

Submission to the Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory 2010

Workforce and Workplace Issues

Brief biography

The author of this submission is an academic, course coordinator and lecturer in social work and humanitarian and community studies at Charles Darwin University. He has been a social work practitioner and manager (in child protection, child and family welfare, and youth justice) in Australia and England for over 10 years. He has now worked as a social work lecturer in three regional universities in Australia.

Other than having significant child protection practice experience the author also has experience, relevant to this submission, in staff supervision (providing supervision and setting up processes within organisations). Recently he has been the Chair of the Australian Association of Social Workers Steering Group that resulted in the recent publication of Cross-Cultural Curriculum Standards for Social Work Qualifying Courses.

Presently he is completing a PhD focussing on widening minority groups' representation in social work practice, and the related staff recruitment and retention issues that present themselves.

It is from the aforementioned practice base and PhD research that this submission is drawn.

Preamble

The child protection system in the Northern Territory (NT) differs in many ways from systems elsewhere in Australia, yet also has many similarities to other jurisdictions.

While inquiries often tend to focus on negative aspects of systemic failures and crises, they also present the opportunity to recognise good practice, to make meaningful and sustainable recommendations and to act as catalysts to change.

It would be easy, and admitted very tempting, to provide a submission that draws upon knowledge and experience across a range of domains that the Inquiry has identified; the author of this submission has significant experience in child and family wellbeing and how early intervention for those at risk can move the system away from only engaging in crisis intervention (or child rescue) into preventative involvement more akin to truly protective (wellbeing) models of child and family support.

However, the Inquiry prefers submissions to have one area of focus, so the tenet of this submission is that from Intake and Assessment Teams to Out-of-home Care Services, for bureaucratic structures and systems, the recruitment and retention of staff must be one of the highest priorities. This written submission is a synopsis of what can be presented by way of an oral submission that the author would very much welcome the opportunity to present.

Introduction

Child Protection services are renowned for their high vacancy rates, poor levels of retention, and the occupational stress (what some refer to as burnout) inherent to the work of the child protection practitioner. The submission will centre on; diversification in recruitment; retention strategies – maintenance, development, and support of staff; and operational factors. While recommendations are inherent within the text of this submission, finer detail of how this can be achieved is not covered as such outcomes require dialogue and negotiation, not imposition, though they can be covered in more depth by way of an oral submission.

1. Recruitment and retention of staff

In Australia, and other white Anglo-western countries, child protection agencies have a workforce that is predominantly female, white, progressively more inexperienced, and under-qualified. This applies to the NT too. However, the demographics and geography of the NT presents some unique challenges, but also opportunities to create innovative recruitment and retention strategies that reflect the diverse indigenous and multi-cultural nature of the population.

Australian child protection agencies also recruit people with a range of qualifications whom, by the nature of their professional training, bring different orthodoxies and paradigms to their work with service recipients. While this has many positive attributes, it does present problems for consistency of service and cohesiveness within delivery teams.

a. A predominantly female workforce

The history of child protection workforces is that numerically women make up the vast majority of the staff (using social work as an example, women represent about 85% of practitioners). Little has been done in the NT or around Australia, or worldwide, to encourage more men into human service occupations, although in the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Community there have been positive actions, generated by governments, to create pathways for more men to enter traditionally female occupations.

Child protection usually focuses primarily on the child and the primary caregiver – the mother. For women to work with women is a positive aspect. However, there is empirical research that shows that significant men in children's lives (the birth father or the male partner of the child's mother) do not engage readily with female workers, thus presenting a strain on staff. The same has been found with boys/male adolescents who have lacked a positive

male role model not engaging with female workers. Outcomes for service recipients, female and male, are measurably better if a male worker as well as a female worker has been engaged, and thus, service delivery outcomes, including staff wellbeing, are improved.

b. 'Whiteness' in child protection

Child protection agencies tend to have a workforce that does not reflect the ethnic and cultural milieu of the population they serve. This places stress upon workers and service recipients, creating fractures in service delivery, uncertainty and mistrust between them, and the real possibility that inappropriate actions are engaged in. This is a highly significant factor for white child protection staff in the NT, as difficulties in 'connecting' with non-white colleagues and service recipients will create tension and the potential that they will feel anxious about failing in their role.

c. An inexperienced workforce

Human service organisations worldwide are dealing with an aging workforce. While this in itself is not an issue, the fact that experience and knowledge is being lost does present a problem for organisations. Child protection agencies have to rely to some extent on recruiting university graduates who are beginning practitioners and lack the deeper knowledge and understanding that comes from practice wisdom gathered over time. Often new recruits have little or no awareness or 'knowing' about the community that they are working with. This can rapidly become overwhelming for them, creating dissonance in their sense of self-application and professional capacity.

d. Under-qualification

Child protection agencies require staff to deal with complex and heavy caseloads. Recruitment of people with suitable qualifications is a struggle, often para-professionals (those without tertiary qualifications) have to deal with matters beyond the scope of their training and qualifications, placing them in unsustainable and highly vexing situations. Many para-professionals are people who have local knowledge, the trust of the communities they work with, and many years of practice wisdom, yet due to their level of qualification they hit a glass ceiling and are unable to move into workplace roles from which they can affect service delivery on a broader scale. Lack of career progression and the inability to influence policy and service delivery results in professional and personal frustration and often leads to these people exiting from the employer/profession.

