Calculated Decisions Entwined in Fate: Reflections as a Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipend Student

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Abstract: Collaborations between schools of social work education and public child welfare agencies have been used as a strategy to improve retention and professionalize the child welfare workforce for approximately 40 years. Funding for these collaborations is provided by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act and can be used to assist current child welfare workers in obtaining their BSW or MSW or to attract social work students to the field of child welfare. This narrative documents my journey, experiences, and insights as a Title IV-E MSW student. It compares my experiences to what the IV-E literature suggests about retention and professionalization within the child welfare workforce and provides recommendations for improving the program.

***Keywords*:** child welfare workforce, Title IV-E, stipend program, turnover, recruitment, retention

Child Welfare: A Profession in Peril

It has been roughly 60 years since the Children's Bureau released a report titled, "In Search of Staff for Child Welfare" which highlighted nationwide staffing shortages within child welfare agencies and encouraged states to use aggressive recruitment and retention strategies (Rycraft, 1994). It appears little has changed since the report's release in 1960. High turnover rates continue to plague child welfare agencies and much of the literature describes this pervasive problem as a "workforce crisis" negatively impacting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children (Faller et al., 2010). Some of the strongest predictors of turnover within child welfare are large caseloads, low salary, feeling undervalued, and lack of respect and little support from supervisors (Griffiths et al., 2017).

Collaborations between schools of social work and public child welfare agencies is one strategy that has been used to address this crisis, according to Zlotnik (2003); one of two major federal funding streams to support these collaborations is Title IV-E. Created as part of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96–272), these funds can be used to attract current social work students to the field of child welfare or to assist current child welfare workers in obtaining their BSW or MSW. The primary goals of these collaborations, Zlotnik shows, are to improve retention and professionalize the child welfare workforce.

I never set out to be a Title IV-E stipend student, never planned to work in child welfare, but somehow, that's exactly what happened....

Calculated Decisions Entwined in Fate

"There is more in a human life than our theories of it allow. Sooner or later, something seems to call us onto a particular path" (Hillman, 1996, p. 3).

In the spring of 1997, I graduated with a BA in Journalism and was immediately hired by a local newspaper in Queens, New York. My career as a journalist was short-lived, however, spanning just shy of a year—the hours were long, the mileage on my car high, and the pay low. The final straw came after I mistakenly reported the outcome of a meeting, and the results became the front-page headline the next morning. Embarrassed and tired, I knew it was time to move on. My friend, the CEO of an employment company, was eager to help.

"I have a great opportunity!" she told me excitedly one day in her office. "It's at a non-profit called Junior Achievement. They recruit and train volunteers from the community to teach business and economics curricula to students in grades K-12. They host volunteer events where employees from a Fortune 500 company go into schools for the whole day, they teach JA, have lunch with the kids, and go out and play with them during recess. It's awesome!"

I did not share her enthusiasm.

"What does this have to do with writing?" I asked, puzzled.

"Well, it doesn't, but I really think you'll love it," she answered, confidently. "Besides," she added, "it's only a temporary position. When it's over, I'll find you something permanent, maybe writing for a magazine."

Desperate for a new job, I reluctantly went on the interview she set up for me a few days later. I had my MapQuest directions printed out and followed them exactly, taking the A train to Chambers Street in downtown Manhattan. Though traveling from Queens to Manhattan took less than an hour, I rarely did it and felt like a tourist standing directly in front of the Twin Towers, head bent straight back, mouth agape, staring up at the mammoth silver buildings that glistened in the sun. I marveled at how they seemed to go on forever until they disappeared into the clouds. I nearly fell backward, and the sudden jolt reminded me why I was here. I eventually pulled myself away and looked at my directions. I crossed the street, looked at my directions again to check the address, and, after some searching, stopped in front of what should have been the building.

"This can't be right," I mumbled to myself, as I checked the address again and compared it to the address on the building in front of me. I shook my head, talking myself out of it, and slowly walked up and down the block, checking the addresses on every building forward and backward until I again stood before the same building.

"Are you kidding me?" I mumbled again, as I walked up to the Buddhist temple. I rang the bell and announced myself, stating less than confidently I was here for the interview, still certain I was in the wrong place—but I wasn't, and the receptionist buzzed me in. I pushed open the door and entered, quietly walking past the room of meditating monks towards the elevator in the back that would take me to the second floor, the smell of incense and chanting following me until the doors closed.

"This is only temporary... this is only temporary," I chanted to myself on the ride up.

The elevator doors opened, and the receptionist led me to the office of the chief operating officer—the walls were adorned with pictures of smiling children and teenagers with their adult volunteers. We immediately hit it off, and soon I was swept up by his excitement and description of the event: corporate volunteers, nervous in the beginning, poring over the curriculum for their assigned classes, then later sitting in elementary school cafeterias surrounded by their students eating sloppy joes, and afterward running around the schoolyard playing tag and double-dutch. Their perfectionism went out the window when they realized these children were just happy to have someone different to share their school day with. He showed me thank-you letters written in crayon and drawings of schools and smiling stick figures. He offered me the position, and I accepted on the spot. This decision would set in motion a five-year career that eventually led me onto the path of child welfare.

The events were held over several months with different groups of volunteers attending different schools throughout the city. Sometimes, volunteers had to cancel last-minute and Junior Achievement staff were asked to fill in. One day, I volunteered in an inner-city third-grade classroom in Brooklyn. The veteran teachers at this school warned me that this particular class was "out of control," and all throughout that morning their regular classroom teacher interrupted my lessons by excessively yelling at them to stay quiet. At lunch, my class surrounded me as we crammed together at the long, white, marble-like picnic table in their cafeteria—they fought with each other over who would sit next to me and stared at me with looks that were simultaneously skeptical, curious, and hopeful. When lunch was over, we went out into the schoolyard and were instructed to form two, silent lines if we wanted to go play. My class couldn't do it. Instead, they pushed one another, yelled obscenities, and made biting remarks about daddies who were missing and mommies who were drunk. One little girl hit another and blamed it on what her mama called "a heavy hand." I watched, stunned. How could these sweet nine-year-olds be so angry?

