development. As Sonoma is in the implementation phase of Safety Organized Practice (SOP)—if the timing aligns—new workers participate in training modules that describe SOP tools and practice. The hands-on practices of SOP, which covers staff competency in utilizing the tools with families, while guided by policy, is really supported by the supervisor. This leads to

some inconsistencies as supervisors have different levels of commitment and competence in using the actual tools. Sonoma County currently employs 140 child welfare workers. In some units supervisors are responsible for supervising up to ten employees. Providing the hands-on training and transfer of learning is a challenge for many supervisors. This is especially true for implementing new practices where staff hopefully will have that ‘aha’ moment that makes training real. Clearly, Sonoma County cannot continue to rely on just the training academy and staff development to meet the training needs of new staff. By investing and valuing training, Sonoma County can support child welfare staff in its ability to move classroom learning into practice. This has already been recognized by the state which has partnered with California Department Social Services (CDSS) and the RTAs to develop a Field Advising component to Core. These Field Advising components have a specific field learning activity for nine of the Core classes. Learning how to complete safety and risk tools in a classroom situation is necessary, but having the support of a training supervisor or field advisor who works directly with the worker and a family to actually complete the assessment brings learning to the next level.

This case study is based on visits to three different Bay Area counties that have established training programs embedded within their family and children divisions. These counties have identified training as a value in their agencies understanding that it will result in better trained child welfare staff and hopefully in better outcomes for children and families.

Alameda County

Alameda County provides a ten week Child Welfare Worker Induction Program that provides training for newly hired child welfare workers. This ten week induction training is offered

approximately two times per year. Class sizes average 24. The training includes hands-on lessons specific to Alameda County Social Service Agency (SSA) policies and procedures. Alameda County also supports learner participation as well as skill clinics for hands-on learning. There are two training supervisors assigned to provide induction training. Their responsibilities include supervising new staff, some curriculum development, coordination with the regional training academy partner, and providing direct training to child welfare staff. Training supervisors also provide post training support groups for staff who have completed induction training. The training supervisors work under the direction of the staff development supervisor. All new staff are required to partake in Alameda County's training program regardless of child welfare experience. The county's hope is to expose new staff to how practice is done in the county; it will ensure consistency among workers. This will also allow staff to incorporate good habits in their work.

During induction training, new workers are immediately introduced to 'ground rules and expectations.' The intention is to create a learning environment including specifics around attendance, attitude towards other employees and good work habits. At the initial meeting, workers are informed about the performance factors that will be used in their assessment. Training unit norms are also identified to encourage a mutual and cooperative learning environment. These norms include mutual learning through cooperation and collaboration with co-workers, good listening skills in a non-judgmental manner to other viewpoints and respecting confidentiality.

Alameda County training includes topics such as new employee benefits, workplace violence and harassment as well as training that is specific to state mandated class work from the common Core. Some of this training is delivered by the training supervisors while other Core training is

delivered through Alameda County's contract with the Bay Area Academy (BAA). Training supervisors also coordinate training that introduces staff to functions that are related to their job duties. This includes relative approvals, kinship support, youth partnerships supporting LGBTQ youth and families, as well as mandated reporting requirements. Training supervisors also offer skill based clinics. These include three writing labs. Participants practice writing investigative narratives, contact notes and court reports. Warrant training is also included in new worker training. Additional training that is out of the classroom has participants tour the county's child assessments centers as well as resources commonly utilized by families. Alameda has made this a fun activity where workers utilize public transportation to visit these resources. Additional training includes child passenger safety, learning about foster care eligibility, security awareness such as California Law Enforcement Telecommunication (CLET) Systems and Child Abuse Central Index (CACI). These learning modules are all integral parts of a child welfare worker's job and it is essential for them to have an understanding of these tasks in order to complete their job functions. In Alameda County, social workers are provided with detailed calendars of their 10 week training sessions as well as detailed descriptions of training. Alameda offers skills labs that provide new staff with a simulated training activity such as that first knock on the door or interviewing children. The learning goal is for staff to develop their skills around engagement, interviewing and safety when meeting with families. Not only are these trainings to develop foundational skills for all child welfare staff, but they also provide an opportunity for social workers to practice these skills in a supportive environment. In addition to training new child welfare staff, the training supervisors provide technical support on CWS/CMS entry, Structured Decision Making (SDM) and Safe Measures. The training supervisors have drop in office hours that provide support for ongoing staff and supervisors. The county's training program not only

provides new staff with the foundational skills needed to become competent in practice, but it also provides staff with the support that is needed as they transition into what is a very difficult field.

Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County provides 15 weeks of dedicated classroom and OTJ (on the job) training for their new staff; Santa Cruz employs 55 child welfare workers and, similar to many counties, has experienced rapid turnover.

In 2013, Santa Cruz did a redesign of its new worker training –The Child Welfare Training Academy (CWTA)—in an effort to utilize a combination of classroom and on the job training, opportunities to practice scenarios, role plays and simulation. In fact, Santa Cruz is developing a Simulation Lab to increase opportunity for staff to gain confidence and competence by practice. The county has moved from a training that was dyadic in nature with practical application in the form of casework training. The redesign was the result of feedback from trainees, their supervisors and managers, the operational needs of the Family and Children Services (FCS) Division as well as integrating evidenced based training theory and emerging practices. “The goal of redesign was to teach necessary skills through planned intensive practical application and practice-based learning.” Workers are assigned a case early on and assignments increase incrementally throughout CWTA. There are structured learning activities/tools, simulation and role plays to help develop workers’ skills. There is greater involvement of social work supervisors’ and coordination between SWS and staff development. As research does show that the role of the supervisor is a key factor in staff retention, this strategy could potentially support social worker retention. Another aspect of Santa Cruz’s program is a Learning Collaborative

where there is a monthly meeting of the training supervisor, supervisors and new child welfare staff. This provides an opportunity to have a shared learning experience. Often in training programs, the new supervisor is out of the loop as the worker is being trained by another supervisor and then the worker is placed into the new unit. The collaborative allows for ongoing assessment and relationship building.

Another aspect of the program is the hands-on learning objective where staff are assigned a case six to seven weeks after hire which provides a real-time experience where they are working with families while receiving guidance in their assessments and service delivery. This is supported through shadowing a more experienced worker as well as reverse shadowing.

Santa Cruz County has packaged its training so that it is delivered in a linear style that all works together. For example, there is a presentation from the Investigations Supervisor followed by referral documentation in CWS/CMS and then an opportunity to enter SDM Safety and Risk Assessments. This way of presenting also supports how everything in the investigation flows. Santa Cruz has developed many tools including practice guides that new staff can complete with their supervisors that break down all tasks related to the role of the social worker. This includes interviewing a parent or child and documenting and utilizing SOP tools, such as mapping of three houses. Santa Cruz County has committed to best practices and has focused its training on the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model.

San Diego County

San Diego County offers approximately four new worker cohorts per year. The typical cohort is 24 to 30 trainees. New staff receive intensive new worker training that includes Core training

provided by the regional training academy as well as county specific orientation to programs, policy and procedures. Similar to other counties described, social workers learn about community resources and the county will invite community partners to provide these presentations. However, San Diego has implemented several new practices in the past ten years that require additional support for new and seasoned social workers. The implementation of these best practices greatly increased the need for training staff in learning the emerging practice models and also supporting staff in incorporating what they learned into their practice.

- Structured Decision Making-2006
- Team Decision Making-2006
- Safety Organized Practice-2010
- Trauma Informed Practice-2010-2012
- Coaching- May 2015

One strategy implemented by San Diego County that supports the hands on learning for staff was the development of a coaching unit. A SOP convening in San Diego provided me with an opportunity to visit the county's coaching unit. For the purposes of this presentation, I will focus on San Diego's field coaching unit which is quite innovative. San Diego has a coaching unit that includes nine senior staff and is managed by a child welfare supervisor. These staff members are stationed in regional offices throughout the county. Social workers are able to sign up for a session with a coach, either in the office accompanying the worker on a field visit. The focus may be interviewing a child or Safety Mapping with a family. Coaches may work with hotline staff on how to interview a caller to gain pertinent information. Other coaching options can also be using the SDM tools appropriately. SOP is the main focus of coaching in the county, but since coaching is learner-led, the learner chooses the goal of each coaching session.

Coaching is a process by which the coach creates a structured, focused interaction with learners. The coach uses appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the learner, while making a positive impact on the organization. (Brooks, et al, 2012; Adapted from Mink, Owen, & Mink, 1993; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010)

Research has shown that educators who participate in coaching as a part of their training:

- Practice new skills and strategies more frequently
- Apply them more appropriately
- Retain new teaching strategies over the long-term
- Demonstrate more appropriate use of new teaching models over time

(Joyce & Showers, 2002)

While training is a good way to introduce core ideas to large groups of people, much of it is based on expertise and content delivery. Coaching allows for practice that is related to the work and supports the transfer of learning. Coaching is a way of deepening the practice. Good coaching consists of appreciative inquiry, facilitation and dialogue between the facilitator and the learner. It is intended to be supportive and not punitive. In San Diego County, the coaching sessions remain confidential while still allowing for a feedback loop between coach, learner and supervisor.

