SKILLS AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY OF FLORIDA’S CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATORS:

An analysis of options for improvement

AN ACTION REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

REUBIN O’D. ASKEW SCHOOL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY

BY

NATALYA RICE

Nlr04d@fsu.edu

TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA

NOVEMBER 22, 2005
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL .................................................. ii
PRESS RELEASE .............................................................. iii
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................... iv
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ....................................................... v

Chapter

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT ................................................... 1
II. BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW ......................... 2
   Background ...................................................................... 2
   Literature review ............................................................. 7
III. METHODOLOGY & EVALUATIVE CRITERIA ....................... 13
   Methodology ...................................................................... 13
   Evaluative criteria ............................................................ 15
IV. POLICY OPTIONS ......................................................... 16
   Option 1: Training program improvements ......................... 16
   Option 2: Ongoing training and professional development ...... 19
   Option 3: Reduced caseloads for new investigators .............. 20
V. FINDINGS ....................................................................... 21
VI. RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION ................................. 29
VII. CONCLUSION ............................................................... 30

REFERENCES ..................................................................... 32
Executive Summary

PROBLEM: Skills and professional competency of child protection investigators

The Department of Children and Families Child Protection Program has been plagued with issues of poorly qualified, inadequately prepared, low skilled workers. The social and financial costs of this problem include the endangered lives of children, failed service delivery, lawsuits from mishandled cases, and high turnover rates. The report reviews options for improving the skills, preparedness and professional competency of child protection investigators.

METHODS

Information for this report was collected in four methods. First, a review of library databases was conducted to find scholarly journals and relevant research. Second, a review of state and federal evaluations of the Child Protection Program was conducted to identify ongoing issues and attempted solutions. Third, a survey was completed by current child protective investigators to identify relevant information on the problem. Fourth, qualitative interviews with child welfare experts were conducted.

OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SKILLS AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY OF CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATORS

This report compares three options for improving the skills and professional competency of child protection investigators.

• **Improvements to the child welfare training program.** The proposed improvements are twofold: the addition of field education and the continual assessment of training effectiveness.

• **Ongoing training and professional development.** This option specifies a skill building certificate training program that is conducted for experienced investigators to enhance skills and continue professional development.

• **Reduced caseloads for newly trained investigators.** This option discusses a reduced caseload for newly trained investigators during the probationary phase of employment.

Each option was evaluated against the following criteria: administrative feasibility, political support, and potential effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report recommends a combination of **improvements to the child welfare training program** and **ongoing training and professional development.** Specifically, a district should be selected as the pilot site for the program, under the guise of the state’s Child Welfare Education Committee. These options are the most feasible, practical, and potentially effective. The state has a training program in place but does not adequately assess effectiveness. The state also has an interest in training and professional development; but currently provides it as recertification for investigators, and leadership development for upper-level management. Both options provide the state with new solutions that are recommended by the Child Welfare League of America, and are programs included in states with model and improved child protection service systems.
I. Problem Statement

Child protective service (CPS) agencies are some of the most highly scrutinized public organizations. These agencies are tasked with a very broad, but extremely important mission of protecting children. The Florida Department of Children and Families is the state’s child protective service agency. Within the past 10 years the department has received much negative press coverage as a result of many issues, but specifically the deaths of children. The deaths of Rilya Wilson and Kayla McKeen are two examples of children whose cases were entrusted to the Department of Children and Families, but were killed at the hands of their caretakers.

How is this possible? How can a public organization not be accountable for protecting the population it serves? Many factors affect the problems of child protective services. Child welfare experts and administrators cite burnout, inadequate training, organizational dysfunction, turnover, lack of qualified personnel, lack of funding and increased caseloads as some of the primary factors.

Though there are a number of contributing factors, the lack of professional skills and competency is especially troubling. The child protection investigator (CPI) has to utilize important skills and competency in diagnosing whether or not abuse is substantiated or unsubstantiated. The possibility of mistakes, or a misdiagnosis at any stage in the child protection process, looms over the conscious of any worker and the reputation of any child protection agency. The consequences of misdiagnosis and mistakes in child protection are paramount, and could mean the destruction of a family, further harm, or even the death of a child.

Issues of professional skills and competency are vital to public administration
because it is the mission and business of the state to protect one of our most vulnerable populations, children. Taking the steps necessary to ensure that children are served by competent and skilled professionals is vital in providing effective and efficient services. The purpose of this report is to provide recommendations for improving the professional skills and competency of child protection service investigators in the Florida Department of Children and Families’ Child Protection Program.

II. Background and Literature Review

Background

It is important to discuss the progression and development of service delivery in Florida’s child protective services. This review of child protective services includes a brief historical view of its development and an overview of its current state.

In 1974 the federal government passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act which provided financial support to states creating child welfare systems. Florida provided child welfare services through what was then called the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. In 1971 the state created the Florida Abuse Registry which received reports of abuse and neglect 24 hours a day at over 181 centers across the state.

