

## **Creating Conditions for Good Practice: A Child Welfare Project Sponsored by the Canadian Association of Social Workers**

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Child welfare social workers in all parts of Canada report that good practice is often hampered by impediments within their employment settings, and by their own sense of powerlessness to create change in their work environments. In 2000, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) launched a project, entitled "Creating Conditions for Good Practice," that was designed to provide front-line social workers in child welfare with the opportunity to comment on both positives and negatives within their own work environments, and to describe what would need to happen in order to optimize their contribution to the well-being of vulnerable children and families. This chapter reports on what CASW learned from this study, and challenges all parts of the profession to use this information to advocate for more effective ways to serve children and families.

Over time, the delivery of services to children and families in

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Suggested citation: Herbert, M. (2007). Creating conditions for good practice: A child welfare project sponsored by the Canadian Association of Social Workers. In I. Brown, F. Chaze, D. Fuchs, J. Lafrance, S. McKay, & S. Thomas Prokop (Eds.), *Putting a human face on child welfare: Voices from the Prairies* (pp. 223-250). Prairie Child Welfare Consortium [www.uregina.ca/spr/prairechild/index.html](http://www.uregina.ca/spr/prairechild/index.html) / Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare [www.cecw-cepb.ca/home.shtml](http://www.cecw-cepb.ca/home.shtml)

Canada, and indeed in North America, has seen many changes. The field today includes services to children who are at risk in their own homes, others who are in foster family care, residential treatment centres, secure treatment facilities, and group homes, as well as many who are living in shelters, makeshift arrangements, and on the street. In recent years, the child protection mandate has increasingly included newborns addicted to controlled substances or infected with HIV, children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and young people with mental health problems. In response to increasing numbers of children referred to child protection systems across the country, mandated organizations and their communities are exploring new ways to deliver services to vulnerable children and their families.

Meanwhile, there are many difficulties associated with the role of the child welfare social worker. In many parts of the country, practitioner morale is poor. Caseloads are heavy, there is a shortage of qualified social workers, practitioners are poorly paid, the attrition rate is high, and there is a major image problem in many communities. Child protection work is very often stressful and is sometimes high profile. Social workers who do this work often feel that they are "damned if they do and damned if they don't." Many social workers involved in child protection work feel their role is misunderstood in their communities, and that the organizations that employ them do not provide the supports they need in order to do their work well. A major issue for some practitioners is the perceived discrepancy between the demands of the workplace and their own allegiance to ethical social work practice. As well, many practitioners carry with them the chronic sense of being unable to influence the system that employs them because of the layers of bureaucracy between the client and the child welfare system.

Historically, the literature on organizational problem solving has made the point that employee productiveness and customer satisfaction are directly related to the climate of the employing organization (Brager & Holloway, 1978). Increasing numbers of studies in the human service field suggest that organizational climate (attitudes shared by employees about their work environment) is a primary predictor of positive service outcomes, and a significant predictor of service quality for clients of human service agencies, including children and families in the child welfare system (Glisson & Durick,

1988; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1997; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Sheridan, 1992). These studies have been welcomed by those concerned with effective delivery of services to vulnerable populations, since strategies for improving organizational functioning have rarely been based on a real understanding of how decisions that improve administrative systems may affect client services (Grasso, 1994).

The organizational literature clearly reports that front-line service providers frequently have little confidence that those who plan and administer child welfare services understand front-line work (Herbert & Mould, 1992; Kamerman & Kahn, 1990). The difficulty is that efforts to improve services are often not informed by the experience of those who are actually delivering them to clients. Many organizations have concentrated, for example, on the importance of inter-organizational coordination as a way to improve services to populations at risk. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that what goes on inside the organization is as important as how well it is coordinated with other organizations.

The literature identifies a variety of specific organizational components that support the effective delivery of child welfare services (Brager & Holloway, 1978; Kamerman & Kahn, 1990; Pecora, Whittaker, & Maluccio, 1992; Weissman, Epstein, & Savage, 1983). The following elements of an effective human service system, as outlined by Pecora et al. (1992), reflect the major themes from this literature:

1. Articulating a clear organizational mission and program philosophy;
2. Developing effective organizational designs and service technology;
3. Recruiting, selecting, and training personnel carefully.
4. Professionalizing child welfare staff members;
5. Specifying measurable performance criteria and [social] worker appraisal methods;
6. Providing high quality supervision;
7. Collecting and using program evaluation data, including consumer feedback information; and
8. Addressing organizational and [social] worker liability.

This list is by no means complete. Ongoing education opportunities, for example, have become part of most effective human service organizations. Recognition of good practice within the organization, emphasis on client service, and reduction of unnecessary paper work are others (Kinjerski & Herbert, 2000).

