

2007

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Recommended Citation

Logan, Angie and Meir, Kevin (2007) "Relationships, Income Support and Decision Making: A Qualitative Synopsis," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol10/iss1/6>

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Relationships, Income Support and Decision Making: A Qualitative Synopsis

Angie Logan and Kevin Meir

This qualitative study of one midwestern state's child protective services addresses whether an income support measure for poor biological caregivers reduces the length of time that their children spend in foster care. The overall findings suggest that workers do value the worker-family relationship. However, some view the immediate worker-client relationship as secondary to the inclusion of extended familial supports particularly as related to sustained more long-term outcome achievement. Most workers additionally agree that client involvement during all phases of the reunification process is critical.

In 2005, one midwestern state's child protective services agency administrative staff expressed an interest in conducting a qualitative study to determine whether an income support measure for poor biological caregivers would reduce the length of time that their children spend in foster care. This particular qualitative inquiry was initiated as a means to elicit insight regarding the caseworker–client relationship, discretionary decision-making, income support, and biological family reunification. The state's child protective agency administrators were asked to select key stakeholders for inclusion in the focus group from both Economic and Employment Support Services (EES) and Child Protective Services (CPS) administrative, supervisory, and front-line staff while simultaneously identifying key foster care subcontractor staff members from a foster care agency in the state.

Poverty/Child Neglect Connection

Poverty-related neglect substantiations account for nearly 60% of the entire foster care population (CWLA, 2000). When children are outplaced into foster care, their parents often lose Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) cash in addition to medical card benefits. Consequently, the loss of these supports results in extended length of stay in foster care for children. Therefore, if public assistance policy were construed in concert with child welfare policy all parents would be given the opportunity to reunify with their biological children. "Vagueness of statutes enlarge judicial discretion while increasing the likelihood of failures of due process and false findings of child abuse" (Huxtable, 1994, p.60). Since states receive their Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funding via block grants, they have the authority to determine how their TANF dollars get spent. Therefore, it would be a viable option, according to the state's child protective services agency administrators, to pilot an income support measure by utilizing a portion of their block grant budget. However, federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) permanency timeline legislation would still need to be amended to include a standardized TANF waiver, which would extend monthly payments throughout the standard fifteen month outplacement period.

Empirically Identified Factors in Reunification

The following factors serve to reinforce timely reunification: the caseworker-client relationship, discretionary decision-making, and income support. Numerous child welfare scholars have indicated that a link exists between the caseworker-client relationship and sustained long-term outcomes (Littell & Schuerman, 2000; Littell & Alexander, 2004; Caliso & Milner, 1992; Coleman & Collins, 1997; Stein, 2003; Smith & Donovan, 2004; Safran, Crocker, McMain, & Murray, 1990; Gaudin, 1993; Morrison-Dore, 1996; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989; Berry, Charlson & Dawson, 2003). The caseworker-client engagement process in the volatile involuntary child welfare arena is difficult to cultivate when families are experiencing pervasive levels of poverty. An empowerment-based theoretical approach to working with these families would support the notion that their participation to work toward reunification is contingent upon adequate access to income, healthcare, childcare, employment, transportation, housing, and education.

Although this particular qualitative inquiry includes caseworkers as participants as opposed to parents as participants, it is imperative to briefly provide a context citing parents' views of the working relationship as described in the child welfare literature. Chapman, Gibbons, Barth and McCrae (2003) found that parents receiving child welfare services cited four overall key factors contributing to the success of the worker-client relationship: frequent contact, continuity of care by the same worker throughout the entire treatment process, implementing relevant services in a swift manner, and ensuring that service provision will assist in sustaining successful outcomes.

According to Cash (2001), parents are more likely to participate in services when more task-oriented approaches are utilized as a means to reduce heightened levels of family stress. Coleman and Collins' (1997) qualitative inquiry further lamented that parents prefer working with friendly yet frank workers who "listen, support, and teach" while providing individually tailored services and supports. Morrison-Dore's (1996) comprehensive review of the working alliance literature suggested that relationships with involuntary child welfare clients could be cultivated fairly quickly if workers would consistently adhere and subscribe to using an empathy-driven empowerment-based approach.