I pleaded with them to stop, but their anger grew, and they began blaming one another as they watched other classes skipping rope and playing basketball around us. I contemplated, briefly, running off with another class and leaving mine to their fate of yelling and hating, but I could not—would not—abandon them. Instead, I raised my voice and asked, "Don't you want to play?! Come on! Stand in line, like this." I stood as the first person in line and started placing students one behind the other. "Stare at the person in front of you! I want to play with you guys." Now we were laughing, and it became a game. Finally, they stood giggling silently, staring at the head in front of them. "OK. I'm calling her over," I told them and quickly ran over to the authoritative figure who ruled the schoolyard, looking back at my class frequently, smiling and encouraging them to continue to be silent by placing my forefinger over my mouth. I tapped the administrator on the shoulder and beamed proudly at my class who continued to hold their two, silent lines. "I don't believe it," she said as she approached my class, genuinely surprised. "Is this Mrs. -----'s class?" I emphatically shook my head yes and that's when she said the words we had been waiting for: "Go play!" The two straight, silent lines erupted into chaos as we all ran screaming and laughing.

When the day ended and it was time for me to say goodbye, one little boy asked to give me a hug. After we hugged, he looked up at his teacher and asked, "How come you never hug us?" It was at that moment that I realized these children were not "out of control." They were simply

children who were neglected of the attention and affection they so desperately needed and deserved—children who, it appeared to me, were surrounded by apathetic adults who had already given up on them and told them, without saying a word, that they would be forever relegated to this life of anger and poverty. I hoped my lessons in the classroom, and my belief in them in the schoolyard, showed them this was not so. That day, I committed my life to improving theirs.

I volunteered in many classes during my tenure at Junior Achievement. I also recruited, trained, and placed thousands of volunteers from the community in some of the most impoverished schools across New York City. I enjoyed what I did tremendously, but I was also deeply troubled by what I saw; for example, children I barely knew called me "mama." In the stairwell, two sixth grade students were skipping class. When I asked them why, they boasted of aspirations to be "players" and "gamblers" and, as such, school was a waste of their time.

During this time, my emotions ranged from confusion to pity to frustration to anger, as I slowly began to realize I was witnessing the devastating effects of poverty, oppression, and inequality endured by these children and their families. With this epiphany came an increased responsibility to do more. But I didn't know what or how, until yet another decision entwined in fate found me in front of a computer in San Diego searching for a way to help children and their families.

This time in my life gets confusing for me because it all happened so quickly. One minute I was driving from New York to Illinois, finally ready to be together forever with my long-distance love, then the next minute (three months actually), I was told by said love that things just weren't working for him, and that when we had been dating long-distance, things were "safe and easy." After this uncomfortable conversation, I had another life-changing decision to make—stay in Chicago (where I knew no one), move back home to New York (where I didn't want to go back yet) or take my dad up on his offer to move in with him in San Diego. I chose the last option and, keeping with my desire to help children, worked for another non-profit, Best Buddies International. I worked as a program supervisor ensuring the quality of high school and adult volunteer programs that advocate for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Then one day, after living in San Diego for just about a year, my dad told me he was considering buying a house in another state. Yet more circumstances beyond my control requiring me to make more life-changing decisions. What would I do now? Stay in San Diego? Should I move back to New York? Move with my dad?

I had considered going back to school in the past, but it was usually just a fleeting thought. As I calculated my next decision, I resolved to move with him because it seemed like the best way I could go back to school. Now that I had a plan and knew where that plan would take place, I had one more decision to make—what would I go back to school for?

The Child Welfare Stipend Program: A Title IV-E University-Public Child Welfare Agency Collaboration

I don't remember the exact word-search combination I used—*children, families, master's degree, helping*—but eventually, my search led me to the child welfare stipend program at a

Southwestern university; it was a Title IV-E funded collaboration between the university's school of social work and a public child welfare agency. The goal of the program was to provide MSW students with the educational experience necessary to meet the challenges of child welfare practice.

The program covered in-state tuition for two nine-month periods (fall and spring semesters) of the MSW program and provided students with a monthly stipend. In return, students were required to work for child protective services for two years upon graduation. At that time, I knew very little about the social work profession and even less about child protection. What I did know is that I wanted to obtain a master's degree and get a job helping children. Knowing I'd have both—AND have my education paid—made it an easy decision to apply.

The program consisted of two years' classroom education coupled with a field placement. The university is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and, as such, the MSW program follows what Colby (2013) describes as the "profession's preferred educational standard" (p. 5)—a two-year, full-time model with year one focusing solely on foundation and year two focusing on specialization. The Standard Program child welfare stipend students could choose between a Direct Practice (DP) or Planning, Administration, and Community Practice (PAC) Concentration. I chose the latter, because I felt I could make the most difference at the macro level.

Some of the foundation courses for my first year consisted of Human Behavior in the Social Environment; Policy; Research; Diversity and Oppression; and Community and Organizational Change. During my concentration year, I took classes specific to the PAC concentration—Program Planning in Social Work; Social Work Administration; Statistics; Legal Issues in Social Work; and Community Participation Strategies. There was only one class that I was required to take in the second year that set my education as a child welfare specialization student apart from other social work students—Child Welfare Services. As I reflect on what I learned in this class, I believe the content did enable me to be a better child welfare worker. I learned about poverty and its deleterious impact on families and communities; I had a greater understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and their influence on parenting styles and family values; I was introduced to the concepts of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender and how together, they influence the way child welfare services are designed and administered; and I learned how to examine the challenges families face and how these challenges contributed to the need for child welfare intervention.

This class, indeed my social work education, allowed me to have a better understanding of the families that come into contact with the child welfare system, thereby allowing me to be more empathetic and reserve judgment. I learned that many of these parents are not sadistic abusers and have actually been victims themselves—of abuse or neglect when they were children, of systemic racism and classism, of judgment, of inequality, of poverty, and of multiple systems that communicate poorly with one another, causing frustration and anger for those who need help.

When I applied to the program, I believed I was a good fit. In my Statement of Education and Career Goals that I submitted with my application, I stated in one paragraph that I was

"passionate about helping children and their families obtain the services they need to become a loving, cohesive family." This commitment to children and families, according to the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (2005), is one of several positive personal factors that are attributed to retention in child welfare. Another personal factor cited by the study is previous work experience. The work I did at both Junior Achievement and Best Buddies should have also contributed to my staying. Finally, in another section of my statement, I wrote, "I am resolute in my dedication to child welfare and understand the hard work that is necessary to complete this program." According to Jacquet (2012), "When IV-E programs recruit students who express a commitment to child welfare, it is apt to lead to increased retention of the MSWs in public child welfare agencies" (p. 420).

