



# SUPERVISION: THE SAFETY NET FOR FRONT-LINE CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

## ACTION BRIEF

To further our understanding of the complex and crucial role of supervisors in child welfare, the NASW Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) convened an invitational symposium, *Supervision: The Safety Net for Front-Line Child Welfare Practice*, on November 18, 2010. It was planned in conjunction with the NASW Center for Workforce Studies & Social Work Practice and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI), with Casey Family Programs (CFP) as a contributing partner.

Expectations are that supervisors be highly skilled practitioners who can implement ethical and culturally competent practices that result in improved outcomes for children and families; who can serve as mentors to front-line workers and guide clinical practices; who engage with the community; who transmit agency policies and evaluate performance; who demonstrate leadership and who help workers deal with the stress and trauma of the work. However, real world practice indicates that it is difficult to actualize all of these roles simultaneously and it may not be feasible to expect to find all of these attributes in one individual.

## RESEARCH ON CHILD WELFARE SUPERVISION

Research indicates that effective supervision is a critical ingredient in addressing child welfare staff retention, organizational culture and climate, culturally competent practice, transmission of evidence-based practices, and child and family outcomes. However, today's child welfare supervisors face challenges in fulfilling their leadership, administrative, education and support functions.

## CHALLENGES TO SUPERVISION

### Training and Knowledge Development

- Lack of adequate training on supervisory roles, tasks and competencies.
- Inadequate knowledge of the changing populations and communities served.
- Over-focus on performance of administrative supervisory functions (e.g., managing staff and workloads).
- Insufficient research-tested models of supervision.
- Inadequate time to attend training or to remain current with the research literature.
- Absence of adequate tools to disseminate evidence-based information.
- Insufficient timely use of data to inform and improve practice.

### Organizational Issues and Implementation of Child Welfare Practices

- Experiences of trauma, and concerns about vulnerability and lack of safety within agencies and communities.

- Frequent turnover of high-ranking leaders and administrators.
- Difficulty in retaining competent front-line workers.
- Potential ethical conflicts in how services to families are assessed and provided.
- Frequent service and resource gaps.
- Potential conflicts between confidentiality policies and transparency of services provided.
- Lack of privacy for meetings, supervisory sessions and client interviews.
- Numerous oversight bodies that review practices and question how services are provided.
- Absence of available and adequate supervision, peer consultation and support for supervisors.
- Problems in organization culture and climate that heighten potential for burn-out.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### Further Research and Enhanced Use of Data Are Needed

- Research is needed on how the following impact supervision, outcomes, and retention
  - ◇ Supervisor’s education, professional preparation and training.
  - ◇ Different models of supervision.
  - ◇ Different practice models.
  - ◇ Organizational climate and culture.
  - ◇ Supervisor to supervisee ratios.
  - ◇ Enhancement of agency practices to ensure that all children and families receive culturally appropriate and relevant services.
- Supervision research should be reviewed, synthesized and translated into practices and be accessible through newsletters and e-alerts.
- National data should be gathered on minimum qualifications, education and training of supervisors.
- Administrative and case data should be utilized by supervisors to enhance practice outcomes.

### Professional Development and Organizational Supports for Supervisors Should Be Improved

- Greater attention should be given to the selection of supervisors
  - ◇ Minimum qualifications should be established for child welfare supervisors.
  - ◇ Supervisory training should be prerequisite for transitioning into supervisory positions.
  - ◇ Effective models for recruiting and selecting supervisors should be disseminated.
  - ◇ Civil service requirements should be re-assessed and aligned with practice realities.
  - ◇ Recruitment of the “right” child welfare workers is critical given that most supervisors are selected from the front-line child welfare workforce.
  - ◇ Recruitment of supervisors should include a combination of educational requirements and performance expectations.
- National competencies for child welfare supervisors should be developed
  - ◇ Supervisory competencies should be compared to MSW curricula offerings.
  - ◇ Best practice models for educating MSWs to become child welfare supervisors should be identified.
- Support, guidance and training of supervisors should be expanded
  - ◇ Create mentorship and peer consultation programs to support supervisors through agencies, through professional associations or through agency/university partnerships.
  - ◇ Create quality improvement debriefing processes in agencies, to identify trends and gaps in performance.
  - ◇ Create a learning organization culture at all levels of child welfare agencies.

- ◇ Develop agency processes to assist supervisors in applying knowledge to practice.
- ◇ Create a leadership track for promising front-line workers.
- ◇ Develop processes for middle managers to mentor and supervise front-line supervisors.
- Front-line practice improvements and the supervisor's role
  - ◇ Optimize supervisor's quality assurance role by using data and records to review performance.
  - ◇ Enhance workers' competencies through strengthening of Title IV-E training programs and other traineeship efforts.
  - ◇ Minimize the number of required forms and paperwork.
  - ◇ Develop incentives for highly competent, well performing workers.
  - ◇ Reduce the extent to which child welfare practice is just an entry into the social work profession.
  - ◇ Work to align values, ethics and understanding of diverse cultures with practice.

### **Enhancing National, State and Community Collaborations and Partnerships**

- Attract new college graduates to child welfare.
- Recruit seasoned professionals into child welfare.
- Strengthen collaborations between social work education programs and child welfare agencies.
- Engage organizations in creating awards, incentives and recognition for exemplary supervisors.
- Pursue the development of a credential for supervisors.
- Enhance continuing education and certificate offerings on child welfare supervision.
- Engage entities involved in review and oversight to work with supervisors and agencies to problem solve together.
- Promote national collaborations among professional and provider organizations, the Children's Bureau and its Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) network to identify and disseminate effective models of child welfare supervisory practice.

### **Recommendations for Policy Enhancements**

- Engage policy makers in the development of minimum qualifications for child welfare supervisors.
- Ensure training of supervisors through development, implementation and monitoring of training requirements.
- Consider a set-aside of Title IV-E training funds to be used to train supervisors.
- Promote career ladders for child welfare workers. Ensure that policies and the related practices account for the differing social contexts of diverse communities.

**The complete symposium report, including references and useful resources are available at [SocialWorkPolicy.org](http://SocialWorkPolicy.org).**

### **Symposium Video available at [SocialWorkPolicy.org](http://SocialWorkPolicy.org)**

The Social Work Policy Institute has made available the recording of the two expert panels, including presentations by Crystal Collins-Camargo (University of Louisville), Carol W. Spigner (University of Pennsylvania), Mary McCarthy (NCWWI; University at Albany), Tracy Whitaker (NASW), Peter Vaughan (Fordham University), Marva Hammons (Casey Family Programs), Agnes Leshner (Montgomery County, MD) and Roxana Torrico Meruvia (NASW). This can be used for professional development of staff or students. Social workers can earn 2.0 Continuing Education credits.

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The **Social Work Policy Institute** is a division of the NASW Foundation. Its mission is:

- To strengthen social work's voice in public policy deliberations.
- To inform policy-makers through the collection and dissemination of information on social work effectiveness.
- To create a forum to examine current and future issues in health care and social service delivery.

Social Work Policy Institute • NASW Foundation  
Director: Joan Levy Zlotnik, PhD, ACSW  
750 First Street NE, Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20002-4241  
[SocialWorkPolicy.org](http://SocialWorkPolicy.org) • [swpi@naswdc.org](mailto:swpi@naswdc.org) • 202.336.8393