In the late 1970’s states began expanding but also combining child welfare services. Decreased funding and combination of services are just a few factors contributing to what some argue was the deprofessionalization of child welfare. Child welfare was historically linked to the profession of social work, but many states began to remove the social work education requirements for child welfare staff. This led to systems in which many of the workers were not trained professionals. This break
between the profession of social work and public child welfare agencies was one factor that led to many social workers leaving the public sector to enter child welfare in the private sector.

Between the 1970’s and 1980’s, the number of reports child protective service agencies received increased 347% nationwide (Berg and Kelly, 2000). With an overwhelmed CPS system and a lack of qualified and well trained child welfare professionals, states responded by narrowing the definition of what qualified as abuse or neglect. In 1980 the Florida legislature created the Children, Youth and Families (CYF) program office which consolidated a variety of child welfare services including abuse and neglect reports and investigations (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1981). CYF experienced a series of problems such as inefficient record keeping, above standard caseloads, and workers not complying with report, investigation and case management policies (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1981). During this time the state did not have a standard case management system. Shortly after the problems of CYF surfaced, the legislature required the office to implement standards of case management which included screening, investigation, service delivery, case monitoring and tracking (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1981).

In 1984 Florida continued to experience a significant increase in child abuse reports which prompted a review of laws protecting children (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1990). Responding to the increase, the legislature significantly increased the number of staff employed in protective services and provided pay adjustments for key personnel working with children to reduce high turnover within
the agency (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1990). In 1986 the Florida legislature enacted the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Training Acts (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1990). The acts created the Children, Youth and Families Professional Development Centers system which provided competency-based training to all staff (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1990).

Continued issues of poor case management, a lack of accountability and a lack of competent professionals affected the office of Children, Youth and Families. In an effort of strengthening the child protection system, the office was changed to the Florida Protective Services System (FPSS) in 1988. According to the legislature, this child protection system functioned with more accountability, and created the Florida Abuse Hotline (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1989).

In 1997 the federal government enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) which called for the reform of child protective service systems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In 1996 the Florida legislature created the Department of Children and Families which replaced the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

Currently, Florida’s child welfare system is a privatized system. It is facilitated and managed within 15 state districts. The screening of child abuse reports and the investigations are services provided by the state through district offices and local units; but contracted community based care agencies provide additional client services such as foster care and adoption. Specifically, the statewide system operates through a centralized abuse hotline located in Tallahassee. Hotline workers receive reports of
alleged abuse or neglect, screen the reports, and if a report meets statutory guidelines of abuse or neglect, it is referred to the local investigation unit for processing and assessment. After the CPI concludes the investigation and provides case recommendations, the case is then referred to a contracted local agency for additional service delivery.

Unfortunately, since the passage of AFSA, evaluation reports from the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), and the deaths of two children in the care of DCF highlighted continued issues of disorganization, inefficiency, ineffectiveness and procedural and administrative problems within the agency.

In 1999 6-year old Kayla McKean was beaten to death by her father (OPPAGA, 2001). The Department of Children and Families had received her case and several reports of abuse, but failed to remove her from the abusive home (OPPAGA, 1999). An investigation into her death revealed a weak supervisory review process. In response to these findings, the Florida legislature enacted the Kayla McKean Act which established an administrative review process for investigations.

In 2001 OPPAGA conducted a program evaluation and justification review of Florida’s Child Protection Program. The report concluded a variety of strengths, improvements and failures. One conclusion was that the program failed to meet its’ performance goals. The report detailed a continued problem of turnover, a failure of workers seeing the alleged victims within the 24 hour period, and an inability to close cases in the required time (OPPAGA, Report No. 01-14, 2001). Factors contributing to these issues were also discussed, an important factor being that there needed to be an
improvement in professional training.

Rilya Wilson was a 5-year old with an open case in the Department of Children and Families. DCF workers interviewed Wilson’s caretakers in reference to another sibling and it was revealed that Rilya was missing. Further investigation found that Wilson became missing in 2001, though it went unnoticed with the department for almost 15 months. Rilya has never been found but she is presumed dead. Her caretakers are charged with her disappearance. The case received national attention and prompted other states to review their CPS systems. Though this case focused on a negligent case worker, further investigation highlighted important failures of the child protection system.

During the Rilya Wilson investigations, Governor Jeb Bush created a special team of investigators titled the “Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Protection” to assess the practices of DCF. The Blue Ribbon Panel found many of the same problems OPPAGA detailed in its’ 2001 report; but it was revealed that Rilya’s case worker had falsified documents. The falsified documents indicated that she had visited Rilya every 30 days as required. In addition, it was revealed that the supervisor failed to review the case—highlighting a violation of the Kayla McKean Act. Media attention on the investigations again noted a child protection system that was understaffed, overwhelmed and inadequately funded. While media attention also gave much attention to negligent child protection workers, child welfare advocates and other groups argued not only for the enforcement of stricter requirements in report screening, investigation and case management; but an increase in resources, training, support systems and pay for child protection workers.

Issues of organizational structure, personnel, policy, and administration have
plagued the state’s child protection services for the past 40 years. Though issues affecting CPS are common to other states and is considered something of a national problem, Florida is unique in the numerous times it has changed its’ system.