Using all of these personal factors, I was, for all intents and purposes, a good fit for the program. But just as there are personal factors that contribute to retention, there are organizational factors that also influence retention, as well as turnover, in child welfare. When I applied and was subsequently accepted to the program, I was unaware of the latter fact. In the beginning, I was eager and excited to learn about social work, child welfare, and how, when using the disciplines together, I could make a difference in the lives of children and families.

Field Placement

Field placements ran concurrently with coursework. In our first year, all stipend students were required to complete their field placement in an Education Unit as a student intern. These units were placed in three Child Protective Services (CPS) offices throughout the state and provided students with hands-on experience. There are two parts to CPS—investigations and on-going. An investigator is, as the name implies, the worker who goes out to investigate allegations of abuse or neglect. If there is cause for removal and placement into foster care, the case is transferred to the on-going unit. Our first-year field placement was with an on-going unit and comprised a supervisor, a caseworker, a case aide, and roughly five MSW students. We were given frequent one-on-one supervision, coupled with a seasoned worker, and provided experiences such as conducting home visits and participating in a mock trial in which we were given details of a real case and called to testify. We were evaluated on our performance with the children and families we worked with and how we applied our classroom knowledge with our practical field experience.

Our first supervisor was a gruff chain-smoker who had been with CPS for roughly 35 years and retired shortly after we arrived. At that time, I smoked as well, and we often ran into each other at the designated smoking section outside the building. If he provided me with any pearls of wisdom as to how to succeed at CPS during these encounters, I don't remember what they were. I just remember that as it got closer and closer to his last day, his smile got broader and broader, and his presence lighter and lighter, until one day he floated away to retirement and was gone.

His replacement, almost literally, floated in. Everything about her was light—her flowing clothes, her soft voice, her mannerisms. She exuded an aura of calm and tranquility that seemed out of place in this hectic, fast-paced world of family court appearances and home visits. One day I shadowed her on a home visit. As we stepped out of the car and started walking towards the house, an enormous, bony, disheveled dog came running at us, barking ferociously. My

supervisor was a few steps ahead and stopped dead in her tracks. I did the same, as did the dog. It was a standoff. My heart was pounding as I watched her, waiting for our next move. I thought for sure she was going to about-face and yell, "Run!" but instead, she slowly held out her hand as if calming vibrations shot out from her fingertips. The dog cautiously walked over to her and started sniffing her hand. I stared in awe.

"Poor baby," she cooed as she petted it softly. "You're just hungry, aren't you? Where are your owners?"

She later explained during supervision how the dog would sense fear. She explained she respected and loved it because it was a living creature; she did not feel threatened or frightened. She understood that all things are connected by an energy flowing through the universe and felt the animal's pain. She then explained she practices yoga and meditation, and that in this profession, it is important to find healthy ways to cope with the daily barrage of stress and trauma. I had no idea how true those words would ring until I graduated and started my work at CPS.

Field placement in my second year was focused on my PAC concentration, and I was placed at a non-profit child advocacy organization. As an intern, I conducted public policy research pertaining to the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and advocated for its reauthorization. I summarized complex public policy issues concerning child health care and disseminated that information—through fact sheets, email alerts, and sign-on letters—to a diverse audience, including policymakers and lobbyists. I met with state legislators and advocated alongside my supervisor and other staff. I enjoyed the advocacy and research my internship provided and wondered if there would be an opportunity to continue this macro-level work once I was placed at CPS.

In the spring of 2007, I graduated with my Master's in Social Work, PAC concentration, and specialization in child welfare. I felt my classroom education, coupled with my field placements, prepared me for the work ahead at CPS. I also had the Social Work Code of Ethics to guide me. I felt proud my newly chosen profession had a code of ethics. Lastly, I was excited my classmate would be with me. He was my classmate-turned-coworker (and will be referred to as my CTC throughout this paper), and I couldn't have survived without him. We supported one another throughout coursework and during our first-year field placement. I knew that together we would go through district orientation, training, and eventually, we would be placed together in the same CPS unit. Although I was nervous, there was comfort in knowing that we would be there to support one another—that I wouldn't be alone.

District Orientation

The trainees trickled into the blue, windowless room, one by one, and sat at one of the three round tables, six chairs to a table. At each seat was a pink writing tablet for notes, a package of post-it notes, a yellow highlighter, a large binder clip, and a table tent to write our names.

All around the room hung dozens of posters—the agency's guiding principles, its vision, its mission statement, a drug identification chart, meth lab hazards, and a poster titled "A Body on

Drugs" depicting small, square, before-and-after pictures of individuals with body sores and missing teeth, unrecognizable after methamphetamine ravaged their bodies and minds. At the front of the room hung a big sign on the dry erase board that read, "Welcome to ACYF District 1!"

The training began with introductions: name, degree, experience, why CPS? Why now? Most of us wanted to help children—to improve their lives and the lives of their families—to make a difference in this world in some small way.

"I was in foster care," said one trainee. "I'm grateful for CPS and for the system. I want to give back."

A majority of us were social workers fresh out of school, newly obtained master's degrees in hand. Now it was time to put that social work education into practice.

During the three-day district orientation, we were inundated with information. I had no idea this was only the beginning, a pre-cursor for a much longer "marathon training" as one former stipend student put it. Some of the information was administrative—how to fill out a timesheet and mileage report; how we were going to be evaluated; an introduction to our personnel folders, what they contained, and where they'd be sent. Folders and folders of information and paperwork. One was even labeled "Survival Guide," but as I learned after several months on the job, even survival seemed impossible.

We were asked what we think are characteristics of a CPS employee. What are the traits we bring with us? As we called them out, our trainer wrote them down:

"Organization!" shouted one.

"Empathy!" said another.

"Effective communication!" said a third.

Observance, good listening skills, teamwork, patience, a sense of humor—on and on we went—ability to manage emotions, dedication to self-care, problem-solving skills, knowledge of child development, understanding of trauma, understanding of policies and procedures, flexibility and, last on my list, ironically, is time management skills.

