



Highlights of GAO-03-357, a report to Congressional Requesters

CHILD WELFARE

HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff

Why GAO Did This Study

A stable and highly skilled child welfare workforce is necessary to effectively provide child welfare services that meet federal goals. This report identifies (1) the challenges child welfare agencies face in recruiting and retaining child welfare workers and supervisors, (2) how recruitment and retention challenges have affected the safety and permanency outcomes of children in foster care, and (3) workforce practices that public and private child welfare agencies have implemented to successfully confront recruitment and retention challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) take actions that may help child welfare agencies address the recruitment and retention challenges they face. Such efforts may include HHS (1) using its annual discretionary grant program to promote targeted research on the effectiveness of perceived promising practices; and/or (2) issuing guidance or providing technical assistance to encourage states to use their program improvement plans to address the caseload, training, and staffing issues cited in the reviews HHS conducts.

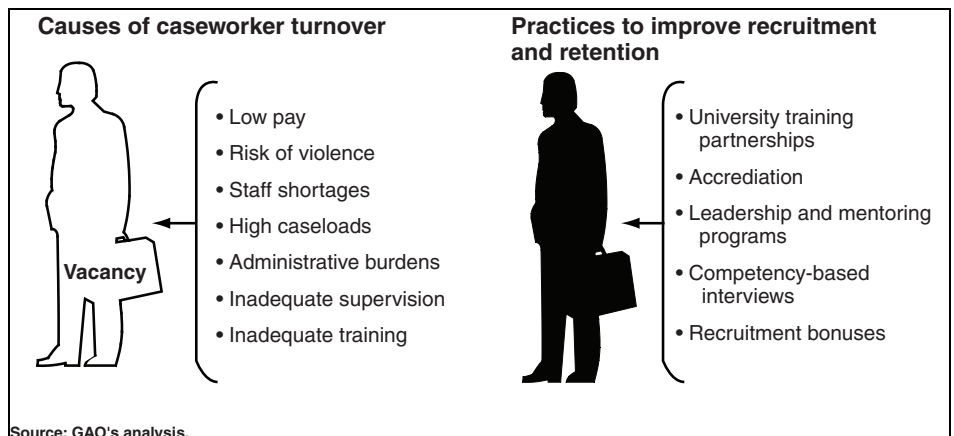
What GAO Found

Child welfare agencies face a number of challenges in recruiting and retaining workers and supervisors. Low salaries, in particular, hinder agencies' ability to attract potential child welfare workers and to retain those already in the profession. Additionally, caseworkers GAO interviewed in all four of the states GAO visited cited high caseloads and related administrative burdens, which they said took from 50 to 80 percent of their time; a lack of supervisory support; and insufficient time to take training as issues impacting both their ability to work effectively and their decision to stay in the child welfare profession. Most of these issues also surfaced in GAO's analysis of 585 exit interviews completed by child welfare staff across the country who voluntarily severed their employment.

According to caseworkers GAO interviewed, high turnover rates and staffing shortages leave remaining staff with insufficient time to establish relationships with children and families and make the necessary decisions to ensure safe and stable permanent placements. GAO's analysis of HHS's state child welfare agency reviews in 27 states corroborated caseworker accounts, showing that large caseloads and worker turnover delay the timeliness of investigations and limit the frequency of worker visits with children, hampering agencies' attainment of some key federal safety and permanency outcomes.

Child welfare agencies have implemented various workforce practices to improve recruitment and retention—including engaging in university-agency training partnerships and obtaining agency accreditation, a goal achieved in part by reducing caseloads and enhancing supervision—but few of these initiatives have been rigorously evaluated.

Causes of and Practices to Prevent Child Welfare Caseworker Vacancies



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To view the full report click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or Ashbyc@GAO.gov.