The most recent OPPAGA reports continue to indicate the same, and some newer problems within the child protection program (OPPAGA, Report No. 04-03, 2004; OPPAGA, Report No. 05-40, 2005; OPPAGA, Report No. 03-09, 2003). As stated in a 1981 report of the Florida CYF, “History shows a dramatically negative impact on service delivery when service delivery structures are changed without changing the support systems, e.g. personnel, information, training, legislation (Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, 1981, p.153)”. Ultimately, skills and preparedness of child protective services investigators affects the quality of decision-making and professional competency. The literature review provides important information about issues affecting child protective services.

**Literature Review**

Literature examining issues affecting the skills and professional competency of child protective services workers is in abundance. Yet, literature exploring and analyzing frontline workers (screeners, investigators and supervisors) and service delivery from a policy and administrative view is lacking. Available and relevant literature focuses on three major themes: turnover, the lack of qualified workers, and the transfer of learning.

**Turnover**

Child protective services staff turnover is a national issue. Smith (2004) estimates turnover rates are average between 23% and 85% per year. The most current turnover data available for DCF reports a rate of 29.7%, which is higher than the national average
of 20%, and significantly exceeds the 7% rate for all state employees (OPPAGA, Report No. 02-16, 2002). In 2004 OPPAGA released a special report on community based care lead agencies which noted a 64% turnover rate for case managers and a 60% turnover rate for supervisors at one agency within its first nine months of operation (OPPAGA, 2004).

Researchers have found a great variety of factors contributing to staff turnover. According to Curry, McCarragher, and Dellman-Jenkins (2005), there are factors that statistically contribute to turnover, these include: supervision and support from supervisor, coworker support, management support, perceived stress, experience level, education, commitment with the organization and child welfare, self-efficacy, realistic expectations, having a sense of mission, and the availability of other job opportunities. Smith (2004) references ideas of organizational support literature and discusses the notion that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are factors contributing to staff turnover. Other common factors attributed to turnover are: age, education, completion of a relevant internship, time spent in court activities, emotional exhaustion, planning a long-term career in child welfare, increased workload, work experience and salary (Nissly, Barak & Levin, 2005; Smith, 2004). Job satisfaction is another factor contributing to staff turnover. A research study compared the job satisfaction of family service workers and child welfare workers. The findings revealed child welfare workers experienced higher feelings of depersonalization, role conflict and role ambiguity (Smith, 2004).

Though research into factors contributing to staff turnover varies, the relationship between supervisor and worker is one factor consistently discussed in literature. Research into retention of child protective services workers emphasizes the relationship between
supervisor and frontline workers as a contributing factor. Smith (2004) notes that when employees feel their supervisors are supportive, they become more committed to the supervisor, and possibly the organization as well. Several studies found an association between supportive supervision and organizational support, organization commitment and job retention (Smith, 2004). Importantly, there is a link between low levels of supervisor support and turnover (Smith, 2004).

Human services and child welfare research supports the notion that turnover produces negative effects on service quality and delivery. When a staff member leaves an agency, their caseload is distributed to the remaining workers. The implications of a worker with an increased workload, yet no increase of resources, time or funding can be critical. An increased caseload generally means a worker has more to do in a short amount of time. Other implications of an increased caseload include the problem that minimal attention is given to the vacated cases, which is a potential risk to client outcomes (Bednar, 2003).

In some agencies, the supervisor takes the vacated caseload. According to Curry et al.(2005), this can cause a decrease in supervising, training and supporting workers. A potential risk to client outcomes can occur because of a new case worker working with an existing case. The new case worker must become familiar with the case history, as well as build a relationship with the family and child involved (OPPAGA, 2002). This can create damaging instability for the child and family (OPPAGA, 2002). The effects of staff turnover are closely related to another issue affecting frontline workers, professional competency.
Lack of qualified workers

The lack of qualified CPS workers is also a national issue. It is of priority that frontline workers are professionally competent in the areas of child abuse, neglect and maltreatment. Reports of child abuse and neglect involve high levels of complex social problems such as substance abuse, homelessness, poverty, and domestic violence (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins 2005). Thus, investigators and case workers must be competent in a variety of fields, in addition to cultural competence, state law, as well as local resources for referrals.

Social work education programs provide education in the mentioned areas as well as provide specializations in child welfare. In previous years, CPS systems required that frontline workers and supervisors have social work education. Typically, this included either a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree or a Master of Social Work degree. As mentioned in the literature review, deprofessionalization of the CPS system led to a breakage between social work and CPS (Zlotnick, 2002). Current requirements are no longer specific to social work education, but often any relevant experience or degree.