Time management. This was impossible for me, indeed for many, in the world of CPS. No matter how many times I arrived at seven am, left at seven pm, worked on the weekends to type up progress notes or close out cases, it seemed I could never catch up, could never quite get a handle on my caseload....

Child Welfare Training Institute (CWTI)

After the three-day district orientation, we were sent to another location in a different part of the state for the Child Welfare Training Institute (CWTI). The training consisted of three weeks of

classes, then we would report to our unit for a week of shadowing, then three more weeks of classes, then back to our unit permanently. Once there, we would be on the new employee schedule, slowly getting cases and going out with a seasoned worker who would allow us to lead the investigations and assist when needed, until we were fully immersed in our unit and part of the full rotation of investigations.

On our first day of training, we were given an empty binder.

"Policies change so quickly around here, it doesn't make sense to have a binder already made," explained one of our trainers. "Instead, we'll be providing you hand-outs every day to insert into your binder until, at the end of the CWTI, you have a complete training binder."

We learned an incredible amount during our time at the CWTI, beginning with legal definitions of child abuse and neglect. We were shown a drawing of a dirty home and were asked to identify what was a safety concern (open electrical wire hanging from the ceiling) as well as what wasn't (empty pizza box on the floor). We spent, as would be expected, a considerable amount of time learning how to interview children. We were taught not to ask leading questions. We were taught children struggle with understanding time (last week, last month) so when we ask questions, it's important to ask questions around seasons or holidays or birthdays. "Was that close to when school started? Near the 4th of July?" We were taught about "good touch, bad touch" and how to explain that to a child during an interview. "A bad touch is when someone touches a part of your body that your bathing suit covers. Can you remember a time that happened?" We learned about domestic violence and its impact on children, and we were taught that methamphetamine and "meth labs" were growing to crisis proportions in the Southwest.

Every day brought with it new concepts and new documents to place in our binder. After three weeks of training, we were ready to report to our unit.

Reporting to My Unit

"How's your training going so far?" asked my supervisor during our first supervision session.

Today was the first day I reported to my unit after being at the CWTI for three weeks. For the entire day, I was out in the field, for the first time, shadowing a seasoned worker who was conducting investigations. This was the first opportunity my supervisor and I had to speak.

"It's going well," I replied.

"So, did they scare the shit out of you with the nanny cam video?" he continued.

Oh yes, I thought to myself. Yes, they did.

It's been 13 years since I saw the nanny cam on our first day at the Child Welfare Training Institute, and for as long as I live, I will never forget it. The trainers warned us about the nanny cam. They said it would be disturbing. That is an understatement. There is nothing—no words, no warnings, no vague description of, "You're going to witness child abuse"—that can really

prepare you for the nanny cam. Still, we tried to brace ourselves for what was about to happen. I can still hear the collective deep breath of reluctant anticipation....

I will warn you now, dear reader, as the trainers warned us—what follows is a description of what we saw. If you don't want to read about how a sadistic abuser, as we later learned he was, beat an 11-month-old, then please move on. As I watched this video during training, I wrote down what I saw and what I felt. I'm sharing it with you now because this is what we saw as child protection workers in training—individuals who wanted to make a difference, who wanted to help children....

The trainer hit play, and instantly, the unidentified man, made so by the camera blurring his face, burst into the room with a clear purpose. There was no pause. No hesitation. No second-guessing. In an instant, he yanked the 11-month-old out of her playpen by one arm, held her dangling in front of him, drew back his free arm with a clenched fist, and gave three quick blows to the child's abdomen—BAM! BAM! BAM! With each blow, her limp body swayed back, then forward, back, then forward. She lost her breath and stopped crying. I scribbled as fast as I could, wanting to take down every description, every sound, every sight. We can't be the only ones to witness this, I thought. As my head was buried in my notebook, my classmate next to me cried out, "Oh, my God!" and out of the corner of my eye, I saw him push himself away from the table. We were in the last row of the classroom, and he pushed himself so hard against the table, the wheels on his chair carried him almost to the back of the room. His hands flew up to cover his gaping mouth, his eyes wide with shock. I looked up at the screen just in time to see what appeared to be a stuffed animal being thrown into the playpen. But it wasn't a stuffed animal. It was the baby. The trainer paused the tape and proceeded to ask us what injuries we thought the baby sustained. The trainer then hit play again, and the abuse started again. When the whole horrific event ended, we were told the police responded after viewing the tape, the sitter was arrested, and the baby only had two small bruises on her stomach. The point in all this was to make us aware that it takes a lot to cause bruises, and we should be vigilant. The emergency room doctors said because she was swinging as he held her by her arm, she didn't get the full blows, which saved her....

"...So, did they scare the shit out of you with the nanny cam video?" he continued.

"It was probably the most disturbing thing I've ever seen," I replied feebly.

"Well forget it," he advised. "That's not who our families are. A majority of our cases are neglect. Parents have substance abuse issues, mental health issues, lack of support—no family or friends to help them out. Yes, there's abuse, and we have to protect children. But don't rush to judgment, don't...." He stopped, and then asked, abruptly, "Did your asshole tighten up when you went out on your first investigation today?"

I sat staring at him, caught completely off-guard for two reasons—one because of his complete bluntness and crass matter-of-factness, and two because he was right. When my colleague and I parked in front of our first house that morning, my entire body tightened up. My heart raced faster and faster as we approached the door and my hands couldn't stop shaking. We held nothing more than a clipboard with a report containing allegations, a brochure informing parents

of their rights, and our ID badges.

"We can't carry anything?" I had asked her earlier that morning when we left the office. "Not even pepper spray?"

"Nothing," she confirmed. "Make sure you shake the gate so if there's a dog, it'll come running while you're still outside. Make sure you know which way the door opens, push or pull, when you're in the house in case you need to get out quick, and never, ever, sit with your back to the door or someplace where you're blocked from an exit."

When he saw I couldn't muster a response, he saved me by asking if I wanted another piece of the Italian bread we were snacking on. I nodded, and he ripped off a piece with his hands, crumbs flying everywhere.

I liked my supervisor. I liked his frankness. I liked the way he tied his thinning salt-and-pepper hair into a ponytail that fell into one long spiral down to his shoulder blades. I liked his staccato rhythm laugh that quickly rose and fell until you weren't sure if he had laughed at all, and I told him this during the unit lunch that was held to welcome me and my CTC to the team on our first day.

