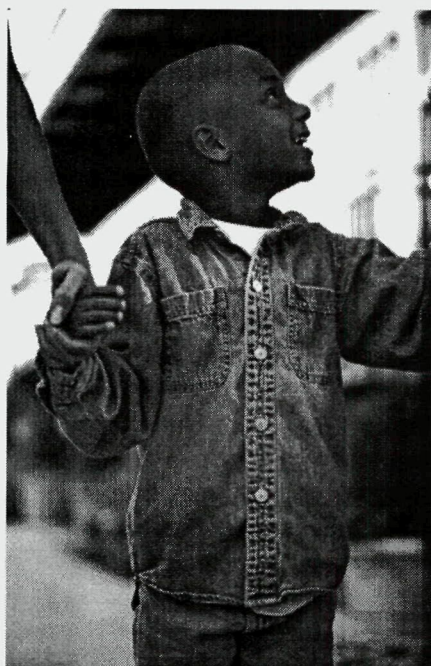


Ongoing Learning: From Title IV-E Student to Public Child Welfare Worker

The author is a 1997 graduate of San Francisco State University. She worked in an intake unit as a screener for a month; then she was in a combined unit of court/FR/FM for two years. For almost a year she has been in the emergency response unit. Currently she is part of a best practices pilot project to change the risk assessment used by the Emergency Response workers to reflect a strengths-based approach, among other things.

by
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When I think of the Title IV-E Program, four main ideas come to mind: how the program was useful; areas for improvement; my internship experience; and my reflections on county differences in the delivery of public social services and nature of the social worker's job. I will discuss my personal experiences and what is true for me.

I can sincerely say that the Title IV-E Program prepared me for my career in public social services. I learned the overall structures of the department and the regulations that govern the system. The program helped me to realize that I had a false perception of public social work. I thought I could be an advocate just for children and "save" them. It became clear to me that the goal was to focus services on the parents so those children could remain or return to the home. This is an extremely important reality because I found out that I burned out much faster when I tried to focus only on the children.

My program at San Francisco State University did an excellent job of teaching me how to develop mutually respectful relationships with the clients. It provided me with a framework on how to work with families. I was taught how to focus on family

strengths and remain conscious that the family are the experts of their own life and I can learn from them. It is important to me that I remember to focus on their needs and strengths, not their deficits and weaknesses

Although the overall program was useful, there is room for improvement. In retrospect, I could have used more training in sex abuse assessment and mental health diagnosis. I feel like IV-E did not train me in these areas, yet I was expected to know about them. Gaining a better understanding of mental health issues has helped me assess my clients more accurately and connect them to appropriate resources. A sex abuse interview is usually traumatic and can be even more traumatic to a social worker that does not know how to effectively conduct the interview. I had to learn how to do a forensically correct interview so that I did not traumatize the client any further.

Even though I attended some excellent trainings, it was sometimes difficult to translate the information into practical skills. For example, after the training on how the court system is structured, it would have been helpful to have a follow up training on how to write court reports. In general, I think a lot more emphasis should

be spent on risk assessment, court report writing, and developing case plans, since these seem to be the essential skills necessary to the job. I would have liked training sessions where I did assessments using actual tools, was given a case to write a court report on, and then had to write the case plan.

Since my internship offered me an opportunity to put my trainings into practice, I think it was the most valuable aspect of the IV-E training. Thus, I think students should be required to do two years at child protective services, but in different counties and units.

There are so many skills to learn and they are different for each unit. For example, it requires different skills to work long term on a family reunification case, compared to investigating referrals within ten days. When you are primarily investigating referrals, you do not spend as much time developing and maintaining respectful relationships with the families. I have also learned how important it is that the investigating social worker be aware of his or her own biases when deciding which children should be removed. I think the IV-E program should be clear about how roles vary depending on the unit and the type of services you are required to offer.

Without my internship, I think my transition into public social service would have been much more difficult. It helped me prepare for my hiring interview and begin my work assignment immediately. Therefore, I believe that it is crucial that future students spend an ample amount of time finding the best

internship and volunteer positions in a unit that will be challenging. Also they should be sure to find a supervisor who is supportive of the IV-E program and is committed to preparing them for employment with CPS.

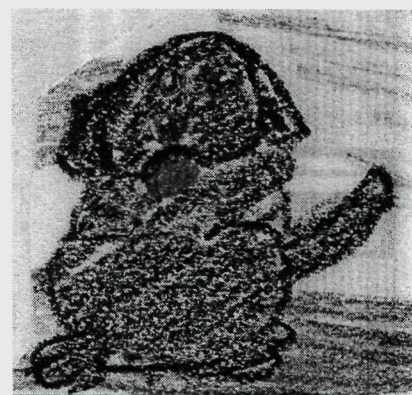
After working in two different health and human services departments, it was very interesting to see how different they can actually be. When I was an intern in Alameda County, almost all of my clients were African-American, poor, lived in Oakland and had substance abuse as a major obstacle in their life. They seemed used to working with service providers from various agencies and were used to seeing diverse staff. Their expectations of me were based on my working for the "government" not on cultural factors.

As an employee in Marin County, the majority of the referrals I receive are on Caucasian families. Even though I have some clients who are poor, I have others who live in million-dollar homes. Confidentiality becomes very important to the clients who are judges, police officers, therapists, doctors, and other professional members of the community. I have witnessed first hand how money and prestige can change the disposition of a case.

It is also interesting to see how differently African-American families in Marin respond to me, compared to my clients in Oakland. When I was in the ongoing unit, most of my clients were African American and primarily lived in the same community. Clients seem to be pleasantly surprised to see an African American social worker and I

was able to develop a working relationship relatively quickly. However, when the family did not comply with the case plan and I had to enforce a consequence, it presented a problem. The family felt betrayed and often told me I should be more sympathetic to their struggles of being poor, African-American, and residents of Marin. Their expectations seemed to be based on my being African American, not a government employee, and it often required an intensive dialogue.

Overall, it is clear to me that abuse and neglect transcends across all racial and economic lines. The IV-E Program, along with a good internship, helped prepare me for life in public social services. There are so many skills that need to be learned that I could not imagine trying to do this job without the training and opportunities offered to me by the program. The lessons I learned from the IV-E staff, my clients, and classmates were all invaluable experiences and I would do it all over again. I encourage perspective MSW students to take the challenge and become a social worker in public social service.



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