The importance of professionally competent frontline workers and supervisors has led many states to create partnerships between social work programs at local universities and colleges with the state protective services system. The federal government provides funding through the Title IV-E training funds, in which many states create partnerships in an attempt to recruit social work students (Zlotnick, 2002). An example of a partnership is the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, which utilizes Title IV-E funds to support its Social Work Education Program (SWEP). The SWEP sponsored staff members to obtain a Master of Social Work degree (Illinois
A second example of the partnerships between social work education and child welfare agencies can be found in Bachelor of Social Work education programs. In these partnerships the state provides tuition stipends for students entering a child welfare specialization program within the social work degree program at their university. Upon accepting the stipend, the student agrees to work for the state in the area of child welfare one year for each year of funding they receive. The problem is that many of the professionally educated and trained social workers leave the CPS system completely, or enter the private sector.

The state is left with the problem of a lack of specially trained and skilled professionals. The general solution used to address this problem is creating better training programs for workers. Many states have created agency specific training programs to address the needs and skills of qualified workers (Shireman, 2003). States utilize federal funds to create quality training programs. Many receive professional assistance from distinguished organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America, Council on Social Work Education, and the National Association for Staff Training and Development of the American Public Human Service Association (Shireman, 2003).

Child welfare professionals and state administrators acknowledge the importance of training workers in issues of child abuse and neglect, but there is disagreement within the profession on the best model. Some support the bureaucratic agency specific model, while others support a more comprehensive model combining on-the-job training, shadowing, classroom training and continued professional development (Berg and Kelly,
Importantly, the focus on quality training programs has been a national focus, but evidence supporting the effectiveness of training programs is lacking (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins).

**Transfer of learning**

A third issue affecting professional delivery of services is transfer of learning (TOL). Transfer of learning explains the transfer of knowledge and skills learned during academic education or training to the profession. Transfer of learning research has generally been a topic of human resources. Available literature addresses contributing factors to this issue. Some researchers address individual differences, while others address organizational elements and their influence on an individual’s ability to transfer learning (Holton, Chen, & Naquin, 2003).

Literature discussing the effects of learning transfer in the area of social services tends to be outdated, and current relevant literature is lacking. A common method of addressing transfer of learning has been assessing and altering training design and improving training programs (Holton, Chen, & Naquin, 2003). Yet, the lack of available literature as it relates to child protective services does not represent the overall importance of the issue. According to Curry et al. (2005), there are some studies that found only 10-13% of learning actually transfers. Relating to the financial costs, this results in the skill dollars loss of 87-90 cents of each training dollar (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins, 2005).

In summary, professional skills are vital in child protective services. The literature reviewed explains that factors contributing to turnover and the lack of qualified professionals, affect the quality of service delivery. When trained professionals do not
transfer their learning to the professional setting, their decision-making and diagnostic skills become questionable. While some states have implemented training programs and the recruitment of social workers as solutions, there is a lack of literature or empirical data explaining the effectiveness of the training programs (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins, 2005).

The child protective services system is plagued by these issues. They have affected Florida’s child protective services for the past 40 years. When CPS workers make mistakes, the effects can be further harm or the death of a child. This paper provides recommendations for increasing the skills and professional competency of child protection investigators.

III. Methodology & Evaluative Criteria

Methodology

Data collected for this report reflects a variety of stakeholders in this issue. Information collected represents child welfare researchers, administrators, state and federal government, and CPS investigators and trainers. Data for this report was collected from the following sources:

- analysis of scholarly journals and academic literature;
- review of Florida legislative and departmental reports and program evaluations;
- review of federal evaluations of state CPS programs; and
- survey (n=10) and personal interviews (n=3)

An analysis of scholarly journals and academic literature was completed through searches of Cambridge Scientific Abstracts and Wilson OmniFile. Data analyzed
pertained to issues affecting the professional skills and competency of CPS investigators. This information provided insight into the problems affecting the professional skills of workers and the identification of best practices in professional skills assessment and training. This insight is vital to proposing recommendations for improvement.

A review of Florida legislative and DCF program evaluations was conducted to assess identifiable problems within the Child Protection Program. Results of this these reports and documents were compared with federal evaluations of Florida’s Child Protection Program. This information was accessed from two sources: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *National Study of Child Protective Services Systems and Reform Efforts*, and the U.S. Children’s Bureau *Child Welfare Reviews*.

A voluntary survey (see Appendix A) was issued to investigators and supervisors (n=10). The participants are currently employed with Florida Department of Children and Families Child Protection Program (District 2). The survey was used to explore the opinions of workers on training programs, professional development and skills.

Structured personal interviews (n=3) were conducted to gather expert and administrative insight about issues affecting the professional skills and development of workers and recommendations for improvement. The personal interviews were conducted with former DCF Secretary, Judge Kathleen Kearney, and current DCF child welfare trainer Grendy Henry. A third interview was conducted with Dr. Robin Perry, a current faculty member in the Florida State University School of Social Work researching issues in child welfare and training and professional development. The interviews varied in length, and were comprised of qualitative questions.
Evaluative criteria

Three criteria were used to evaluate each policy recommendation: administrative feasibility, political support, and potential effectiveness.

- Administrative feasibility. This assesses the practicality of the recommendation. Does the recommendation completely change the current structure, or will it cause minor changes? It is also concerned with how easily the recommendation can be implemented. Administrative feasibility is assessed through expert opinion, current research, and government reports.