Organizational change frequently creates a climate of uncertainty, particularly when front-line staff members perceive that they have had little or no voice in planning changes being undertaken (Brager & Holloway, 1978; Briar, Hansen, & Harris, 1991; Herbert & Mould, 1992; Weissman et al., 1983). However, the way change occurs is vitally important to its success. Virtually all of the literature on organizational change cites the importance of seeking input and involvement of front-line staff, from the very onset of the planning process when major organizational change is contemplated. To do otherwise is likely to have long-standing negative effects on staff morale, and consequently on the effectiveness of client service.

Many child-serving organizations lack an ideological base and a clearly stated mission that is apparent in the day-to-day work of every person in the organization. Policy is not always measured against its potential effect on vulnerable populations, and success is too often measured by policy compliance instead of client outcome (Trocmé, Nutter, Thompson, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 1999). As well, difficulty in hiring and retaining competent people is related to organizational climates that fail to understand and support good practice.

### **THE "CREATING CONDITIONS FOR GOOD PRACTICE" PROJECT**

The Canadian Association of Social Workers is a national organization that represents more than 18,000 social workers across Canada. Many of the social workers represented by CASW practice directly in the specialized field of child protection; many others work in the broader field of child and family welfare. Over time, CASW has heard from practitioners in all parts of the country that good practice is often hampered by impediments within their employment settings, and by their own sense of powerlessness to create change in their work environments. The CASW Board of Directors became convinced it had a role in providing leadership in the areas of profes-

sional support and advocacy, and thus decided to launch the project.

The project was not about child welfare reform. Rather, it was about creating conditions that optimize the contribution of professional social workers to the well-being of vulnerable children and families. The primary focus of the project was to provide a voice for front-line social workers. It is the lived experience of those front-line practitioners that formed the basis for this report, and that will continue to inform CASW's efforts to work toward change.

The data were collected by means of a survey questionnaire, provincial/territorial focus groups, and consultations with front-line social workers. The questionnaire was designed to provide respondents with the opportunity to identify factors in their work settings that are seen as supportive of good practice, as well as those that represent impediments to good practice. They were also asked to identify indicators of good practice and alternate practice methods that would enhance their practice. (Respondents were also asked to identify examples of good practice initiatives from their own jurisdictions. The responses to these were so few in number that they have not been reported.)

Each member of the CASW Board worked with his or her provincial/territorial social work association to identify a social worker, who would be willing to act as a coordinator for the project. These coordinators took responsibility for distributing the questionnaire in their jurisdictions and for encouraging their child protection colleagues to respond. The survey instrument was also published in the *CASW Bulletin*, and posted on the CASW website. Provincial/territorial social work associations provided links to this website and publicized the project in provincial publications. Subsequently, the coordinators also arranged focus group meetings, thus collecting additional data for the project.

## **LEARNING FROM THE SURVEY**

By the established deadline, 1,118 responses were received from 10 provinces and three territories. Of the total responses received, 983 were complete and usable. Respondents were predominantly female, and most were front-line service providers who had worked in child protection for five years or more. The majority of respondents

worked in government settings. About two thirds of the respondents had professional social work degrees. Both rural and urban settings were represented.

The first question asked respondents to rate, from a list of factors, those that would encourage good practice. Most frequently identified were the following:

- acknowledgment of challenges/complexities of child welfare work by the employing organization;
- comprehensive, job-specific training by the employing organization for all new staff;
- increased fiscal resources to meet the legislated mandate;
- increased services to meet the needs of children and families;
- ongoing opportunities for professional development provided/enabled by the employing organization;
- reduced caseload size; and
- visible supports for good practice.

Space was provided to identify additional factors; however, the majority of these added comments were reiterations of factors already included in the original list.

### **Other themes from the survey**

Five other themes, each addressed in the subsections that follow, emerged from the survey responses:

- organizational support
- professional training
- role of child welfare social workers
- work with families
- elements of good practice

#### **Organizational support**

Emphasis on the need for more resources was not surprising. A similar result might be anticipated if this question were put to any group

of employees in the human service field. A more interesting result was that respondents equally emphasized the importance of the employing organizations in acknowledging the complexity of child protection work and providing visible supports for good practice. It is clear that there is much good work being done, but there is a pervasive view that the good work is generally not understood, appreciated, or acknowledged by employing organizations. Some respondents commented that those who direct their work do not have social work education and may not appreciate the difficulty of following the principles of competent and ethical social work practice while satisfying the demands of the workplace.