Outcomes in child welfare are in part, contingent upon the quality of the caseworker-client relationship (Berry & Dawson, 2003; Littell & Alexander, 2004; Morrison-Dore, 1996). Morrison-Dore (1996) refers to Safran, Crocker, McMain, and Murray's (1990) work on the warning signs of alliance rupture, while noting that the caseworker-client relationship could in fact be monitored and tracked by specifically identifying (1) negative statements regarding the caseworker or services rendered by the caseworker; (2) conflicting responses from clients regarding previously agreed upon goals, (3) failure to maintain appointments, (4) refusal to follow through on agreed upon tasks between scheduled appointments, and (5) overly compliant reactions to agreed upon objectives.

Petras, Massat, and Lehr-Essex (2002) developed the ENGAGE Model for caseworkers serving children and their families involved in the child welfare system. The premise of their conceptual model conforms to Bowlby's (1969) notions regarding

attachment theory, which implicitly acknowledges the inherent bond between children and their biological parents. Petras et al., (2002) further illustrate that child welfare system involvement serves to perpetuate despair and hopelessness. Therefore, they recommend that caseworkers work toward educating parents about the adversarial nature of the child welfare system while simultaneously culminating the restoration of hope and the development of supportive community partnerships.

“Given the time limitations in child welfare legislation and managed care, it is especially important to determine methods of quick engagement and treatment compliance for neglectful families” (Dawson & Berry, 2002, p. 305). Littell and Schuerman (2003) in conjunction with Gaudin (1993) and Berry (2003) further illustrate that relationships and services need to be individually tailored to suit the immediate and complex needs of families involved the child welfare system in an effort to promote more sustained long-term changes.

Berry, Charlson, and Dawson (2003) stated that “The two most recent family policy directives [Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) 1996 and Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) 1997] are: limits on the length and amount of financial assistance to families in poverty and limits on the amount of time that families can receive child welfare services. Given that families who neglect their children are those typically most in need of (i) continuing financial assistance, and (ii) services of a longer duration, the outlook for these families under current practice directives is poor” (p. 21). Concurring with the findings of other child welfare scholars, Waldfogel (2004) states that increases in poverty in the state of Illinois are associated with increases in child maltreatment rates. Courtney (1999) additionally indicated that as a nation, we must begin to assess the ramifications of poverty instead of consistently focusing on individual family deficits as a means to more adequately address and prevent child maltreatment. Courtney (1991), in earlier work, also noted that it is a common phenomenon for biological caregivers to become involved in the child welfare system while unemployed.

According to Gaudin (1993), poor caregivers substantiated for child neglect have ongoing restricted access to the adequate resources necessary to remedy their allegations. “Poverty is a confounding factor in defining neglect”(Gaudin, 1993, p. 4). Paxon and Waldfogel’s (2002) work further illustrated that poor parents receiving TANF, consistently more often than not, were reported, alleged and substantiated for poverty-related neglect. “We still find that poverty, working single mothers, and unemployed parents are significantly related to the number of victims of maltreatment” (Paxon & Waldfogel, 2002, p. 458).

Child well-being outcomes, with respect to child maltreatment, are relative to the economic conditions of individual states (Waldfogel, 2004; Ozawa et al; 2004). Brandon (2000) also previously found that that prior to welfare reform, states with higher Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) cash payments had lower foster care caseloads. Wells and Guo (2003) also indicated that consistent receipt of welfare as opposed to income earned from work is associated with swift reunification. In sum, the child welfare system is utilizing the foster care system as an ineffective means to address the overall wellbeing of poor children.

Income Support

Too many poor children are residing in foster care because TANF public policy is not construed in concert with child welfare policy. Waldfogel and Paxon's (2002) research illustrated that 40% of families receiving TANF in Illinois had their children removed from the home. The authors also concluded based on their findings, that lower welfare payments were associated with higher foster care caseloads. Wells and Guo (2003) study found that consistent receipt of TANF during child outplacement resulted in reduced number of days spent in out of home care. Currently, foster care "maintenance payments" paid to foster parents during child outplacement come from uncapped Title IV-E funds which cost states millions of dollars, whereas TANF child payments to biological parents typically range from \$140.00-\$202.00 per month (Kansas Social and Rehabilitative Services Economic and Employment Services Manual, 2004). One midwestern state's child protective services agency 2003 Fact Sheet indicated that 88.4 million dollars were spent on preserving 3,046 foster care families while only 9.3 million dollars were spent on more front-end family preservation services for 2,570 families. At the present time, several states provide a 45-180 day TANF extension to poor families during outplacement, however, this is a discretionary decision that presently rests in the hands of individual caseworkers. Several Child Protective Service (CPS) workers in one state noted during an informal focus group interview, that they were completely unaware of the discretionary 180-day waiver extension option for poor families even though it is clearly outlined in that state's 2004 Economic and Employment Support Services (EES) Manual.