- Political support. This assesses the support of legislators and the public. It assesses the political environment surrounding the recommendation. Is it something current legislators would support? It is a recommendation that would be easily adopted? Political feasibility is determined through expert opinion and current literature.

- Potential effectiveness. This assesses potential impact of the recommendation. Would it provide effective results? What type of impact would this policy have upon investigators, supervisors and other administrators? Would it improve the decision-making skills of frontline workers and supervisors? This is determined from current research, expert opinion, and survey results.

These criteria were chosen to reflect issues presented in the literature review and because they support the overall goal of improving the professional skills and competency of CPS investigators. Each criterion is ranked as high, medium, or low.

Limitations of this analysis involve the small survey sample size (n=10), and the
small number of interviews (n=3). The state recently completed its transition to total privatization. This involved some structural and administrative changes. Since total privatization the state has not completed a program evaluation of the Child Protection Program or the training program which could provide additional insight. Yet, information used is the most recent available (since 2000) and the personal interviews and surveys provide insight into the current status of the child protection and training programs.

IV. Policy options

There are three specific policy options identified in this report: CPI training program improvements, ongoing training and professional development, and reduced caseloads for new investigators. The policy options are intended to improve upon the skills and professional competency of child protection investigators.

Option 1: Training program improvements

The Florida Department of Children and Families currently contracts with the University of South Florida (USF), Florida International University (FIU), and the University of Central Florida to provide training for child welfare workers through Professional Development Centers (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2004). Relating to child protection investigators, the training lasts approximately six to seven weeks and involves a pre-test, in-class work, shadowing experienced investigators and a post-test. Improvements to the current training program include two components, field instruction and comprehensive training program evaluation.
Field instruction/education

Previously, training was offered in phases. Trainees spent several weeks completing classroom instruction, then spent time completing extensive field education, shadowing, and mentoring (Kathleen Kearney, personal communication, November 14, 2005). Currently, not all district training programs include field instruction. The contracted universities are not required to provide field education, which is why some districts have field instruction and some do not (Grendy Henry, personal communication, November 10, 2005). The decision to provide field instruction is left to the districts. Without field instruction, training consists primarily of in-class training, and in some cases short-term mentorship.

Findings from the current investigator surveys revealed that 65% (n=10) felt their pre-service training was inadequate and unrealistic compared to what they experienced once they became investigators. All contracted universities should be required to provide extensive field instruction for trainees. Trainees should be exposed to a variety of training methods, not only classroom instruction because there are a variety of learning styles. Field training provides trainees with a realistic view of job responsibilities, and is an opportunity for students to realistically apply knowledge gained from classroom training. As in other professions such as medicine, anthropology, law, and psychology; students spend extensive time applying their classroom education in the field.

Comprehensive training program evaluation
Measurement of the effectiveness of the current DCF investigator training programs is essentially non-existent. The pre-test, post-test scores do not adequately measure the transfer of learning to the field, or the actual preparation of trainees. As the common issues affecting testing, training tends to cater to the test, in other words, students are trained to the test—or, are already aware of post-test questions through training and as a result of the pre-test.

Though there are core competencies and basic concepts each training program is required to provide, there is extreme flexibility in additional training aspects and how they are offered. The Department of Children and Families should establish and complete a consistent, comprehensive evaluation of its training programs in each district. This is especially important because there is inconsistency among the training provided in DCF districts.

In the survey administered to current DCF investigators, 30% of survey respondents indicated a problem with their training experience was that their trainers had never worked as investigators. Training evaluations should include an evaluation of the trainers and their qualifications to train in child welfare, in addition to evaluating training components. A comprehensive evaluation includes examining what is being taught and what is being learned. It involves testing investigators during their probationary phase, which could be a better assessment of training knowledge retention. The evaluation should also answer questions regarding whether or not training components are identified as best practices. As discussed, training programs vary throughout the districts, thus a proper evaluation should be a comparative analysis of training practices within the state which can also identify model practices.
**Option 2: Ongoing training and professional development**

100% of survey respondents (n=10) support ongoing training and professional development. Currently, the state requires recertification for child welfare workers, and provides leadership training and professional development for upper level management in the Department of Children and Families. Under this proposed policy, the state would provide comparable ongoing training and professional development for CPIs. This would be accomplished through a skill-building certificate training program for experienced workers.

Under the proposed program, experienced workers would apply and be recommended by their agency director. Accepted CPIs (and their supervisors) would participate in skill-building, hands-on, experiential workshops. The workshops would involve a combination of learning through extensive coaching and mentoring, self-directed activities, computer-based distance learning and case based learning. The proposed skill building and professional development training programs would mirror that of the program as it is offered in the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program (Ohio Child Welfare Training Program, n.d.).