"Good," he told me. "It's a good thing when I laugh."

I didn't think anything of that statement, but my CTC didn't like it. He said it sounded foreboding, almost like a warning. Little did I know that would be one of many things he didn't like about our supervisor. The importance of supervision, both as a source of social support as well as workplace support, is an organizational factor that can contribute to either retention or turnover (Wilke, et al., 2018). For my CTC, it was a major factor that contributed to his leaving.

But supervision wasn't a turnover factor for me. I felt supported and thought our supervisor was fair to us and our families. I appreciated the way he helped me think critically about my cases. He wasn't a social worker, nor did he have to be—a social work degree is not a requirement to work in child welfare, and while there is some debate in the child welfare literature as to whether or not social workers make better child welfare workers than non-social workers, there is agreement that child welfare service delivery is deeply rooted in the early history of the social work profession, and much of the literature on child welfare competencies and social work education cite direct links between the two (Social Work Policy Institute, 2010).

I observed these links with my supervisor, and there were instances in which I felt he was applying social work skills, both with our families and with us. He would use reflective listening frequently and understood the power dynamics that existed between us and our families. He encouraged me not to rush to judgment and, most importantly to me, despite how busy he was, he was always available for consultation. Whenever I was having difficulty with a case, I would softly knock on his door, which was always open unless he was having supervision with one of my colleagues.

"Got a sec?" I would ask sheepishly, feeling bad I was interrupting.

He would usually be sitting at his computer, reviewing our case notes, reading new reports he was about to assign to one of us to investigate, or conducting myriad other tasks he was required to do as a unit supervisor.

"Of course. What's up?" he'd ask.

"I don't know what to do about this case," I began one day, and flopped into the chair in front of his desk. "I have a 12-year-old girl. She's still wetting the bed. She's hoarding food. She's not showering. Maybe she's being sexually abused?" At this point, my voice trailed off until it was barely audible.

"What?"

"Maybe she's being sexually abused," I said a little louder.

"You do that a lot," he observed.

"Do what?"

"Your voice. It trails off when you're not confident about something, and I can't hear you. No one can hear you when you do that. Even if you're uncertain, say it. Don't let your voice go off into a whisper."

"Really? I never noticed that."

"Don't do that either," he advised. "At least not when you're interviewing kids."

"Do what?"

"Sound surprised. 'Really?'" he said, imitating me, his voice rising sharply. We both laughed. Then he grew serious again.

"If you do that during an interview, a kid will pick up on that and will tell you what he thinks you want to hear. You can't show any emotion when you're interviewing," he advised. "No matter what you hear."

"I had no idea I did that either. Thanks for this."

"So, what do you think you should do?" he asked, re-focusing the conversation and getting me to think about the case I brought to him. "Do you want to remove?"

"I don't know," I said, frustrated.

He eventually helped me think through all of the options. I did not remove the young lady and instead offered in-home supportive services that would help the grandfather with his granddaughter's behaviors, as well as provide therapy for the young lady to understand the

underlying causes of these behaviors. My supervisor and I had many meetings like this, both in supervision and impromptu. He never appeared annoyed and was never too busy to provide guidance.

My CTC, on the other hand, did not feel supported. In fact, our feelings about our supervisor could not have been more opposite. He felt our supervisor was insensitive and did not hold the same ethical and social work values that stipend students held regarding helping people and families. He also felt our supervisor made statements that were very direct and condescending with little regard for how they would be received.

Moreover, my CTC expressed these concerns with our training supervisor, who then elevated it to the human resources director. The latter did not want to intervene and instructed the training supervisor to instruct my colleague to go to our supervisor, and then our supervisor's supervisor if the problem could not be remedied. In short, he should follow the chain of command. Because he was new, he did not feel comfortable doing this. In addition to the lack of supervisory support he felt, my CTC believed he was not suited for investigations and requested to be moved to an on-going unit. This request went unheeded, and he was required to remain in our unit. He felt demoralized and disempowered as a result.

Peer support is another factor in retention, and although my CTC did not feel supported by our supervisor, many of our colleagues in our unit were very supportive. They wanted us to succeed, taking the time to answer our questions and helping us to process what we were observing daily. The floor of our building housed several other units in both investigations and on-going, and in addition to the colleagues in our unit, we met others during our first week of shadowing. Everyone was supportive and grateful to have us on board, but as time went on, it seemed to me the air was always heavy with defeat. My CTC noticed this as well, and as the weeks turned to months, secondary trauma and burnout were evident in some acts of insensitivity and judgmental attitudes. Once we were asked to transport two children to a foster home after they were just removed from their parents.

"I need you two to take this one and this one," said a worker from another unit, as she touched each child on the top of the head.

She said it so matter-of-factly, with no emotion. My CTC and I immediately looked at one another and later discussed how concerned we were by this. The worker did not call these children by name and, it appeared to us, did not even recognize the trauma these children just endured after being removed. We later realized that this type of behavior was a symptom of secondary traumatic stress, and it explained the defeated vibrations I felt. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2016), child welfare workers are at very high risk of developing secondary traumatic stress because of their daily interactions with individuals who have experienced trauma. Moreover, this trauma and secondary trauma experienced by children and families, as well as staff, can affect organizational culture, which in turn can negatively impact child welfare workers who want to help children and families.

Despite these instances, it was clear that those who took a job in child welfare were committed to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Why else would they work such long

hours and put their own safety at risk? I remember I hadn't seen one of my colleagues for a few days. When we finally ran into each other, I noticed she had a circular bruise on her arm the shape of a cup. It was purple and yellow with some green throughout.

"Jesus, what happened?" I asked.

"I was supervising a visit and the parent got upset with me. She threw the sippy cup at me, and it hit me right in the arm."

Fortunately, I was never physically assaulted, but I was most certainly verbally assaulted and intimidated on many occasions, sometimes even before going out on an investigation.

"Hey Boss," I said, as I knocked on the door of my supervisor's office one day, holding the report I was about to go investigate. "Um, the report says there's a gun in the home...?" I said, half statement, half question.

"Welcome to the Southwest," he responded without looking up from the computer.