Discretionary TANF waivers are only authorized and extended to poor families during the outplacement period if their caseworker is aware of the 180 day policy. Child abuse and neglect substantiation and removal criteria consume the bulk of the research literature regarding caseworker decision-making. Therefore, it is necessary to refer instead to the literature on income support immediately following child outplacement to ascertain reunification outcomes as related to discretionary caseworker decision-making. Smith and Donovan's (2003) qualitative research findings suggest that " Decision making time frames established by the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA; U.S. Public Law 105-89) underscore the need for child welfare caseworkers to use efficient and effective practices, especially when families are working toward reunification" (p. 541).

Child welfare scholars Kortenkamp et al(2004); Harris and Courtney (2003); and Wells and Guo (1999) suggest that there are six key characteristics that predict longer lengths of stay for children living in out-of-home placements: family race (African American); child gender (male); female-headed single parent households; neglect substantiations; pervasive poverty conditions; and child and maternal health problems. Doherty (2003) stated that biological parent reunification occurred more often when caregivers had a high school education, steady employment, comprehensive support services, and an absence of substance abuse issues.

Following their evaluations of the Norman Cash and Housing Assistance Program, Shook and Testa (1997) and Eamon (2004) concurred that when family participants received cash and housing help, length of stay in out of home placement was reduced overall by an average of 122 days. Eamon's (2004) work provides a

comprehensive overview of the Norman Program (NP). This initiative resulted from a consent decree agreement between the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services. The *Norman v. Johnson* (1990) holding stipulated that it was unconstitutional to remove children from their biological families solely on the basis of poverty. Reminiscent of the “no removals based solely on reasons related to poverty” statements made by Teddy Roosevelt at the White House Conference of 1910, the holding from this proceeding required the state to adhere to “reasonable efforts” by providing intensive cash and housing support services to poor families. Eamon (2004) additionally illustrated, by citing case law examples, that many children, despite lower court implementation of “reasonable efforts” provisions, continue to be removed from their biological caregivers solely on the basis of poverty.

“Using state level panel data, we find that socioeconomic circumstances, in particular income, parental work status, and single parenthood, affect the incidence of child maltreatment” (Paxon & Waldfogel, 2002, p. 465). Caregivers who receive consistent cash assistance from monthly welfare checks as opposed to income earned from wages reunify with their children at swifter rates; however, not all families are given the opportunity to continue to receive assistance following outplacement (Meier, Booe & Zeysing, 2005). In order to more effectively address the poverty related underpinnings of neglect and dependency, income support waivers must be tied to parallel the 15-month ASFA (1997) permanency planning timelines.

Caseworker Discretion

Caseworkers are often over worked and inundated with superimposing federal policies that don’t adequately address the structural barriers that their families face. “Correcting the imbalance of power involves the sharing of information, including educating parents about the child welfare system and fully disclosing information about their case so that they can make informed decisions” (Petras et al., 2002, p. 236). According to the Urban Institute’s (2001) *New Federalism Child Welfare* report, several states have implemented Statewide Automated Information Systems (SACWIS), Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting Systems (AFCARS), and Structured Decision Making (SDM) standards for accountability purposes, caseworkers are still using subjective decision-making processes to make removal, reunification, and termination determinations.

The aim of recent reform, according to the 2001 Urban Institute report, is to “propose a more customized and individualized approach to families” (p.12). Due to the changes in ASFA’s permanency planning guidelines, workers now have only 12 months to engage families in the treatment process. If little progress is made within the first few months, workers begin to work more diligently toward finding alternative placement options for the child (Zeysing, 2005). Stein (2003), in addition to Smith and Donovan (2003), stated that caseworkers prefer to work with foster parents instead of biological caregivers following child outplacement because foster parents have more access to resources and are typically easier to work with. “An unanswered question of vital importance is how preventative efforts be given the necessary attention at the same time that foster care services are expanded so that they are available to all children who need them” (Whittaker & Maluccio, 2002, p. 108).

In child welfare services, although supervisor signatures are required, decisions are based upon disclosures made by individual family caseworkers. EES and CPS workers have the ability to engage in discretionary decision making on a daily basis. Though workers around the country are now required to use universal standardized risk assessment templates, individual workers ultimately still determine whether children will be removed, maintained, reunified, and or alternatively placed. EES workers additionally have the authority to cut off cash assistance to biological caregivers as a penalty for non-cooperation or compliance. One state's child protective services caseworkers are given the authority to discern which particular caregivers are worthy of TANF waiver provisions following the removal of the child from the home into foster care. They also possess the discretionary power to withhold needed supports such as access to streamlined substance abuse and mental health services (Meier & Booe, 2005).