Ohio’s program offers four programs, two for caseworkers and two for supervisors (see Appendix B for a detailed description). The programs for caseworkers are both six-months offering specialized skill development in, *Developing Skills for Engaging Children and Families* and *Developing Skills in Interviewing Techniques with Young Children* (Ohio Child Welfare Training Program, n.d.). The two programs available for supervisors are, *Enhancing Skills for Managing Change and Conflict*, and *Enhancing Supervisory Skills for Improved Child and Family Outcomes* (Ohio Child
The goal of this program is to continue skill building and professional development of investigators. Recertification is essentially recycling information CPIs learning during training, and does necessarily prove to enhance or develop applicable skills.

**Option 3: Reduced caseloads for new investigators**

Currently, after trainees complete child protection training, they are placed on a probationary period. The problem with this probationary stage is that new CPI’s receive a full, regular caseload. This is critical to retention because as Zlotnick (2000), explains, most child welfare workers decide whether or not they are going to stay in their job within the first couple of weeks. When training does not provide workers with a realistic view of what to expect on the job, this is a recipe for disaster. Upon beginning the job they become overwhelmed with a former investigator’s full caseload or a completely new and full caseload.

The probationary phase should include a requirement that new investigators (those who recently completed DCF training), should have a reduced caseload. This policy recommends that the reduced caseload for new investigators should be at least half the size of the district’s caseload average. For example, if the district has an average caseload of 20, new investigators should not exceed a caseload of 10 during their probationary period.

Child welfare research explains a variety of problems with high caseloads such as: increased turnover, burnout, stress—and as discussed in the literature review, all of these consequences can mean horrible consequences for clients. Cases can become neglected
and workers begin to find shortcuts around proper procedure and department policy.

V. Findings

Each policy was assessed with the evaluative criteria. This section concludes with a table summarizing the results.

Option 1: Training program improvements

The two aspects of this policy were assessed separately with the evaluative criteria.

Field instruction/education

Administrative feasibility

Previous to the privatization of training, intensive field instruction and education was a pre-service training component (Kathleen Kearney, personal communication, November 14, 2005). Importantly most states provide some form of field instruction in child welfare training. State history, federal recommendations and research support the practicality of field instruction in training (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2004). As mentioned, some districts provide field instruction and some do not. Yet, because it is unclear as to why all districts are not providing field instruction for training, though it was previously provided, administrative feasibility of field instruction is rated medium.

Political support

Governor Bush and the Florida legislature have voiced support for the improvement of child welfare services in the state. Together they have established special investigatory panels and the Child Welfare Education Committee to identify problems within child protection services and identify best practices for improvement
(Florida Department of Children and Families, 2004). Best practices for improving all aspects of child protection in the state are a political priority. Media stories of child protection services in disarray have highlighted public disappointment with the current system. Not only do public administrators have a vested interest in improving services, there is also the interest of serving the public. Political support of an important additional aspect of training that is supported by federal government, research, and notable child welfare groups is likely to occur. Political support of field instruction is high.

**Potential effectiveness**

Child welfare workers should be exposed to what their job will actually involve *during* training (Dr. Robin Perry, personal communication, November 12, 2005). The very concept of training is *preparation*. The effectiveness of field instruction is incomparable. 90% of survey respondents stated that most of their learning came from on-the-job learning experience. Field instruction can provide this type of realism during training. The potential effectiveness of field instruction is high.

**Comprehensive training evaluation**

**Administrative feasibility**

Currently, the state has two groups that could conduct the training assessment: OPPAGA and the Child Welfare Education Committee. In 2003 OPPAGA attempted to conduct a program evaluation of child welfare training but was unable due contract issues with the training universities (OPPAGA, Report No. 03-09, 2003). The Department of Children and Families’ establishment of the Child Welfare Education Committee is a second group that could conduct this comprehensive evaluation of state training programs. Thus, administrative feasibility is high.
Political support

Recently, the Florida legislature contracted Maxximus, Inc to evaluate child welfare training programs (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2004). This was a one time evaluation and provided recommendations to the federally required Program Improvement Plan (PIP). The state is required to submit a PIP to the federal government after child welfare services are reviewed. Florida CPS is subject to federal review, but there is no national evaluation of training programs. The reasons for this vary, though some would argue the profits saved and earned through private contracting prevents many stakeholders from calling for a review and evaluation of training programs. Thus, political support for training evaluation is low.

Potential effectiveness

Instead of maintaining a reactionary position to training, continual and comprehensive evaluation could highlight shortcomings and failures that could prove troublesome. Continual evaluations can reveal new innovations and best practices in training that can be updated. Negligent investigators and inadequately prepared investigators can prove to be detrimental for clients, and are a financial cost to the state. Evaluating the program that prepares investigators for their work is imperative. OPPAGA, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, child welfare research, and the Child Welfare League of America each support training as vital to the preparedness and professional competence of child welfare workers. Potential effectiveness of this policy option is high.
Option 2: Ongoing training and professional development

Administrative feasibility

Implementing this type of program would involve additional supervisory and agency commitment. The workload and responsibilities of supervisors are complex, thus commitment and readiness for this type of program is unclear. The Department of Children and Families currently provides professional development for upper-level management. This program would simply be an expansion of the current program for upper-level management.

