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Commentary on "Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of the Influence of the Organizational Environment on Permanency Decisions for Families"

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The article entitled "Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of the Influence of the Organizational Environment on Permanency Decisions for Families" provides a framework to understand how child welfare caseworkers (CWCs) view the environment in which they make decisions that affect the lives of children and families. CWCs are entrusted to make decisions that protect the safety of children within complex family systems that have failed the child. They weigh the multiple interests of children, their caregivers, and public and private systems that are also entrusted to protect the child to make the right decisions and recommendations for all parties involved. CWCs assess complex circumstances to determine the nature of family problems, the need for further investigation, and, finally, the outcomes that are in the best interest of the child. They may make life-changing recommendations for a child to be removed from the home or placed in out-of-home care, and they make recommendations for permanency outcomes.

CWC decisions regarding a child's placement are made in the face of competing needs of the children, families, and public organizations that are responsible for the safety of the child. The decision to remove a child from a home or place the child back into a home should be made after considering all available information about the prior circumstances and what is known about the present situation. What happens when that information is not known or accessed? What happens when the CWC cannot collect data because resources needed to do so are not available? What changes can be made within the child welfare system that improve CWC decisions when monetary resources to fund services are not likely to increase in the near future?

The Smith article looks at the factors that affect the work that the CWC does to make decisions regarding child placements and permanency within a child welfare system of competing values. Given the competing values that CWCs face, Smith's study asks the question, "To what extent do contextual factors in the organizational environment impact decisions made by social workers to reunify or terminate parental rights of children placed in foster care?" Smith attributes the decline in the number of children placed in out-of-home care to progress made by the child welfare system in preventing children from unnecessarily remaining in foster care (U. S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2011). Progress in reducing the number of children in foster care depends in part on the ability of CWCs to investigate the many cases that are in the system and make decisions as to what is best for the child.

The article seeks to discover whether the environment in which CWCs work influences decisions to reunify or terminate parental rights.

CWC recommendations must be defensible to those who are also responsible for the outcomes, such as the court system, family members, and others whose lives are impacted by the outcomes (Parada, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007; Smith, 2006; U. S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2003). The concern is that CWCs not only encounter difficult situations, but also face conflict from within their work settings that may impede the decision-making process or influence decisions (Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; Margolin, 1997; Pelton, 1989). There is concern that CWCs who are overwhelmed with multiple cases and have little access to needed information regarding the child's situation might place a child back into an unsafe environment. Heavy case loads, bureaucratic distractions, and role conflicts may adversely affect their decision-making abilities to determine what is in the best interest of the children and families for whom they are responsible. Pressures from the public, social and legal organizations, and media influences, (Stein, 2000) (Costin et al., 1996; Margolin, 1997; Pelton, 1989) as well as racism, sexism, and ethnocentric influences (Cohen, 2003) may affect a CWC's decisions to reunify or to terminate parental rights. Furthermore, other factors such as the beliefs and values of key stakeholders, along with federal, state, and local policies, may also come into play.

Working within the child welfare system where casework loads are high and monetary and personnel resources are low can be overwhelming and frustrating to CWCs. CWC decisions can be affected by time pressures, minimal resources, inadequate services and organizational distractors that are inherent in the child welfare system (Brooks & Webster, 1999; Brown & Etta, 1997; Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Whipple, Solomon-Jozwiak, Williams-Hecksel, Abrams, & Bates, 2006). The information discovery process necessary to making an informed decision about child welfare situations is handled by employees who may feel overwhelmed and who may not have access to the resources needed to make the best decision. The study found that CWCs view high caseloads and excessive paperwork as a major issue in their work. CWC respondents indicated that they face overwhelming caseloads and that their work can never be completed in a usual work-week time frame. However, 43% strongly agreed that they are expected to make decisions without appropriate resources, and the resources and materials available to execute their case assignments are inadequate to do their job. This finding is concerning because people who feel that they cannot do a good job at what they are entrusted to do face frustration and burnout and eventually leave such a frustrating work environment.

The article underscores the importance of understanding the perceptions of child welfare caseworkers regarding the factors that influence their day-to-day decisions. CWCs work with supervisory people in the child welfare system who guide and oversee the work that is done. Smith found that most of the CWC respondents provided positive feedback about their supervisors. Smith's study found that CWCs strongly agreed that advocacy is an essential part of their job and that they advocate to help clients obtain needed services. They are committed to their work, and need support from supervisors and key stakeholders to make the best decisions possible for the children and families they serve. A final note regarding the future of the child welfare system and the case workers who bear responsibility for the lives of vulnerable children. Smith underscores the importance of including the perspectives and concerns of child welfare caseworkers in the development of both policies that guide their practice and programs needed to deliver services to children and families. There is a need for increased funding from policymakers to title IV-E child welfare training programs to ensure there are highly competent Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)- and Masters in Social Work (MSW)-prepared social workers to do the needed work to keep children safe. We need intelligent and committed people to be CWCs. Smith stressed that need because of the far-reaching consequences that the decisions they make have on the lives of children and families they are entrusted to serve in the child welfare system. When their work environment is consistently overwhelming and frustrating, it may be a reasonable choice on their parts to leave the system. What the child welfare system can do to protect CWCs in light of the diminishing resources available in the system is to listen to what CWCs say, recognize the flaws in the system and support CWCs in their work to protect our children.

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