Public Child Welfare

BACKGROUND

Public child welfare services are child centered and family focused and include an array of preventive and support services, as well as protective services out-of-home care, and other permanency options such as placement with relatives/kinship care, and adoption. The public child welfare agencies fulfill society’s mandated commitment to help families or family substitutes provide safe, stable, and permanent homes for their children. Decision making about the most appropriate environment for children and youths not only calls for an extensive knowledge of child development and an understanding of where a particular youth may be in the course of development, but also requires an ability to bring together different groups who have interests in the outcome that can be competing and conflictual. The rights of biological parents, the demands of juvenile courts, the requirements of federal and state rules and procedures, and the assessments of other professionals, all must be synthesized into a coherent, consistent, comprehensive plan that will achieve safety, stability, and permanency for each child and youth.

Although professional social work practice in public child welfare exemplifies the profession’s values and mission to serve the most vulnerable, high turnover rates, with significant delays in replacement, among professional social workers have increased over the past two decades (Barnes, 2000; Kraus, 2000). Social work students continue to be more interested in social work practice in private clinically oriented settings, health care, education, aged, or employee assistance programs (Barnes). Poor working environments, high rates of exposure to critical events, high levels of accountability to multiple and conflicting stakeholders, poor or inadequate supervision, the widespread practice of splitting clinical intervention from case management work, noncompetitive salaries, few promotional opportunities, and intrusiveness into their personal lives discourage new graduate social workers from entering public child welfare and influence qualified experienced staff to leave the child welfare field (Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Bednar, 2003; Cyphers, 2001, 2005; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; GAO, 2003, 2004; Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howe, 2002; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992). This inability to attract and retain social workers causes concern because the tasks to be accomplished and the critical decisions to be made demand a high degree of professional expertise that is applied consistently over extended periods.

ISSUE STATEMENT

The lifelong effects of child welfare decisions demand highly qualified personnel in public child welfare administration and services who have a thorough knowledge of child and youth developmental needs, comprehensive knowledge of the resources needed to meet those needs, ability to find and develop the necessary resources, and commitment to serving children and youths from impoverished environments (Cyphers, 2001, 2005; Ellett et al.; GAO, 2003, 2004). Decisions made by public child welfare staff are critical; they can alter the future course of a child’s life and
that of his or her family. Decisions such as whether a child was abused, should be removed from the home, should be placed in a particular type of treatment setting, should be returned home or whether to petition a court for termination of parental rights are typical of those made daily by child welfare workers. In addition, child welfare workers must work with public child welfare agencies, government rules and regulations, private child welfare agencies, courts, and parents and family members, all of whom frequently have competing and conflicting interests in the decisions and who hold the child welfare worker accountable for the decision that is made (Barak et al., 2001; Ellett et al., 2003). Only individuals who have had professional training should be given the responsibility for such important decision making.

The social work profession needs to assert its role in public child welfare by supporting three principles:

1. An undergraduate social work degree should be required for the delivery, and a graduate social work degree should be required for the supervision and administration, of social services in public child welfare to ensure that workers have the necessary skills, knowledge, and values to provide high-quality services.

2. The development of an educational curriculum and professional training is vital to the recruitment and retention of professional social workers in public child welfare.

3. The profession must organize at the local, state, and national levels to promote public understanding of and financial support for the public child welfare system, its services to clients, including equal access of resources to guardians and kinship providers, and its workers.

**POLICY STATEMENT**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recognizes that effective services to the children and families in public child welfare demand the values, knowledge, and skills that are intrinsic to social work education. Therefore, undergraduate social work education should be required for the delivery of social services in public child welfare, and graduate social work education should be required for the supervision and administration of social services in public child welfare. NASW supports the initiatives that encourage recruitment, education, and retention of professional social workers (BSWs or MSWs) in the public child welfare system, such as loan forgiveness programs, payment of licensure fees, financial incentives for rural practice, and statewide access to social work education programs.

NASW believes that children and families who are served through the public child welfare system have a right to the same level and quality of services delivered by professional social workers in other fields of practice. Furthermore, because the philosophical base of public child welfare requires both rehabilitative and preventive services, social workers need skill and professionalism to provide these services under the legally mandated authority of the public agency.

The same elements that undergird all professional social work practice should guide social work practice in public child welfare. Nonjudgmental respect for the dignity of the individual child and family, the use of a helping relationship, support for family self-determination, confidentiality, the right to culturally and ethnically sensitive service, and advocacy with meso and macro systems are among the essential elements in social work practice. Social workers also must address the vulnerability of women, people of color, and people with a nonheterosexual orientation in the delivery and receipt of public child welfare services and attempt to resolve their disempowerment.

NASW advocates high standards of professional ethics and practice in child protection, intact family services, kinship care, foster care, group care, and adoption, with an emphasis on keeping children connected to families of origin.

NASW supports increased activities for the recruitment, education, training, and retention of professional social workers in public child welfare. NASW also supports federal funding for education and training programs.
to prepare social workers for practice in child welfare.

National and local units of NASW will work together to support and promote the use of professional social workers in state and local child welfare agencies.

Public child welfare agencies and workers face unique demands and stresses. Social workers must work with other groups and professional organizations to succeed in the following activities:

- promoting public understanding of and financial support for public child welfare services to clients, the public child welfare system, including research of that system and services, and public child welfare workers
- supporting efforts to reform the public child welfare system to keep families strong, increase the safety of children, and ensure quality service delivery
- creating greater opportunities for the professional development of public child welfare workers
- securing adequate salary levels for public child welfare workers
- advocating for loan forgiveness programs for professional social workers in the child welfare system
- establishing a maximum caseload standard nationwide
- promoting job flexibility
- providing supervision that is consultative and supportive
- promoting evidence-based practice
- ensuring working conditions that are suitable and professional
- supporting title protection, which allows only workers with a social work degree to use that title.

Social workers should be allied with leaders in the public child welfare field to develop appropriate public policy in this arena. NASW reaffirms that professional social work practice in public child welfare exemplifies the profession’s values and mission to serve the most vulnerable.

REFERENCES