The department’s Program Improvement Plan explains plans for professional development workshops for CPIs in the future, though it is not explicitly stated when this will occur (Child and Family Services Review, 2001). There is a lack of information available as to why professional development is not currently occurring, but as mentioned there is information available explaining that it will occur at some point. Thus, the administrative feasibility of this option is medium.

Political support

As with the first policy option, Governor Bush and the legislature voiced support for improving the skills and professional competency of child welfare workers. Training innovations and the identification of best practices are imperative to this challenge. This proposed policy may be something the legislature chooses to privatize as well, but because the state has voiced interest and support for improving the skills and competency of child welfare workers, political support for this policy is high.
Potential effectiveness

As discussed in the literature review, perceived organizational support and the relationship between supervisor and worker are related to retention. The skill building and development training program this policy proposes requires the cooperation of supervisors and CPIs, and the support of the department. It promotes supervisory mentoring instead of primarily monitoring. Lower retention saves the state money, and when combined with increased skills and professional competency, can have positive effects on the quality of service delivery.

This type of certificate training program can be used as a tool for recruitment. It would professionalize child protection investigations by providing the opportunity to receive a special certificate in skills and competencies relevant to investigations.

A skill certificate program can promote higher quality service delivery. It rewards experienced workers and gives them the opportunity to enhance their skills, which is beneficial for clients, and can improve the reputation of the department. The potential effectiveness of option two is high.

Option 3: Reduced caseloads for new investigators

Administrative feasibility

The Department of Children and Families has had a problem with a high backlog of cases (OPPAGA, Report No. 01-14, 2001). Decreasing the number of caseloads for new workers may or may not increase case backlog. Factors contributing to the high backlog of cases, such as why workers are unable to close their cases within the required time limit, are unknown (OPPAGA, Report. No. 02-16, 2002). But the inability to close
cases affects investigators’ ability to initiate new cases. This could of course leave children to harm. Importantly, over the past five years the state has seen an increase in the number of abuse and neglect reports and investigations. This increase may create an environment where it is not feasible to reduce the number of caseloads for new investigators.

Turnover and training cause problems for the feasibility of this policy option. Currently, training is offered biannually. When an employee leaves, it could be months before the district is able to hire and train a new investigator. The implications of turnover and infrequent training add to case backlog and the redistribution of cases. If districts have investigators with reduced caseloads, but also an increasing backlog and a reduced number of investigators due to turnover, this is also a recipe for disaster. Either the district would have to redistribute the cases to the new investigators, which defeats the purpose of the policy, or the more experienced investigators would experience an additional increase in their caseloads. Administrative feasibility of option three is low.

**Political support**

The state is currently working towards meeting recommended federal, and best practice caseload standards. OPPAGA has been reporting the high caseload size as a problem continually within the past five years, but the department and the legislature have had trouble identifying solutions to address the issue.

As discussed in the background and literature review, in previous years the state has addressed backlog and caseload issues by providing funding to hire additional workers and narrowing the statutory definition of abuse and neglect. Albeit, problems of case backlog continued.
A policy that would reduce the number of cases workers can manage, coupled with a child protection policy that requires investigation when the report meets statutory definition, may prove complicating to accept. Judge Kathleen Kearney (personal communication, November 14, 2005) discussed the fact that during her time as DCF Secretary, the problem of high caseloads was a pressing issue, and the state wanted to protect the quality of service delivery, but increased investigations and pressure to protect children can prove complicating. Political support of the policy is medium.

Potential effectiveness

Reducing caseloads for new investigators is a way to continue the training process. It is also a method that works to not overwhelm or provide negative effects upon the weaker skilled new workers, compared to the more experienced workers.

According to child welfare research, reduced caseloads can provide a higher quality of service delivery and can provide positive effects on retention (OPPAGA, Report No. 01-14, 2001; Child Welfare League of America, n.d.). Reduced caseloads provide workers with more time to close cases properly, and make professional, skilled decisions without additional stress. This can provide positive results when investigators complete their probationary period and accept a full caseload. Potential effectiveness of this policy is high.

The results of the policy evaluation are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Policy options matrix
In Table 1, options that received the highest ranking are highlighted in yellow. An examination of the table shows the most feasible options are policy options one and two.
VI. Recommendation for action

Relating to information discussed in the literature review, child welfare workers need to be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to effectively complete investigations. Though many Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students are equipped with that knowledge, it is unrealistic for every investigation unit to be staffed with only BSW and MSW educated investigators. High rates of retention, poor supervisor relationships, and the poor transfer of learning are proven to affect the skills and job performance of child welfare workers. Each of the policy options addresses this problem.

Requiring field education as an aspect of training is necessary for relevant experience, and could be a tool for retention. Exposing trainees to what they will actually experience on the job is a basic training concept. Assessing the effectiveness of training is important to retention and skill development as well. Why should the state continue to waste training dollars when the retention rate is high? When a worker leaves, the state has lost money used to train the former worker, has to spend additional funds to train a new person, and cases have to redistributed. Potential investigators should be prepared for the job as best as possible. This includes a training program that utilizes best practices, and training is provided by adequate and skilled trainers.

