

## GAO STUDIES CHILD WELFARE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

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Two members of the U.S. House of Representatives, recognizing the need for a stable and highly skilled child welfare workforce to meet federal goals, requested the federal General Accounting Agency (GAO) to study child welfare recruitment and retention. The report, issued on March 31, 2003, identifies (1) the challenges child welfare agencies face in recruiting and retaining child welfare caseworkers and supervisors, (2) how recruitment and retention challenges have affected the safety and permanency outcomes of children in foster care, and (3) workforce practices that public and private child welfare agencies have implemented to successfully confront recruitment and retention challenges.

The GAO found that child welfare agencies face a number of challenges in recruiting and retaining workers and supervisors. Low salaries, in particular, hinder agencies' abilities to attract potential child welfare workers and to retain those already in the profession. Additionally, caseworkers the GAO interviewed in all four states they visited cited high caseloads and related administrative burdens, which they said took 50 to 80 percent of their time; a lack of supervisory support; and insufficient time to take training, as issues impacting both their ability to work effectively and their decision to stay to stay in the child welfare profession. The GAO also analyzed exit interviews completed by child welfare staff across the country.

According to caseworkers the GAO interviewed, high turnover rates and staffing shortages leave remaining staff with insufficient time to establish relationships with children and families and make the necessary decisions to ensure safe and stable permanent placements. The GAO analysis of the HHS's Child And Family Service Reviews (CFSR) in 27 states corroborates the caseworkers accounts showing that large caseloads and worker turnover delay the timeliness of investigations and limit the frequency of worker attainment of some key federal safety and permanency outcomes.

The good news was that many child welfare agencies have implemented various workforce practices to improve recruitment and retention- including engaging in university- agency training partnerships and obtaining agency accreditation, a goal achieved in part by reducing case loads and enhancing supervision. Dozens of states, including Ohio, have used federal and state training funds to form partnerships with universities and their schools of social work to better prepare students to enter the child welfare profession. In exchange for tuition stipends, the students commit to work in a public child welfare agency for a specified term. In Kentucky and California, states showed that 86 and 85 percent respectively of participants continued to work for the agency after their commitment concluded.

Illinois officials reported that meeting accreditation (Council on Accreditation-COA) standards of lower caseloads, reduced supervisor - to staff ratios, and increased emphasis on professional credentials had improved the agencies' attractiveness to applicants and enhanced worker morale and performance- two factors critical to retention.

With the assistance of PCSAO and the Institute for Human Services (IHS) the ODJFS initiated the University Partnership in Ohio for this current school year with the Ohio State University and the University of Akron' Schools of Social Work. The first class will graduate soon ready to enter the public child welfare field in Ohio.

Additionally, in 2002 the ODJFS initiated a statewide effort to have all PCSA's in Ohio accredited. Currently, nine PCSA's are accredited by COA and nine are in the "First Class" currently going through accreditation. PCSAO is assisting ODJFS in this bold effort to impact child welfare in Ohio.

The GAO recommends that HHS take actions that may help child welfare agencies address the recruitment and retention challenges they face. Such efforts may include HHS (1) using its annual discretionary grant program to promote targeted research on the effectiveness of perceived promising practices; and/or (2) issuing guidance to encourage states to use their Program Improvement Plans (PIP) to address the caseload, training, and staffing issues cited in the reviews' (CFSR) HHS conducted.

To obtain a copy of the complete GAO study go to: [www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-357](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-357) ▪