Respondents all over the country perceived that when a case does not go well, particularly if a child dies or is injured while in care, social workers are often "hung out to dry" by the media and do not feel supported by their employing organization. Several examples were cited of social workers being disciplined or dismissed following such tragedies, when, in the opinion of these respondents, the failure to protect the child was due to systemic inadequacies, rather than personal or professional incompetence. These comments were not directly elicited by the questionnaire, but were made spontaneously, seemingly to emphasize the perceived failure of employing organizations to provide regular, visible, and public support for professional staff members who have taken on difficult and demanding work, and who are trying hard to provide competent service.

### Professional training

Comprehensive, job-specific training, provided by the employing organization for all new staff, was identified as another important potential encourager of good practice. Many respondents reported that, as new workers, they were given large caseloads and very little supervision, and reflected that their clients could have been better served had they had the opportunity to learn the specifics of the job from the outset. Experienced social workers often reported that they now spent a lot of time helping new staff members, particularly those with no social work education, who come into the system with little sense of the specific requirements of their particular child protection setting. Interestingly, most respondents did not complain that their

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basic social work education had failed to prepare them for child protection practice, but rather, that schools and faculties of social work generally devalue the child protection setting as a career choice, which many respondents connected with the current national shortage of trained social workers in the child protection field. An accompanying perception was that child welfare teaching in many schools or faculties of social work is often not informed by the real and current experience of those practitioners who work on the front line. Conversely, the respondents perceived that important child welfare research, emanating from academia, is not easily available to front-line practitioners, for whom the demands of the workplace make it difficult to be regular readers of social work books and journals. Considerable emphasis was placed by respondents on the need for employing organizations to provide ongoing opportunities for professional development.

### Role of child welfare social workers

The following description of good practice was drawn from comments of the respondents.

Good practice in child welfare is about creating the capacity and conditions for positive change within families, so that children can maximize their potential within stable and safe environments. Good practice must be based on strong, personal commitment to serve children and families, and dedication to positive outcomes. Good practice implies the creative use of resources to support each family's plan for their children.

An overarching theme from these respondents was that good practice means meeting the needs of the client instead of those of the organization, when those are not congruent. Many respondents commented that although additional resources are needed, it is the responsibility of professional social workers to be creative in using whatever resources are available. Many spoke of their frustration and disappointment with colleagues who are poor advocates for themselves and for their clients, who seem inordinately fearful of rocking the organizational boat, and who tend to give themselves and their professional status too little credit for having the power to influence.

Many respondents pointed out that national and provincial social work associations have existing advocacy mechanisms that need to be used more effectively. They stated that the personal commitment to serving children and families is strengthened by:

- a work environment that fosters good practice,
- accountability mechanisms,
- adherence to professional practice standards,
- effective use of social work knowledge and skills, and
- social workers who address their own wellness as part of their practice.

#### Work with families

Respondents repeatedly commented that the means for supporting positive change is based on creating good working relationships with families. Showing honour and respect toward children and families; being responsive and accessible; involving and supporting families, extended families, and communities; mobilizing strengths; and respecting cultural diversity were constant themes in this section of the survey instrument. It was noted, however, that families involved with child protection often lack the resources they need to fulfill the plans they have for their children. The development of permanency plans with families based on their unique needs, and the creative use of existing resources to meet those needs, are essential tools in the achievement of positive outcomes. Advocacy on behalf of vulnerable families was seen as a critical way to secure access to services, as well as a symbol of shared understanding.

#### Elements of good practice

As respondents considered the elements of good practice, organizational conditions that foster good practice were identified:

- accessible clinical supervision
- adequate, appropriate, and accessible resources
- appropriate workloads
- competent and qualified staff

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- flexible and creative service systems
- management decisions based on social work ethics
- positive, supportive, and encouraging work environment
- shared view of child protection that enables everyone to work together

Respondents were also asked to comment on indicators of good practice. The following factors—if they were put in place—were identified as having the potential to support good practice:

- *Accountability:* Outcome measures are in place; interventions have led to documented, improved circumstances for children and families.
- *Adherence to a professional code of ethics, and standards:* Best practice principles are incorporated into everyday work; all social workers stand up for professional beliefs.
- *Broader professional role understood and supported:* Systemic obstacles are recognized and addressed; agency mandate is balanced with family's goals; teamwork exists among clients, social workers, management, and the broader community.
- *Employee wellness:* Staff is emotionally healthy; there is evidence of balanced life; workplace morale is high, as evidenced by less burnout and low staff turnover.
- *Focus on serving children and families:* The organization understands the importance of relationship as a catalyst for change; the work is done creatively and is focussed on each family's unique needs and best interests; workers routinely join with clients to achieve positive outcomes.
- *Personal and professional development:* The organization as a whole and individual practitioners take responsibility for ensuring that each worker has the skills and ability to do the job; there is interest in ongoing professional education and incorporation of current research into agency practice.
- *Personal and professional satisfaction:* All staff feel that their work is valued by the community; have the sense of a job well done; love the work; have confidence that each child and family is receiving the best possible service.

