



University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work,
Child Welfare Education and Research Programs



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

This research is funded by the PA Department of Public Welfare,
Office of Children, Youth and Families.

Data Brief 3: October 2024

CWEB Post Hire Interview: Experiences of Newly Hired Caseworkers

Introduction

The post hire interview protocol was initiated in August 2020 to provide additional support to CWEB graduates as they enter their county child welfare agencies for employment. The goals of this project can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Interviews are completed by a former county child welfare administrator who is also a CWEL graduate. Interviews are completed once a CWEB graduate is employed for at least 90 days with follow-up interviews at six months, nine months, and up to a year. After the CWEB graduate's commitment is complete, the interviews are concluded. Graduates are encouraged to maintain contact with CWEB program staff and others they have identified in their network of supports.

Figure 1. Goals of the Interview Protocol

Goal 1: Support	Provide graduates with extra support as they start their child welfare career
Goal 2: Intervene	Acknowledge and reinforce the positives that are occurring in the workplace. Identify graduates who are struggling and connect them with the CWERP County Liaison for intervention
Goal 3: Retain	Increase retention time among graduates

In September 2022, the interview questions were revised to comprise two tracts: initial interviews and follow-up interviews. An additional question concerning the Foundations training was added to the initial interview in April 2023.

Literature Review

The literature regarding newly hired caseworkers' experiences as they enter child welfare have been mostly qualitative in nature and highlight the importance of support for these new workers. Many qualitative studies have found that new child welfare workers often lean on their more experienced colleagues for guidance. One study found that, "All the participants referred to colleagues as fundamental sources of learning casework. They spoke of 'watching' and 'seeing' how their experienced colleagues behaved across a range of situations to ascertain behavioral clues that they could add to their working styles" (Harrison et al., 2023).

A study completed by Schelbe et al., (2017) focused on the stressors of newly hired caseworkers such as "The pragmatics of performing their jobs including large workloads; administrative requirements; unsupportive colleagues; and challenging parents and hurt children". Unsupportive colleagues added additional stress to an already stressful career (Schelbe et al., 2017). Other studies found that many new workers felt frustrated or even disillusioned with the larger system that their child welfare agency was part of "Although some did describe rewarding aspects of the job amidst challenges (e.g., helping families), more frequently workers focused their comments on the challenging landscape of child welfare work" (Burns et al., 2023). Additionally, Burns et al. explained that many interviewees "expressed concern over a larger cultural problem in child welfare, specifically that it is a "desensitized" and "broken" system of care," indicating that child welfare workers have noticed the limitations of the system.

While this literature review has highlighted many of the challenges that come with child welfare work, there is also evidence that many workers find the job rewarding and that is why they choose to stay. Schelbe et al. (2017) found that "Workers found satisfaction through helping and making a difference in client lives and having autonomy and variety within their positions". The workers who choose to stay in the child welfare field do so because they enjoy seeing the difference they can make in the lives of their clients.

Research

A total of 248 interviews were conducted, including 109 initial interviews and 139 follow-up interviews. Only initial interviews were used for this analysis to gauge graduates' experiences in their agencies 90 days after hire. To determine the CWEB graduates' perception of their agency placement, they were asked this question during the interview:

CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCES

POSITIVE SUPERVISOR

Graduates' supervisor or other management personnel offered them support and guidance throughout their time at the child welfare agency.

"Support from her supervisor is positive. She has a really good supervisor which makes the job easier."



SUPPORTIVE PEERS

Graduates received support, encouragement, or help from their peers, co-workers, or previous supervisors.

"Support system with the agency, supervisor, other caseworkers and supervisors is great. Never feel alone or scared. There is always someone who will help her and no question goes unanswered."



FAMILIES - POSITIVE

There were positive experiences with the families that the graduate worked with.

"He seems to have a very good relationship with the families he works with. He's had some successes - finding housing, and helped families get their court cases closed."



INCREASED CONFIDENCE

Graduates felt confident that they understood their position and its related tasks.

"She feels like she is getting better at communication and being assertive when figuring out what clients' needs are and getting them the services that they need."



Q4: What has been your experience working in your child welfare agency? (Probe for the best parts and the challenges).

Responses were read and grouped into themes by two independent reviewers. Any conflicting themes or coding was resolved by a consensus of the two reviewers.

Results

A total of twenty themes were identified in the interviews:

- Challenge with age difference
- Families – negative
- Families – positive
- Increased confidence
- Needs confidence
- Negative supervisor
- Overwhelmed
- Paperwork challenges
- Problems with deadlines
- Remote work – negative
- Remote work – positive
- Remote work – neutral
- Positive supervisor
- Supportive peers
- Transferred counties
- Transition to office – challenge
- Uncomfortable – authority of position
- Workload challenges
- Work-life balance challenges
- Transition – student to caseworker

The four most commonly found themes are discussed in detail in Figure 2. The remote work items were specific to the COVID era.

Discussion

The top two rated themes deal with the support and positive relationships with supervisors and peers. As the literature suggests, having supportive peers and supervisors is crucial when it comes to job satisfaction in child welfare (Schelbe et al., 2017). If graduates feel that they are supported by their peers and superiors, they might be more likely to remain in the child welfare field. Research has shown that peer and organizational support predicted a caseworker's intent to stay in child welfare (de Guzman, Carver-Roberts, Leake, & Rienks, 2020).

Another theme that was prominent was positive experiences with families, such as receiving positive feedback from families. Schelbe et. al. (2017) reported that helping and making a difference in the lives of children and families as a satisfaction to newly hired caseworkers. Our data indicates that graduates feel like they are able help the families and children on their caseload.

The fourth most common theme was increased confidence. Graduates reported that they felt confident in their understanding of their job and how best to do it. This could indicate that graduates' internship experience and first 90 days on the job ultimately prepares them for the day-to-day duties of a child welfare worker.

It is also noteworthy that the main themes found are all related to the people in the child welfare system and not the system itself. While all of the common themes are positive, these themes highlight the fact that the workers and client interactions in the child welfare system are what makes it a worthwhile career.

References:

- Burns, D. D., Langenderfer-Magruder, L., Yelick, A., & Wilke, D. J. (2023). What else is there to say? Reflections of newly-hired child welfare workers by retention status. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 144, 106731. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106731>
- de Guzman, A., Carver-Roberts, T., Leake, R., & Rienks, S. (2020). Retention of child welfare workers: Staying strategies and supports. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(1), 60-79.
- Harrison, J., Hodge, S., & Choy, S. (2024). Learning from casework in child protection: The view from within. *Social Work Education*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2352115>
- Schelbe, L., Radey, M., & Panisch, L. S. (2017). Satisfactions and stressors experienced by recently-hired frontline child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 78, 56–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.05.007>

Citation for this report:

Child Welfare Education and Research Programs (October, 2024). Data Brief 3: CWEB Post Hire Interview: Experiences of Newly Hired Caseworkers. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work.

For questions about this project or for further information, please contact Rachel Winters, Senior Evaluation Coordinator at rrw14@pitt.edu or 412-624-3838.

For more information on Pennsylvania's Title IV-E education programs, Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates, and Child Welfare Education for Leadership, including Annual Reports, program descriptions, and FAQ'S please go to our webpage:

<https://www.socialwork.pitt.edu/child-welfare-education-and-research-programs>