A few CPS workers even voiced how much they loved their job. When I was at CPS for several months, I had a conversation with a 10-year veteran and asked him what kept him in investigations.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," he replied enthusiastically.

"That's awesome!" I exclaimed in an Oscar award-worthy performance of hiding my shock.

I can't imagine doing this for one more day, I thought to myself.

2008 Journal Entry

"You never know, when you knock on that door, what's on the other side." –14-year CPS veteran

For the past two weeks, every Saturday and Sunday, I go out to the balcony and chain smoke, reflecting on my week. "Don't take your work home with you," advised several seasoned employees. Too late. I've shadowed several investigators on at least a dozen child abuse and neglect reports—watching, learning, questioning, and calculating—what will I do when the case is mine?

Safety. Risks. Family preservation. Policy. Dangers. Strengths. Concerns. Social work. Dignity and respect. They all come together and guide me in making critical decisions.

As I sit staring out at the palm trees, I light another cigarette and recall the last case of the week....

"We're going to see mom, first," said the veteran CPS worker I shadowed. "She's at the hospital. Read the report while we drive there."

A SEN (Substance Exposed Newborn). Cocaine. Six children already removed, and baby makes seven.

"I hate her," I said flatly after reading the report that contained the allegations. Six kids? And now another baby? But why?

I regretted those words the second I said them. My second week on the job and already I broke a code of ethics—dignity and worth of the person.

"I'm not feelin' the love here," my CTC chided from the backseat.

"I know, I know," I sighed. "But that tiny baby."

I can't think about it anymore and grab my cellphone to call my grandfather. I've learned to be patient and let the phone ring at least a dozen times. With each ring, I can see him shuffling closer to the phone.

"Hello?" he finally answers.

"Hey grandpa, it's Jennifer."

"Jennifer!" he says, enthusiastically. "So nice of you to call."

We talk about our favorite radio political pundit, he tells me about the opera he heard on the radio earlier that day, and, eventually, he asks me how the new job is.

"It's OK," I answer. "It's already kind of stressing me out," I admit.

"I don't know how you're doing it," he replies. "I couldn't take it. All those crying mothers. 'My baby, my baby. Please don't let them take my baby!' It was too sad. I had to leave."

I have completely forgotten my grandfather was a family court interpreter.

"Just make sure you take care of yourself," he advises.

"I will," I assure him, lighting up another cigarette and pouring myself a glass of red wine as the clock strikes noon. "I'll be home for the holidays."

"Can't wait," he replies. "Thanks for the call!"

Child Protective Services Specialist II

After shadowing, followed by the other three weeks at the Child Welfare Training Institute

(CWTI), I was ready to start. On my first official day, my first case was waiting for me on my chair, placed in a manila folder with clasps on both sides. On the right was a report which contained the allegations taken by the CPS hotline. On the left, among other paperwork, was a domestic violence screening tool and a brochure detailing parental rights. I was on the new employee rotation so, for now, there was just one case. In time, there would be more. Many more. I opened the folder and began reading the report. It wasn't at all what I expected. No physical abuse. No emotional neglect. It was a suicide—a father who took his own life and a mother who couldn't be located. The suicide note, which he wrote to his 11-year-old son, was included with the report. I read how sorry he was that he did this and how he hoped his son would understand and forgive him. I couldn't believe I was reading this. I felt the corners of my mouth turn down so sharply they hurt. It took all the strength I could muster to not break down and cry on my first day, 15 minutes into the job.

"Good morning," said my supervisor who popped into my cubicle, startling me. "I see you're reading your first case."

"What are we supposed to do with this?" I asked, puzzled. There was no respondent parent. He was deceased.

"We have to go see him," he answered, referring to the child who was staying with a family friend.

Despite the emotional toll of my first case, it was relatively easy in that it was not time-consuming. We found the child's mother, and I supervised a few visits. I didn't observe any safety concerns and, in fact, she appeared doting and loving. I don't recall the facts of the case and why the child was living with his father and his mother wasn't more involved. But after supervising several visits at her home and interviewing the child several times, as well as others who knew the family, I concluded, with my supervisor's consultation, that there were no safety concerns and no reason he couldn't live with his mother. I made referrals for counseling—individual for the child and family for them both—and closed the case. I felt good that I was able to help this family. This, I thought, is why I'm here—to help.

But as the weeks went on, my caseload grew. The allegations ranged from medical neglect (called in by a doctor who felt the parents were not doing enough to help their anorexic teenage daughter), to physical abuse (a child who was disciplined with a hanger), to child endangerment (a mother and aunt who were arrested during a drug raid while the child was sleeping in another room). Eventually, I was put into full rotation, and the cases seemed endless. Just when I thought I may catch up thanks to putting in long hours and working weekends, it was my turn to investigate new allegations, and the cases I was working on the week before still had work that needed to be done—voicemails to be returned, notes to be written, and visits to be conducted. This went on for months and, eventually, I felt like a hamster in a wheel. No matter how fast I ran, how early I arrived, how late I stayed, how many weekends sacrificed, I simply couldn't catch up and was going around and around but not getting anywhere.

In my last supervision session, I was questioned about the number of open cases I had on my caseload—45. My investigations determined they were all "unfounded" which means I did not

have sufficient evidence to conclude abuse or neglect. An "unfounded" case also means that what happened didn't meet the legal definition of child abuse or neglect. In these instances, these cases just needed to be closed, but instead they sat in my drawer and showed they were still open on my caseload in the computer database.

"Why haven't you closed them out yet?" my supervisor asked.

"I don't have the time," I explained feebly. This had become my mantra. There was no other explanation. There was never enough time.

The concept of time management was laughable. Every time I turned around, it seemed it was my turn to do investigations. Just when I thought I might have some time to write my progress notes, or finish a court report, or transfer a case to the on-going unit, it was my turn again. When I arrived at my cubicle in the morning, I'd find several manila folders stacked on my chair, each one containing various allegations, all with varying priorities—"priority 1" required us to go out within two hours, and "priority 4," 72 hours.

"Don't wait until the last minute to go out on your P4s," our supervisor advised us early on. "You never know when something will change, when you'll get a P1 that'll push the P4 to the side, and then you'll be late going out to investigate the P4."