Factors commonly identified by the respondents as impediments to good practice were also noted. Of these, caseload size was the most frequently reported. Many respondents from across the country wrote that caseload size prevents individualized, relationship - based work with clients. Subsequent focus group discussion clarified that the essential issue is difficulty in having time for relationship-based work, with large caseload size being a major contributing factor. The most significant impediment to social workers' practice was that large caseloads prevented the social workers from getting to know their clients and spending quality time with children and families. Respondents talked about the fact that competent social work practice is relationship-based, and that the inability to work in this way creates ethical dilemmas for many on a daily basis. They were mainly confident that they know how to do the work and that they can make good decisions in the best interests of the children they support, but their employing systems are too often unaware of the value of good, relationship-based practice as a catalyst for change and do not sanction doing the work in this way.

Although the issue of caseload size inhibiting relationship building was certainly the factor identified most frequently, other factors were also seen as major obstacles. The fact that practice decisions are often fiscally driven was experienced as a demoralizing reality by many of these social workers. Employing organizations were seen as more interested in saving money than providing quality service to children and families. Limited resources, both within the agency and in the broader community, were also cited as a chronic impediment to good practice. However, the most consistent message from the practitioners had to do with their ability to get to know children and families, and to use their social work skills to help vulnerable people optimize their life opportunities.

Respondents were asked to name alternate practice methods that would enhance their practice. Examples given were: resiliency models, structural social work, community-based practice, group work, family preservation, and reunification work. Some suggested traditional healing/cultural practice, mediation, and family group conferencing.

## **LEARNING FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS**

In most provinces, focus groups included a mix of managers, front-line staff and supervisors, although, in some provinces, these groups were separated. The participants represented urban and rural community organizations. First Nations social workers were included in many focus groups and, in two provinces, separate focus groups were arranged for First Nations social workers.

In focus group discussions, several impediments to good practice were identified, in addition to those presented in the survey. Of particular significance were:

- Child protection social workers felt very vulnerable. There was a strong fear of liability and lack of confidence in the employing organization's support, should they be involved in a high profile case.
- The timing and ordering of child welfare-specific training often did not contribute to competent practice. In many jurisdictions, this specific training by the employing organization was deemed inadequate, and was available only after a new social worker had been in the system for some time. Most participants expressed strongly the need for very high quality training at the very beginning, regardless of the educational preparation of the new worker.
- In many jurisdictions, focus group participants identified case studies and other costly child welfare projects that had been undertaken at the behest of the employing agency (often in response to a local problem or a tragic event). Although the perception is that many of the ensuing reports contained very good and practical recommendations, there seems to be a common failure to implement these recommendations or to follow through with any suggested modifications to the existing system.
- Lack of opportunity for increased pay and increased status within the system, without advancing to supervisory status, was identified as an impediment. There were suggestions that competent front-line practice should be rewarded and good practitioners encouraged to continue with front-line

practice through incentives such as opportunities for continuing education.

- Lack of expertise of supervisors was a prominent theme. There was a widely held perception that people became supervisors for a variety of reasons that have little to do with their understanding and skill at clinical supervision. Participants expressed frustration with supervisors who are preoccupied with administrative tasks, and as a consequence, are often unavailable to staff. Even experienced practitioners cited the value of case consultation, and stated that they would expect this from a child welfare supervisor. Peer support was valued, but was not perceived to take the place of responsibility for tough decision making, which was seen as an inherent aspect of supervision in child protection.
- Focus group participants echoed the prominent themes from the questionnaire responses. Lack of relationship-based work and continuity of service as a result of workload, vacancies, and high staff turnover were recurring themes. Repeatedly, it was suggested that the greatest deficit in the system was the lack of emphasis on the importance of one-on-one relationships and individualized planning for children.

Overall, the focus group discussions provide evidence that, in many jurisdictions, legal mandates were not being met, client needs were not being met, and social workers were not meeting the ethical requirements of their profession. It was suggested that many social workers engaged in child protection work had lost their sense of pride and ability to do effective and evidence-based social work practice. In particular, a lack of recognition and support had left many social workers feeling victimized, helpless, isolated, and disenchanting. An attitude of apathy coupled with powerlessness prevailed among social workers in many of these groups.

Nevertheless, some remedies to this situation were suggested by the focus group participants. They suggested that the first step to regaining a sense of pride was for social workers to value themselves as professionals, to value the work they do, to take responsibility

through their work and professional associations to create a positive image, to advocate on behalf of their clients and profession, and to reclaim their expertise and field of work. Creativity and flexibility were stressed. While chronic resource shortages were a constant challenge, many practitioners seemed able to find ways to deliver good services in the context of these constraints, and were critical of colleagues who succumbed to the challenges of the work, instead of meeting them head-on.