In San Diego, the coaching unit began in May 2015 with six coaches. They mirrored the coaching model used by its Regional Training Academy (RTA). Currently, coaching is a model used in many of the RTAs to support emerging practices. Coaching is strength-based and skill-based. Sonoma County is already implementing a coaching model as the county moves toward full implementation of SOP. Some of the benefits of the coaching model in San Diego are as follows:

- Enhances transfer of learning from classroom to the field
 - Allows workers to “try on” skills with support until they are masters•Workers are able to sign up and meet individually or in small groups
 - Workers can elect to bring their Supervisor or meet privately
 - Coaching is confidential
 - Feedback is provided to county leadership in the form of a monthly report which highlights key themes including what is working well, what is causing worry and what needs to happen next.
- San Diego has reported positive feedback from staffs who are participating in Coaching.

Comparisons of Counties with Training Units

Key Elements	Santa Cruz	Alameda	San Diego
County training Unit	Yes	Yes	yes
Staff development provides induction and core training to new staff	County relies on RTA for core training. Training supervisor provides some advanced and skill based training	County training supervisors provide core in partnership with RTA. County provides or coordinates advanced and county specific training	County training staff in partnership with RTA provides core and advanced training
Transfer of Learning; training	Shadowing/Reverse Shadowing, simulation	Interviewing Skills lab,	Coaching provided for

support	activities; supervisor becomes involved shortly after worker commences induction	Simulation activities	all staff. Training staff also provide Field Advising training as mandated by Core 3.0
Cases assigned at time of hire vs. after induction	Case assigns incrementally after 6-7 weeks from hire	Assigned to unit after completion of induction	Assigned after completion of induction
Cohort size	Varies 1-10. Induction is adjusted if there are only 1-3 trainees	2 cores per yr- 24 trainees	5 cores per year 24-30 trainees

Recommendations

Sonoma County will plan and implement a training supervisor position that is embedded within Family, Youth and Children’s (FY&C) division. This position will be responsible for providing and coordinating training for new child welfare staff. This position will also take the lead in providing Field Advising as mandated by Core 3.0. Additional responsibilities include coordination and support for social work interns. This position would coordinate with staff development and our RTA (Bay Area Academy) to support coaching throughout FY&C. Recommendations (with suggested implementation timetable) are as follows:

1. Planning meeting with staff development with the intent to determine roles for FY&C, staff development, and Bay Area Academy. We would want to avoid a duplication of roles and promote how we would work together most efficiently. 2016-2017 fiscal year

2. Develop a training plan that utilizes a combination of classroom and hands-on learning (on the job training), practice scenarios, role plays, and simulation. Learning will be rooted in emerging and evidence-based practices. 2016-2017 fiscal year
3. Develop a plan that will support involvement of supervisors from the time of hire. Training supervisor will be the lead in the OTJ training which will reduce the impact and responsibility of new training for the assigned supervisor. Supervisors will be supported in their role as a coach. 2016-2017 fiscal year
4. Training supervisor will strengthen the current intern program by establishing guidelines that support field instructors and specific learning objectives for interns.

August 2016- Training Supervisor

Anticipated Cost

The Federal Government provides an enhanced federal match of 75% for curriculum development, materials and books, field instructors, staff incentives, etc.

What criteria will county use when evaluating program.

1. Post surveys distributed six months after training to induction participants
2. Increased compliance with training regulations as mandated by state
3. Feedback at three months, six months and one year from unit supervisor assessing competency of workers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mary Shean, William Nguyen, and Larry Sanchez from Alameda County for providing me with this learning opportunity. I would also like to thank the amazing Mary Bergman and Andrew Stewart from Santa Cruz County for hosting me and providing me with so many valuable resources. Thank you also to Javier Perez from San Diego who so generously

provided me with a wonderful and inspiring learning experience. I very much appreciate Andrea Dubrow who extended herself so that I could develop my own BASSC project and thank you to Dr. Mike Austin who provided guidance after I realized I could not support my original theory with data. And lastly, I would like to thank my manager Jane Wilson, Division Director Nick Honey, and Director Jerry Dunn for the opportunity to participate in the Bay Area Social Services Consortium Executive Development Program.

References

Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005)

Case Business School Report, Eva Kyndt et al (2009)

The National Implementation Research Network, Joyce and Showers (2002)

The Complete Handbook of Coaching; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck (2010)

Developing High-performance People: The Art of Coaching - Oscar Mink (1993)