"I understand," he said. "But if something happens to one of those kids, if one of them dies, even if the case is unfounded, because it's still an open case on your caseload, it's still on you."

And that was it. That was all I needed to hear. On me?! I felt I had been duped, set up to fail. I didn't blame him. He was the man in the middle, the one who heard it from up top, who heard it from even further up top until I was certain no one had any understanding of what was happening down below. How could anyone possibly think this job was manageable?

In Search of Staff for Child Welfare

"Dear -

Regretfully, as per our conversation... I am resigning from my position as Child Protective Services Specialist II effective... My decision is based on a number of factors including, but not limited to, unrealistic job expectations, irreconcilable priorities, and extreme emotional stress endured throughout my employment.

I will be providing the agency with a more comprehensive letter detailing the many issues and concerns I have regarding both the [stipend program and the agency]."

I walked in and handed my supervisor my resignation letter. He showed no emotion. He was neither surprised nor disappointed. He took the letter from me and said simply, "This is too bad. You were really starting to get it."

I was tempted to take it back, to give it another try and not feel like a quitter. But then I thought

about how I was smoking up to two packs of cigarettes a day, how my eating habits had deteriorated, and how I was attending more happy hours, and buying more bottles of wine than any one person should. I thought about how my ever-growing "To Do" list raced through my head each night while lying in bed praying for sleep—*call the psychiatrist, go out and do that last home visit, return all those voicemails, write that court...*—until sleep finally rescued me; I thought about how every morning when my alarm went off I unconsciously sighed, "Oh f - - - ," as the thought of everything I had to do raced back into my brain, uninterrupted—*...report, schedule the team decision-making conference, go to that school and interview that teacher, should I have removed that child?....* And I thought about the 45 open cases sitting in my drawer and how if something happened to one of those children....

"I'm sorry," I said, defeated. "I just don't think this is for me."

I lasted just one year and two months as a Child Protective Services Specialist. My two weeks' notice turned into one month as I meticulously closed out every one of the 45 cases and ensured the ones that were still open could be easily followed up with. I provided detailed notes and made sure all forms and assessments were complete. I felt bad leaving my unit, knowing that with my departure, and the departure of my CTC (who resigned at the same time for similar reasons), they would be down two people and left to pick up the cases that would have been assigned to us to investigate. I felt bad for my supervisor as well, because I knew he, too, would have to pick up new cases.

Despite my deep commitment to child welfare, my passion for helping children and families, my newly acquired social work education skills, and hands-on field placement at a public child protective services agency, I became exactly what the Title IV-E program was designed to prevent—one more child welfare worker who contributed to the high turnover rate within the profession. My classmate-turned-coworker (CTC) made two.

During our time together at CPS, my CTC became my rock and my sounding board; I was the same for him. I know there was no way we could have lasted as long as we did without one another. Peer support is identified as a retention factor in the child welfare workforce recruitment and retention research (e.g., Griffiths, et al., 2017), but it wasn't enough to prevent us from leaving. Though we encouraged one another and tried to stay positive and see our commitment through, the demands on us—our time, our emotions, our physical and mental health—were simply too great.

We felt we had been set up to fail by everyone involved in the child welfare stipend program at the university and the child welfare agency who knew what this job entailed and didn't tell us. We were so angry we drafted a letter to the governor with the hopes of eventually sitting down to meet with her. We felt we could not let this happen to others. Our letter detailed the "dynamics, issues, and concerns" we had. We emailed other stipend students asking them about their experiences, incorporated our own experiences, and expressed our concern that stipend students were not provided with all of the information needed to make an informed decision, especially as it pertained to the emphasis on paperwork and timeliness of case transfers and closures.

Our letter detailed 28 irreconcilable priorities that conflicted simultaneously or within similar time frames of each other, which included, but were not limited to:

- Completing family and child assessments and investigations within mandated timeframes
- Receiving four or more new investigations each week
- Completing case notes within mandated timeframes
- Completing the Child Safety Assessment/Strengths Risks Assessment within mandated timeframes
- Completing case closures, transfers, and case plans within mandated timeframes

We asserted the time frames, mandates, policies, and expectations could not be completed in a 40-hour workweek, and, coupled with the emphasis on paperwork and timeliness, believed that all of these dynamics were incongruent with all we had learned during our social work education. In short, we believed we spent more time on paperwork and less time providing these families with the help they needed.

On and on we went, for 24 pages, detailing everything we felt was wrong: issues resulting from the irreconcilable priorities (decreases morale of investigative stipend workers); forced overtime (impossible to complete tasks in 40-hour workweek; cannot adequately address families' needs); work environment (being threatened with write-ups if cases were not closed or transferred); and the cumulative and long-term effects of it all (increased mental, emotional, physical stress/illness; burnout).

My CTC submitted his exit survey on his last day. He was detailed and thoughtful in his comments explaining everything we documented in our letter. I, on the other hand, was so angry by how it all played out, and was focused so much on what I wanted to say, that I never said it—the comprehensive letter I planned to provide detailing the many issues and concerns I had with the stipend program and child welfare agency, as well as the 24-page letter my CTC and I spent so much time researching and writing, was never sent. Eventually, I moved back to New York and was immersed in job-hunting and reconnecting with my family. He was also job-hunting and reconnecting with himself, engaging in the self-care activities he didn't have time for during our time together at CPS. In short, our lives moved on.

Conclusion and Recommendations

I may not have been a good fit for investigations, but I never left child welfare. After my experience at CPS, I spent roughly five years as a foster care, adoption, and post-adoption supervisor, followed by another five years working at a legal services organization where I provided direct social work support and advocacy to parents involved with the child welfare system. I am currently employed at a public child welfare agency conducting the macro-level work I have always wanted to do.

In some ways, I also never truly left that Southwest state. I subscribed to daily news clippings and kept my finger on the pulse of what was happening there. In 2013, I learned the child welfare agency had come under intense scrutiny because there were thousands of child abuse

and neglect reports that went uninvestigated. This was the result of a practice that began in 2009, shortly after I left. In an attempt to manage increasing workloads, an increasing number of children entering foster care, and a decreasing workforce, a special unit was created and tasked with identifying the more severe allegations called into the statewide hotline. During this new process, cases were erroneously designated unnecessary to investigate and were closed. While the media, the public, and politicians vilified the agency, I understood how something like that could have happened. It was an act of sheer desperation, of an attempt by those in the trenches to manage the unmanageable, to try to stop the bleeding coming from a wound that had become so deep and so wide that not even the tightest tourniquet could stop the gushing.