Focus group participants suggested that employing organizations could encourage a sense of pride by creating positive and supportive work environments, promoting a positive public profile, recognizing social workers' competence and expertise publicly and internally, and improving the competence and confidence of social workers through timely and ongoing specific job training, and opportunities for continuing education. They felt that social work associations and schools of social work also have an important role in promoting a positive profile of child protection as a social work specialization, and in recognizing good practice.

Practitioners emphasized that more fiscal resources and increased services would enable a reduction of workload, which in turn would facilitate the use of relationship as a catalyst for change. In the minds of these respondents, this would create additional congruence between social work values and social work practice, so that children and families would be better served, and social workers would feel confident about their practice and resulting outcomes. Participants acknowledged the reality that many social workers had spent their careers responding to crises, and that retraining would be needed if they were faced with the need to do individual work with children and families. Without retraining, some practitioners would inevitably continue with the same crisis-oriented practice.

A strong point was made about the potential for creating conditions for good practice, even within the limits of existing budgets. These included encouraging a sense of pride among social workers through provision of visible supports like a positive work environment and recognition, timely and orderly training, clinical supervision, and prioritization of work. With fixed resources, child protection work should focus on relationship-based work, prevention, and increased work with communities. Part of creating conditions for

good practice includes reliance on regular staff. Participants considered that there was too much contracting out to other professionals of work that can be done by social workers.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The project data reflect the lived experiences of social workers in child welfare across the country. Interest in and support for the project has been remarkable. More than 1,000 social workers took time to respond to the questionnaire alone; many more attended focus groups, and still more attended the consultation day, and subsequent presentations of the project in various parts of the country.

The most powerful messages from all the data were that the demands of the work environment overwhelmingly impede the use of relationship as a catalyst for change, and that social workers felt keenly, the lack of visible and public support for good practice. Shortages of resources, poor quality supervision, and large caseloads were also common themes. There was a sense that many of these practitioners feel lonely and isolated, and that there is a pervasive sense of powerlessness and fear. Some child welfare social workers involved with this project recognized that their employing systems are as concerned about the well-being of the children they serve as are the social work staff, but those responsible for these systems are often driven by political and fiscal agendas to create policies and programs that create difficulties for front-line staff. Others suggested that their employing organizations seemed to identify front-line staff as part of the problem rather than as a key to positive change. It is hard to imagine a more destructive or demoralizing state of affairs for those who work in such environments.

The following were the specific themes from the survey data, focus groups, and consultations.

- Across the country, the most frequently identified impediment to good practice was the inability to form meaningful relationships with clients. This was attributed in part to caseload size and staff turnover, and to the employing organizations' lack of understanding of the relationship-based nature of social work and of the

importance of spending time with individual children and families. Some respondents spoke of children on their caseload whom they had not seen for months. Others described taking children into care which might have been avoided if the worker had been able to spend more time with the family.

- The most important encourager of good practice was for employing organizations to publicly acknowledge the challenges and complexity of child welfare work, and to take more responsibility for interpreting that role to the public. Social workers in child welfare settings felt very vulnerable to public criticism and public misunderstanding.
- Decisions that affect children's lives were too often driven by fiscal considerations rather than by good practice.
- Resources were often insufficient, both within mandated organizations, and in the community.
- Many social workers were concerned about legal liability, and were unsure about their employing organizations' support if a problem arose.
- The culture of fear could be overcome with competency-based, job specific training, high quality supervision, and mentoring by senior colleagues. Respondents did not describe their social work education as deficient. However, they felt that they require supplementary, on-site job-specific training, which should be mandatory for every social worker new to child welfare work, regardless of educational background. The need for skilled clinical supervision was mentioned repeatedly.
- Recommendations of existing studies needed to be implemented. Respondents from virtually every province identified studies and reviews that had been commissioned in their jurisdictions (often in response to a tragic event) that were comprehensive, accurate, and included excellent recommendations. However, the recommendations of the studies had rarely been implemented.
- More meaningful connections needed to be made between schools of social work and the practice community. Front-line staff tended to repeat the interventions traditionally

used in their agencies, with little knowledge about the efficacy of those interventions. Most were aware that there was good research being done at universities and elsewhere, but the results of that research rarely informed their practice.