Incorporating a skill building certificate training program for ongoing professional development can be a continued investment in CPIs, and an investment in higher quality of service delivery. It is a way to enhance skills and competency of workers since they have completed training and been in the field. Reducing caseloads of new investigators can allow the proper development and maturation of skills learned.
during training because it prevents them from becoming overwhelmed from a full caseload.

The recommendation for action is to incorporate option one and option two. As summarized in Table 1, these options are the most feasible, most likely to be supported, and have high levels of potential effectiveness. As with many programs implemented within the Department of Children and Families, these options should be implemented as pilot programs. Specifically, the state should utilize one district as a pilot site for both of the options. These options should be implemented and assessed by the department’s Child Welfare Education Committee.

**VII. Conclusion**

Though child welfare is highly scrutinized, it is a much needed profession. The Florida Department of Children and Families has an important mission of protecting the vulnerable. The skills and professional competency of investigators responsible for this mission are critical to service delivery. It should be of high priority that the department train and prepare workers with the best resources available. Entrusting critical services to workers who are not effectively trained is a disservice, and further endangers the lives of children.

This report was created with one purpose, to provide options for improving the skills and professional competency of child protection investigators. The proposed, and recommended options are the most feasible, practical and potentially effective. They are supported with research and professional opinion. The implementation of the recommended policies can continue the state’s initiative to connect research with direct
practice. This can ultimately assist the Department of Children and Families in becoming an exemplar and model system.
References


http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws/pi/pi9802.htm


Retrieved September 20, 2005 from
http://ca1.csa.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/ids70/results.php?SID=94f6f14427d8fdac60a
c127bf0afc9cc
Press release
November 22, 2005

Report identifies options for improving skills of DCF investigators

A reported was submitted Wednesday to Governor Bush, the Department of Children and Families’ Child Welfare Education Committee, and the Florida legislature concerning the skills and professional competency of Florida’s child protection investigators. The report recommended improvements to the department’s training program and the implementation of ongoing training and professional development.

The report cites issues of turnover, supervisory support, and transfer of learning as factors affecting the skills and professional competencies of protective investigators. Researchers provided three policy options: improvements to the training program, ongoing and professional development, and a reduction of caseload size for new investigators. The third option was not recommended after it was determined the option was the least feasible and would receive the least political support.

This report was submitted after months of investigations into the practices of the Florida Department of Children and Families. This is the initial report in a series of departmental evaluations and assessments.

For additional information please contact:
Natalya Rice
(343) 542-2781
Nir04d@fsu.edu
November 19, 2005

Secretary Luci Hadi  
Florida Department of Children and Families  
1317 Winewood Blvd.  
Building 1, Room 202  
Tallahassee, Florida  
32399-0700

Dear Secretary Hadi:

The skills and professional competencies of child welfare workers are a national issue. States such as Ohio, Kentucky, Virginia and Texas have implemented a variety of training and skill building programs within their child protection service systems per recommendations of the Child Welfare League of America, Council on Accreditation, and the U.S. Administration of Children and Families. Best practices identified in child welfare research discuss the advantages of organizational support, effective training programs and professional development on retention and the quality of service delivery.

The protection of one of the most vulnerable populations is the forefront of a national dilemma. Child abuse and neglect continue to plague society, and the responsibility of public organizations to protect children is vital. Child protection workers should possess professional skills and competencies to successfully deliver services and meet client needs.

After a review of current state policy and practices, in addition to best practices, we recommend improvements to the child welfare training program, and the establishment of a Skill Building Certificate Training program. The implementation of these recommendations will help make Florida’s Child Protection Programs one of the exemplar programs in the nation, and improve quality service delivery in protecting abused and neglected children.

Respectfully,

Natalya Rice
APPENDIX A

1. Please list your current job title ______________________________

2. Do you feel your job description accurately describes your actual job activities?  
   Yes          No
   2a. If not, please explain ________________________________
       ___________________________________________________
       ___________________________________________________

3. Do you feel your skills and talents are fully utilized in your current position?  
   Yes          No
   3a. Please explain your answer.
       ___________________________________________________
       ___________________________________________________

4. Do you recognize an active support system within your department?  Yes      No
   4a. Please explain your answer.
       ___________________________________________________
       ___________________________________________________

5. Do you participate in regularly scheduled meetings with a supervisor?  Yes      No

6. Did you complete training for your current position?  Yes      No
   (If you answered No, please skip to question 9)

7. Did your job training involve any of the following? Please circle all that apply.
   a. guest speakers
   b. mentorship
   c. job shadowing
   d. on-the-job training
   e. classroom training
   f. other, please list ________________________________

41
8. Do you feel that the training adequately prepared you for your current job function?
   Yes           No

   8a. Please explain your answer.

   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________

9. Does your current job provide ongoing training and professional development?
   Yes          No    I don’t know

   9a. If so, please explain.

   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________

10. Do you support ongoing training and professional development?
    Yes         No       I don’t know

11. Additional comments?