The average caseload around that time was well over 100. When I resigned, I had 45 cases that needed to be closed and dozens more that were open requiring varying degrees of follow-up. I had breathed a sigh of relief knowing I had left just in time, but my relief quickly turned to guilt when I realized my workload was absorbed by my remaining colleagues who still had their existing caseloads to manage in addition to new cases rapidly being assigned to them daily.

An issue brief by the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) cites caseload and workload as contributing factors in turnover. According to the brief, *caseload* is defined as the number of cases assigned to a worker, whereas *workload* is the amount of work that's required to "successfully manage assigned cases and bring them to a resolution" (p. 2). Both caseload and workload were factors that contributed to me leaving. Decreasing caseload and workload is a way to improve retention. The child welfare agency I worked for found a way, and the average caseload size dropped from 145 to 22.

Because of my high caseload and workload, I felt the utilization of my newly acquired social work skills was limited. I spent more time doing paperwork than providing these families with the help they needed. One recommendation to address this issue is for public agencies to "review their job expectations of workers and determine whether their expectations for caseloads and paperwork permit workers to achieve their ultimate objective of the child welfare system: helping children and families" (Samantrai, 1992, p. 457). Though this article was written more than 25 years ago, its recommendation is as salient today as it was back then, and it is one I strongly echo.

Although the Title IV-E program did not contribute to my retention, I do believe the social work education I received was instrumental to my professionalism. It provided me with the foundational skills of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation when working with children and families. It also taught me to be culturally aware; to understand the detrimental effects poverty, racism, and oppression had on these families; and to use a strengths-based perspective.

I don't know whether or not these social work skills improved outcomes for the children and families I worked with, and the research on this subject is varied. Hartinger-Saunders and Lyons (2013) conducted a review of the peer-reviewed literature on Title IV-E funded programs and conclude

> Research studies still remain somewhat small [and] current published research at the time

> of this review has not progressed in order to link outcomes related to retention rates, education level, skill and knowledge attainment, and employee and organizational characteristics, to improved outcomes for children and families (pp. 292-293).

In contrast, Leung and Willis (2012) found improved outcomes for children and families who had Title IV-E stipend workers, specifically pertaining to the reduction of time to achieve reunification and on the reduction of time to achieve adoption. Regarding improving workforce retention, Carr et al. (2019) found Title IV-E education may reduce turnover and retain workers who hold an MSW. The study also found that MSW workers who received Title IV-E training expressed higher intent to stay in public child welfare than those workers without Title IV-E training.

Much of the research pertaining to the Title IV-E stipend program is complex and sometimes contradictory, with some studies finding it does improve outcomes for children and families and positively impacts caseworker retention and others finding it does not significantly contribute to either. To be sure, continued research is necessary. Smith (2002) recommends "strengthening evaluations of federally-funded child welfare training through well-targeted questions, strong research designs, strong research methods, innovative methods, and theory-driven studies" (p. 189). This is another recommendation I would strongly echo, particularly with the recent passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). The FFPSA allows states to use Title IV-E funds to pay for services to prevent children from being removed from their families and placed in foster care. With this focus on prevention, outcome evaluations of the effectiveness of Title IV-E education partnership programs can be instrumental in bolstering arguments that advocate for the necessity of continued federal support of these programs (Leung & Willis, 2012).

While writing and researching this paper, I revisited the university website and noticed a new section was added. This section advises potential applicants to learn more about a career in child welfare, specifically at child protective services, and to assess whether they would be a good fit using several documents provided on the website, including one dispelling common myths about working at CPS, one reviewing the role of a case manager, one listing frequently asked questions about the stipend and scholarship programs, and one covering information about working for the state child welfare agency. Lastly, a self-assessment is provided which allows applicants to consider whether certain personality characteristics they possess fit with the demands of working for a child welfare agency.

I was glad to see this section was added and recommend all Title IV-E programs do the same in order to help prospective students understand what child welfare work entails. Equally important is for prospective students to research all they can about child welfare work. Visiting the state child welfare agency's website and looking at job descriptions is one way to have a better understanding of what the position entails. If possible, it would also be advantageous for prospective students to speak with former stipend students who are current employees. These recommendations can help prospective students make an informed decision as to whether or not they want to apply. This is important because a recurring concern that was expressed by fellow stipend students was the lack of information provided about working at Child Protective Services. My colleagues felt they were not given all of the information they needed in order to

make an informed decision. To that end, I would also recommend adding a Realistic Job Preview (RJP) video to all Title IV-E stipend program web pages and include a link to the partnering state child welfare agency. This recommendation is supported in the research literature. According to Faller et al. (2009):

> RJPs appear to be a useful strategy for recruitment, selection, and retention of child welfare employees. They may reduce the workload of human relations staff, serve the function of assuring a goodness of fit between employee and the child welfare job, reduce turnover of child welfare staff, and increase job satisfaction (p. 44).

Two final recommendations: 1) Do not place the person based only on the needs of the child welfare agency, and 2) Provide internships and field placements that more closely resemble the work the student will be doing once hired. My CTC recognized he was better suited for on-going work but was required to stay in investigations because he was a stipend student. If we want to improve retention of Title IV-E MSW workers, a balance between agency need and the goodness of fit referenced earlier should be reached. Additionally, our first-year field placement in the on-going unit was not reflective of where we would eventually be working. I recommend providing students field education training units that are representative of where they will be placed upon graduation.

I'm no longer angry at the university or the state child welfare agency. I know now that the individuals who work there each did, and continue to do, the best they can. The additions to the university website, as well as the reduction in caseload made at the agency, demonstrate the on-going effort to improve recruitment and retention of the child welfare workforce.

Everyone who works in child welfare plays an integral part. Some of us work directly with children and families, some of us conduct research to improve policy and practice, and still others educate and train the next generation of child welfare workers. All of us are committed to keeping children safe and families strong and supported—safety, permanency, and well-being. It is our mantra. It is our calling.

Disclaimer

The opinions and statements contained in this writing are those of the author only and do not represent the opinion or interest of any State agency or department within the State.

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