- Community agencies and organizations needed to be seen as part of the solution. Social workers must stop thinking that they can, or should be, working in isolation from the communities where they work. Employing organizations need to make genuine connections with the community and other non-mandated organizations. It is interesting to note that on the survey instrument, the most frequently identified alternate practice model was "community-based practice."
- Respondents to the survey instrument communicated a pervasive sense of apathy and powerlessness. Many described ethical dilemmas that they faced every day, but felt powerless to change. Some suggested that their employing organizations seemed unaware of the frequent lack of congruence between the ethical stance of social workers and the demands of the workplace.
- A number of respondents spoke of their own frustration and disappointment at the sad state of morale among their colleagues. These colleagues were described as poor advocates for themselves and their clients, and as being afraid to rock the organizational boat. The respondents perceived that if these colleagues were more confident in their professional identity, and had the tools, they could positively affect the organizational climate.
- Joining and supporting provincial social work associations was seen as a good advocacy strategy. It was suggested that social workers who are afraid to speak out individually should use their provincial associations as advocacy arms. Both the national and provincial/territorial associations needed to encourage such action, and be active advocates on behalf of members.
- There are many positive stories to be told. Social workers in child welfare should take every opportunity to positively

promote the work they do. They need to “walk taller,” be proud of their profession, and stop giving away practice to other professionals.

- Provincial and territorial associations need to engage in social action initiatives in relation to the poverty that is commonly experienced by child welfare service recipients.
- Creating conditions for good practice must be a shared responsibility. Provincial and national social work associations, faculties and schools of social work, organizations that employ social workers, and front-line social workers themselves, must all be part of the solution.

### **PARTNERING WITH THE NATIONAL YOUTH IN CARE NETWORK**

One of the groups identified as an important partner in this project was the National Youth In Care Network (NYICN). CASW met with representatives of NYICN in early 2002 to discuss areas of mutual concern. At that meeting, the CASW team was made aware of “Primer,” a project designed and managed by NYICN. This project (NYICN, 2001) was designed to “teach social workers, those already working and those training to be in the field, how to be more sensitive to young people growing up in care.” The project was based on a survey of 50 young people in care across Canada. These young people were asked to talk about three main issues they feel they face as young people in care. Respondents were also asked to describe an ideal social worker, and to comment on how social workers can work more effectively with youth in care. The CASW team was immediately struck by the fact that the NYICN study provided an additional and valuable perspective on the very questions that the CASW study was attempting to answer.

Social workers in child welfare organizations will not be surprised at what these young people had to say. (Quotations in this section are taken from the *Primer: A Survey of Young People in Care*, NYICN, 2001.) There were major issues around moving (“placement bouncing,” as one youth described it). Recommendations were that youth should be consulted regarding placement options, that pre-placement visits should be mandatory; and that social workers need

to show consideration and sensitivity to youth who have to be moved. Transition from care after age 18 was another major issue. Assisting with long-term financial planning, connecting with sources of support in the community, and encouraging the development of existing skills were seen as ways to lessen the extreme anxiety felt by most of these young people as they reach the point of leaving care. The public's generally negative and suspicious attitude toward young people who are, or who have been, in care was another issue. These young people suggest that the inclusion of more positive information, such as good qualities and records of achievement, should be standard policy in agency files. Community outreach and education, and opportunities for youth to share feelings of isolation and stigmatization in support groups, were also seen as desirable. Being listened to was a big issue for these young people. They felt that their voices are often not heard; that when they have an issue, "it takes weeks for our worker to call back," that they are often excluded from decisions that affect their lives, and that their individual plan of care is not always reflective of their own wishes and life plan. Many of these young people lived with depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem, and they needed more information about sources of help in the community. They also wished for opportunities to form personal attachments with their social workers in order to "repair damaged trust."

Young people growing up in care were asking social workers to:

- Get smaller caseloads. ("Social workers could take some time to get to know each of us.")
- Listen to youth. ("They should get to know us better—don't just rely on files to tell the story.")
- Don't give up on us. ("They need to be there for us—that's all we need and want.")
- Be better advocates for us. ("Try to improve the system from within—really get on the Minister's back about the budget cuts, and try harder after your supervisor says, 'No.'")

When asked, "What should a social worker be?" The most common descriptors were:

- attentive,
- available,
- caring,
- flexible,
- knowledgeable,
- real, and
- trustworthy.

Universally these young people said that the social worker should be "someone who cares about me," "someone who is interested in me as an individual person," "someone who I can talk to and see even when I don't have a problem," and "someone who will call me back when I leave a message." One young person said, "When I first went into care, I felt so lonely and the only person I knew was my social worker, so it helps if they call back, even for a two-minute conversation." (National Youth In Care Network, 2001).