Themes conveyed throughout the literature support the notion that caseworkers consistently spend more time during the 12 month outplacement period focusing on alternative placements in contrast to preserving the biological family unit due to ASFA's conflicting concurrent case planning stipulations (Stein 2003; Smith & Donovan 2003; Waldfogel 2000; Urban Institute 2001). This unrealistic approach to permanency presents an insurmountable strain on caseworkers, particularly those working to address maltreatment concerns reinforced by poverty. "If workers do not attend to the biological parents, they cannot compile the data necessary to sustain a petition to reunite a child with her or his parents nor the data necessary to sustain a petition to terminate parental rights" (Stein, 2000, p. 591).

Smith and Donovan's (2003) qualitative inquiry suggests that caseworkers are often subjected to restrictive working conditions that are reinforced and maintained by poorly developed public assistance and child welfare policy mandates. State level agencies that are required to adhere to these strict guidelines render caseworkers helpless in their quest to provide assistance to poor caregivers. "For example, if caseworkers deprioritize contacts with parents, decision makers who depend on caseworkers for knowledge about parents may fail to learn about important aspects of parent's lives, families may fail to receive services they need or want, especially under ASFA timelines, and important permanency decisions could be based on insufficient or inaccurate information" (Smith & Donovan, 2003, p. 560).

The authors further indicated that sensationalized child maltreatment media accounts may explain why caseworkers view the treatment of the biological parents as secondary to maintaining the foster family. "Media stories often portrayed tragedies as the result of faulty decision making or caseworker errors" (Smith & Donovan, 2003, p. 548). Huxtable (1994) additionally posited that the tendency to sensationalize child deaths by blaming caseworkers results in an exacerbated number of children being removed from the home.

Stein's (2003) work indicates that the tenets of ASFA are based upon "anecdotal rhetoric" instead of raw data. "Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996) rest on a common set of values that express, among other views, the conviction that (1) social policy should not reward women who choose to have children out-of-wedlock and to raise their children on their own at state expense and that (2) social policy should not provide the means for people who use illicit drugs to support their habit nor should a parent's use of illicit drugs

be rewarded by the state taking on permanently the role of the parent” (Stein, 2003, p.670).

Methods

The study that is the subject of this manuscript sought to explore and identify the following three questions:

- 1) How does the caseworker-client relationship influence reunification outcomes?
- 2) How does individual caseworker discretion influence reunification outcomes?
- 3) How does extended income support during child outplacement influence reunification outcomes?

Sample and Design

Two ninety-minute focus groups were conducted. Key state child protective services agency administrators from both EES and CPS selected 12 participants for inclusion in the relationships, decision-making, and income support as related to reunification outcomes inquiry. Three participants were administrators from a foster care agency in the state while the remaining participants were state protective service agency EES or CPS administrators, supervisors, and or front-line staff. This study was operationalized using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) naturalistic paradigm while additionally incorporating the key elements of Kreuger’s (1994) focus group methodology. “A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on defined areas of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment...conducted with approximately 7 to 10 people by a skilled interviewer” (Kreuger, 1994, p.6). The focus group sessions were conducted at two different points in time with 12 participants in attendance at the first meeting and 8 of the former 12 in attendance during the second group at one midwestern state’s service center.

Procedure

First upon entering the group room, a non-judgmental atmosphere was created for participants, the consent form was reviewed , and the following methodology procedures were explained :all perceptions are valid; no right or wrong answers; open and honest communication is preferred; review informed consent and confidentiality issues; discuss intended use of feedback elicited (Einsidel, Brown & Ross, 1996). Following consent from all participants, I proceeded to discuss the nature of the inquiry and requested that the participants answer the first question about the caseworker client relationship. After 30 minutes had passed I requested that the group transition into discussing discretionary decision-making, which prompted a few participants to request further clarification regarding what I meant by term “discretionary decision-making”. Following the passage of another 30 minutes, I continued by asking the group to discuss income support as related to reunification outcomes.

Data Collection

During the interviews, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) five constructs were utilized to guide the note taking procedure: "here and now constructions of individual workers; reconstructions of these entities in the past projections of these entities in the future; triangulation and; member checking" (p.268). Here and now constructions, reconstructions of the past, and projections of the future were all elicited and expressed via direct quotes in the final individual and group summary write-ups. Triangulation and member checks were initiated by sharing notes taken during the two sessions following the completion of each group. Official transcripts were not made readily available to group participants due to time constraints related to classroom limitations. In addition to note-taking, audio tape equipment was used during both interviews for verbatim transcription.