2. Retention strategies

Child protection agencies tend to operate through a revolving door of recruitment. Many newly qualified workers do not last a year at best before they have had enough and leave the job. This places significant strain on organisational structure and systems, workforce cohesion, key service deliverables, and public confidence. There are known ways that these issues can be handled;

a. Supervision

Supervision is a critical factor for staff wellbeing, team cohesion, and achieving service outcomes. However, supervision must be of a high standard, with individual staff members and in groups, regular (at least monthly), purposeful, and be a high priority to the employer and the employee.

Poor quality supervision will likely have an adverse outcome for all parties. Those who are responsible for providing staff supervision will only be able to provide supervision as good as that which they have themselves experienced or have been trained in, thus investment in supervisors is essential. Often supervision is seen as solely about caseload management and auditable outputs. While this is an essential component of the *administrative* function of supervision, on its own it can be counter-productive leaving staff feeling overwhelmed and disempowered – people report leaving supervision feeling worse than when they went in. Therefore, it is crucial to utilise the full purpose of supervision and include the other facets, *educative* and *supportive*. Through the educative element the supervisor can help the worker develop and share practice wisdom, seek answers to problems and source training and further education as part of their continuous professional development. The supportive strand is concerned with 'issues' that the worker may be dealing with in the workplace and in their personal life that may be impacting on their professional resilience.

b. Workloads

Child protection staff who do not receive regular professional supervision will struggle to manage a well balanced caseload. It is generally accepted that for an experienced worker a mixed caseload (from the more straightforward through the complex caseloads) should ideally be eighteen, and for beginning practitioners less complex and fewer in number. Higher caseloads coupled with lack of or poor quality supervision inevitably raises the likelihood of anxiety, work related stress and vicarious trauma.

c. Professional development

Practice wisdom is partially gained through shared experiences, and reflective activities that can occur in the workplace. However, continuous professional development presents the essential up-skilling, and measurable facets (qualifications) that organisations should see as vital to workforce enhancement. Linkage and partnership with the tertiary and vocational education sector provides organisations and their staff opportunities to familiarise themselves with contemporary theory and practice and to gain recognition for it. Usually this is seen as staff attending a higher education establishment (either in person or via external study). While this is a sound and productive methodology, opportunities to take the material into the workplace, to provide teaching and learning in-situ creates a dynamic that staff find invigorating and meaningful.

3. Operational factors - organisational and bureaucratic

Child protection agencies are under continuous high level stress. They are required to satisfy public and political demands, be constantly under media

scrutiny, and work with very difficult and often extremely complex situations. Child protection is an uncomfortable place to be as a worker and manager. In these circumstances organisations can easily become insular, introverted, and defensive. Hence, the risk of organisational and bureaucratic paranoia is hardly surprising. What are seemingly unsurmountable problems within organisations often result in what can be termed a 'siege mentality', and organisations and bureaucracies become enigmas; unfathomable and reclusive.

In the NT, working with unmanageable caseloads resulting from too few staff, high staff attrition rates, under-qualified staff, and many unfilled positions, is compounded by demographic and geographical complexities, and vast tracts of impaired infrastructure. Couple this with inferior supervision provision, and insufficient professional support and development for staff; the potential for failures in service delivery is clear.

While the picture painted is intentionally stark, there is no intention to promote a sense of despair, rather to bring the focus on reality, what can be done, and how it can be achieved. In such situations commentators often refer to a 'system in crisis.' This holistic attitude alone can cause people to see the crisis as too big. The proposition of this submission is that for workforce and workplace issues (these inevitably factor in to every other issue the Inquiry is looking into) a reframing into 'crises within the system' allows for each tension to be deconstructed and dealt with in a more manageable and less overwhelming way.

Two examples from overseas of how organisations are responding to crises are that are to some extent now gaining some traction in Australia (at least in a dialogue sense) are;

- In England a pilot scheme is running across a number of locales whereby child protection staff teams are relieved of much of the administrative burden they have carried through the use of designated specialised administrative staff. This enables them to do the job they had trained for – early indications are that the outcomes are very positive in all respects. (In another state in Australia the author monitored child protection staff activities over a number of weeks and found that after their administrative functions workers averaged 20 minutes per day for client contact or they spent more time with clients and the administration fell by the wayside).
- In England social work academics are more and more frequently conjointly appointed with the local social services department (often child protection teams dealing with intake and assessment through to long-term care). This creates partnership, development of practice skills and practice wisdom, research capacity and so forth.