It is difficult to escape the impression that the issues raised by this group of young people who have grown up in the care of child welfare systems are analogous to the issues raised by the social workers who responded to the CASW study. Like the young people whom they are mandated to support, social workers in child welfare often feel unappreciated and misunderstood, and not heard by the larger system. Again, like these young people who have grown up in care, social workers feel that they are not understood within the communities in which they live and work. There is a powerful message here. The very people who are most immediately affected by the organizational impediments identified by the respondents to the CASW study are articulating an identical message to that of the social workers who are the targets of their concerns. The impediment to good practice most frequently identified by respondents to the CASW questionnaire was the difficulty in having time for relationship-based work with individual clients. The NYICN report highlights the importance of the relationship between a social worker and a young person in care. "This relationship is crucial to the overall well-being of a young per-

son in care... the social worker is often the biggest constant human support that youth have.”

*In face of the complementary findings from these two studies, it is difficult to ignore the importance of relationship as a catalyst for change in the child welfare system.*

### **ACTIONS ARISING FROM THE PROJECT FINDINGS**

The Board of CASW examined the data from the project, and initiated a series of solution-focussed actions. Discussions were held with other interested individuals and organizations, including the Child Welfare League of Canada, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, the National Youth In Care Network, provincial and territorial Directors of Child Welfare, and the Chair in Child Protection at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Identified actions included:

- Developing and disseminating a public message regarding the role of social workers in child welfare (see Appendix 1). Member organizations were encouraged to use this message as an advocacy tool.
- Making innovative practice information for front-line workers available on the CASW website.
- Encouraging provincial and territorial associations to sponsor workshops and emphasize child welfare issues at conferences.
- Encouraging provincial social work associations to use the findings of this project as the basis for information-based advocacy within their jurisdictions.
- Establishing of children's issues committees in member organizations, and linking these committees in order to provide CASW with a national view of issues facing social workers in child welfare.
- Initiating discussion with the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work regarding the need to emphasize child-welfare specific information in the teaching of ethics in schools/faculties of social work.
- Collaborating with the CASW insurer to ensure that

liability workshops focus on social work practice in child welfare settings.

- Inviting social workers in child welfare settings across Canada to submit success stories.

Some of the actions have been put in place. Others will take time to evolve. In some jurisdictions, provincial social work associations have used the findings from the study as the basis for advocacy within their own employment settings. At this point, the effectiveness of this advocacy is difficult to judge. The most visible action has been the establishment of children's issues committees in each province. In many places, these committees meet regularly, and provide a forum for social workers to identify practice difficulties and gaps in service, and to share information about new initiatives. This process should enable information-based advocacy by the provincial social work association. The energy that has gone into this action varies from one jurisdiction to another. A pamphlet has been prepared for public distribution with a view to improving public understanding of the role of social work in child welfare. Stories of successful interventions have been posted on the CASW website, as have additional articles for the information of front-line staff. Recently, CASW was asked to provide a representative to be part of a national panel on CBC Radio, which was convened to discuss high profile child welfare cases. This last event gives some assurance that CASW has achieved a heightened profile in child welfare in Canada.

## **COMMENTARY**

Public child welfare in Canada has never been a perfect human service. However, one can look back at times when being employed in a child welfare setting was viewed by one's colleagues and by the public as an important role, worthy of esteem. That is not the case today and it has not been the case for some time. Profound changes have taken place in public child welfare across this country and beyond. Effects of globalization, increased evidence of political decision making in the human services, renewed emphasis on family responsibility, the philosophy of letting the community provide—all set within an environment of severe cost containment—are important

factors contributing to these changes.

There is little community involvement with the children, youth, and families who receive services from the child welfare system and consequently, there is little community awareness as to why parents and children need the intervention of child welfare social workers, or about the work that these social workers do. Experience suggests that the community trusts child welfare professionals to help "needy" children, and to assist families to "get on their feet" so they are able to carry on without government help. This trust is compromised when something occurs that casts doubt on the ability of child welfare professionals to successfully manage these difficult problems. These incidents often involve the media challenging the service system's efficacy, creating anger and criticism in the community, and leaving child welfare staff feeling unfairly judged by a community that doesn't understand its work.

What is particularly discouraging for those of us who have been involved in this work for a long time, is the reality that much is known about creating environments where children will prosper. Social workers in child welfare talk about this endlessly. They know and understand the needs of children and families, they are acutely aware of the effects of poverty and other social ills, and they understand the need for relationship-based practice. For social workers, the realities of political decision-making and fiscal restraint are often discouraging. Why is the political will to make needed changes so hard to muster? Perhaps we have not been strong enough and strategic enough in our advocacy efforts. It is the hope of those involved with this project that the voices of more than 1,000 Canadian social workers will eventually be heard and will lead to changes in their ability to serve vulnerable children and families in a humane and effective way.