Following the completion of each focus group, the audio tapes were transported to the transcriptionist, group notes were reviewed, and recurrent themes were collapsed into summaries based on my notes for participants to review in the absence of the official transcripts.

Data Analysis

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method was used to analyze the data in Microsoft word. The process, according to the authors, consists of a procedure which entails: "comparing feedback to each category, integrating categories and properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory" (p.339). Workers were assigned initially to one of three categories: administrator, supervisor, or front-line worker but later collapsed due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter discussed.

Following the examination of the categories, some were collapsed into broader themes whereas others were partitioned out if relationships between/within themes were not clearly delineated. Grounded theory was used throughout the course of the data analysis process as a means to continually monitor the fit between my questions and the individual caseworker realities. Finally, the method also conformed to the rigor of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness standards by submitting the written notes to the group members following both 90 minute audio taped interviews so that they were given the opportunity to make any needed additions or clarifications.

Support for Rigor

Key characteristics of moderators should have high levels of interpersonal and communication skills, appear non-biased, and able to maintain control as well as flexibility within the group (Kreueger, 1994; Litoselletti, 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) additionally noted that trustworthiness consists of upholding the true realities of those working in the environment to which the inquiry is being made. Although it was not possible to evoke prolonged engagement for the purpose of this particular time-limited inquiry, credibility and engagement was achieved in the short run by honoring the workers experiences through the member checking process.

Notes were shared with workers as a means to adequately member check with them. Transferability regarding relevance to other contexts was mutually determined by a tenured Social Work professor, participants, and this researcher. Dependability in addition to confirmability was monitored by using two member checks and later conveyed using direct quotes derived from verbatim audio transcriptions. Finally, participants were given the option to elect to drop out by contacting the researcher in person or via e-mail or telephone.

Results

Interestingly enough, during the course of the inquiry, I began to realize that the literature terms I was using were not as familiar to the participants as I had initially expected. Instead of using the term “reunification”, they were using the term “reintegration” and in contrast to “child outplacement” they were using the term “out-of-home placement”. Additionally, by virtue of having a diverse group, many participants were entirely unaware of the concepts. For instance while talking about income support, EES workers knew exactly what I was talking about however, some foster care agency and CPS staff did not know what TANF was, although the focus groups were conducted in 2005. In regard to discretionary decision-making, some workers understood the basic construct while others did not. These reactions suggested that many of the participants were unaware of the findings in the literature.

Four major themes emerged following the first focus group: relationships; discretionary decision-making; income support; and service systems.

Theme I: Relationships

Participants repeatedly said that caseworkers need to be “open and honest” with their clients using a “client-centered approach”. One participant stated that the manner in which workers engage families albeit a “direct” or “indirect” approach greatly influences the nature of the overall case outcome. Other workers posited that it is critical to inform families what “you’re going to tell the court” and whether it’s “good” or “bad” news. Several participants indicated that “families like to be praised” while others said it is difficult to achieve an alliance with a family when caseload sizes are too high. Participants also noted that frequent consistent contact with the same worker results in better outcomes.

Participants further stated that workers need to be “creative” in their work with families while simultaneously promoting the inclusion of client-driven decision making during all phases of the concurrent case planning process noting: “clients need to be a part of the plan...the solution”. Caseworkers additionally suggested that clients are more motivated when they feel that they are “running the show.” A few caseworkers lamented that the caseworker-client relationship is actually secondary to the more informal naturally occurring “extended family and extended systems” networks. Workers finally emphasized the importance of acknowledging “what resources they bring to the table”. Another worker said that it is critical to initiate client conversations by asking: “Where do you want to start?” In her concluding statements about relationships, one worker posited “every interaction is an intervention.”

Theme II: Discretionary Decision Making

In regard to discretionary decision-making, “creativity” is the preferred method of working with clients. Although several workers prefer a more “creative” discretionary approach to decision making, others advocate for a more universal standardized approach as a means to ensure equal access for all families. “While I think it’s great that we have creativity, I also think that in order to ensure that services are maximized for all communities, and for all that we are responsible for as social workers, that we have to be responsible agents of what we’re given.” One participant said “...How are we ensuring that all of our caseworkers and all of our customers are getting all of what they deserve...that what’s creative here is creative in County A...what’s creative here is creative in County B”. Other workers indicated that creativity and standardization are essentially irrelevant topics to discuss because “Attorneys and judges have the ultimate decision making authority...not individual case workers...Reunification-that’s still dictated by our court system.” Regional differences and worker proximity were also mentioned in regard to the manner in which decisions are made. In rural settings workers were more familiar with one another’s roles, responsibilities and capabilities. “You can just walk across the hall and talk to your people”. While in contrast, an urban site respondent reported that it’s more difficult to assist families in crisis because “It’s a bureaucracy...that gap of getting them re-established.”

Theme III: Income Support

In most instances, immediately following outplacement, biological families lose their TANF cash assistance, medical benefits, and food stamps. The discussion of income support indicated that families often additionally lose their housing when their children are outplaced as a result of the immediate loss of TANF income: “It’s really hard to get off ground zero without housing.” Another participant stated, “ They’d need to get a bigger apartment because there is no way we’d integrate four children back into a one bedroom apartment.” Participants further noted that the loss of healthcare and counseling services benefits also present significant barriers for caregivers working toward reunification with their children.

Loss of cash assistance following outplacement ultimately prolongs the time children reside in foster care and too much time is wasted addressing other issues related to poverty as opposed to helping families overcome other barriers: “ Yet we see time and time again that we spend tons of time talking to parents and helping them to adjust to the loss of income when the children are removed...That time could be better spent working towards reunification...You spend tons of time prior to reunification trying to figure out how to pay for all the things they need to get the bigger house again and get the utilities turned on again and get the home furnished again because of the losses that they had financially when the kids were removed”. Workers stated that children are reunified more quickly when the continuity of TANF is sustained throughout the outplacement period. “ And in those families where the financial support did continue, those children went home faster because she was able to maintain her home, legal employment, working on getting her GED, and some job skills and things.” Another participant noted that “ ...There’s no doubt that the length of stay is extended because finances are cut ...If they don’t have transportation to get kids to a medical appointment that placement will last more long term because their medical needs then will be more long term.” Reunification

criteria primarily rests on the family's history with the child welfare system: number of previous contacts, prior and current case plan goal achievements, and ultimately "The court needs to be on board". Several participants concurred that "Poverty can play into it for some families ...Poverty can slow things down." "But, we've never held out poverty as a reason why children don't return home...Poverty can't be the reason".

Theme IV: Service Systems

Workers posited that systemic constraints determine the manner by which workers collaborate with one another, by which interventions are used to help support families and whether policy actually reinforces reunification efforts. "Policy is black and white...It didn't say I couldn't do that...You know you've gotta kinda bend the rules." Workers insisted that the new collaborative client-centered Integrated Service Team (IST) approach to care has proven to be an effective method to address both material hardship and child abuse simultaneously. IST employees call themselves the "People in the pods" because EES and CPS staff are required to work in close proximity to one another instead of being relegated to separate departments on different floors of the building. Several participants further indicated that in-home case management services and programs provided by family preservation, foster care, and adoption agencies are extremely helpful when responding to poor families struggling to confront substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence issues.

Conclusion

The overall findings in this inquiry suggest that workers do value the worker-family relationship. However, some view the immediate worker-client relationship as secondary to the inclusion of extended familial supports particularly as related to sustained more long-term outcome achievement. Most workers additionally agree that client involvement during all phases of the reunification process is critical.

Several participants additionally note that most child welfare decision making rests in the hands of attorneys and judges as opposed to individual caseworkers; however, being "creative" and "bending the rules" was perceived as being more helpful to clients than "going by the book." Many group participants concurred that they would be "able to focus on what we need to focus on if finances were in the picture in terms of their aid continued." One group member said that she wouldn't have to figure out how to get "clients gas and transportation if they received a TANF waiver during outplacement." Other group members indicated that more availability of intensive case management services might serve to mitigate outplacement.

Successful caseworker-client relationships lead to promising outcomes. However, alliances cannot be achieved in the absence of basic needs. Discretionary TANF waivers may or may not give authority to individual caseworkers to discern whether biological caregivers are worthy or unworthy of cash assistance, thereby rendering parents helpless in their quest to reunify with their children. TANF waivers must be made available to all CPS families so that they may sustain stability while attempting to address the real issues at hand.

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This qualitative inquiry was initiated by Angie Logan in collaboration with a state child protective services agency. We are grateful to Gail Zeysing, Dona Bue, and Gina Myer-Hummel for all of their support and guidance in the preparation of this publication. Please direct any questions or comments to Angie Logan at allogan@ku.edu