There is some cause for optimism. Social workers are aware of what constitutes good practice in child welfare. The data reveal that for the most part, these are social workers who not only understand what good practice is, they also understand very well the needs of vulnerable children and families. In spite of difficult and demanding working conditions, there are social workers everywhere who have found ways to be good advocates for themselves and for their clients, who are proud of their work, and who are impatient with their col-

leagues for their perceived lack of creativity.

CASW has taken on a powerful and important task. There is much work left to do. Perhaps the most challenging part is yet to come. As the project has evolved, it has become clear that in addition to providing front-line staff with advocacy tools, the social work profession as a whole, including those who teach, research, organize, regulate, and work in child welfare settings, needs to take a hard look at professional associations, organizations that employ social workers, schools of social work, and other professional social work bodies and organizations concerned with the well-being of children. There are multiple targets for change, and multiple potential members of the action plan. Active liaisons need to be encouraged. Change will not happen easily. The profession must be creative and assertive in finding ways to get the message out to where it can be heard, and to strategize about ways to exercise influence, individually and collectively. Like most professional endeavours that are worthwhile, moving ahead will be a challenge. For those who believe that change is always possible, it is a challenge well worth our very best efforts.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTES**

1. This chapter expands upon material that appeared in *Canada's Children* [Herbert, M., & Mould, J. (2002). Canadian Association of Social Workers Child Welfare Project: Creating Conditions for Good Practice. *Canada's Children*, 9(2), 44-46.] and material that is posted on the CASW website (casw@casw-acts.ca).
2. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canadian Association of Social Workers and all of its members. Special thanks are due to Eugenia Repetur Moreno, Executive Director of CASW, and to John Mould and Ellen Oliver whose terms as president of CASW overlapped with the child welfare project.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **CASW Statement on Social Work Practice in Child Welfare**

Child welfare is considered a special area of practice within the profession of social work, and the principles and values of the social work profession generally fit with policies that guide modern child welfare organizations. In most jurisdictions in Canada, social workers in child welfare agencies have a minimum of a Bachelor of Social Work degree, and are registered with a provincial body that holds them accountable for competent and ethical practice.

The mandate of child welfare agencies is to work with the community to identify children who are in need of protection, and to decide how best to help and protect those children. A fundamental belief is that government interference in family life should be as minimal as possible, except when parental care is below the community standard and places a child at risk of harm. The major guiding principle is always to act in the best interests of the child.

Social workers in child welfare agencies are involved with the planning and delivery of a variety of services for children and families, such as family support, residential care, advocacy, and adoptions and foster care programs, as well as child protection. The social worker's task is to understand a variety of factors related to the child, the family, and the community and to balance the child's safety and well-being with the rights and needs of a family that may be in need of help. The professional social work judgment involved in these decisions serves children and families well in the great majority of situations, a fact often lost when a case decision becomes the object of intense public and legal scrutiny. As in other professional work, it is difficult never to make a mistake, and most decisions about complex matters involve risks as well as benefits.

The typical referral to a child welfare agency involves a child who is the victim of neglect, not of physical or sexual abuse. Very few children who are known to child welfare agencies are removed from their homes. Social workers in child welfare believe that most children are better served within their own homes, with resources being used to shore up and strengthen families, and removing children from

their homes is a measure of last resort. When a child is removed, it is usually for a temporary period with the idea of working intensively with the family so that the child can return home as soon as his or her safety can be assured. Chronic shortages of resources, however, make this work difficult. When a child is removed and the family's situation poses ongoing risks to that child, the court may decide to remove guardianship permanently from the parent or caregiver. Whether the child is removed temporarily or permanently, a home within the extended family is the preferred placement, but it is frequently necessary to place the child in a foster or adoptive home or in residential care.

Public child welfare agencies have evolved as a result of society's belief that all children have the right to stable homes where they are well cared for and are safe from abuse and neglect. But this cannot be solely the concern of government and those who work in human services. The public is not always aware of the lack of resources for children from impoverished homes who so often end up in the child protection system with concomitant poor success rates in school, poor employment opportunities, and a greater than usual chance of becoming involved in the mental health or prison system. It is not always easy to convince the voting and tax-paying public that spending on vulnerable young children and their families can save a huge cost down the road. Children need to be a priority not only for governments, but also for the communities in which they live.

Social work in child welfare settings is frequently stressful. Caseloads are often large and there are chronic shortages of needed resources, both within the child welfare system itself and in community agencies that support it. Sometimes social workers experience differences between the demands of the workplace and their own allegiance to the ethics of the social work profession, largely because the systems that employ them are driven by political and budgetary agendas. Nevertheless, there are many thousands of skilled and ethical professional social workers in Canada who are committed to their work in child welfare agencies and whose efforts have made positive differences in the lives of countless vulnerable children and families (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005, p. 12).

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