



Exploring the Perspectives and Needs of Child Welfare Caseworkers in their Work with Children with Disabilities

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Team Project Abstract 2014-2015

Background: A significant percentage of youth in foster care have developmental disabilities (DD). National estimates range from 28% - 50%. Unfortunately, in the child welfare system (CWS), disability is considered to be a secondary concern. In many communities, disability status of children in foster care is not documented and there is little known about the services offered to these children. Additionally, caseworkers receive minimal to no training and support around understanding the specific needs of children and youth with disabilities.

Objectives: The first objective is to assess the knowledge, experience, and comfort level of DSS caseworkers in working with children with DD. The second objective is to determine what additional training and resources caseworkers need to adequately serve children with DD within CWS.

Methods: An electronic survey was used to assess the knowledge, experience, and comfort level of lower- and mid-Hudson Valley Department of Social Services caseworkers in working with children with DD.

Participants included caseworkers from Orange, Westchester, Ulster, Rockland, Suffolk, and Putnam Counties.

Community Partners: Both national and local level partners were consulted for this project. Traci LaLiberte, Ph.D., Executive Director at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work, was consulted regarding national practices for reporting disabilities within CWS. Philip Goldstein, Director of Program Development at the Child Welfare Academy of the Westchester DSS, was consulted regarding specific practices within Westchester County and the feasibility of survey dissemination.

Results: Six of the eight recruited counties participated in the survey. A total of 251 respondents consented to participate. Over 50% of respondents had greater than 10 years of experience. A majority worked in Child Protective Services. Over 84% had children with known DD on their caseloads. Mean scores of the 3 constructs demonstrated that while caseworkers had a high mean score of comfort, their mean knowledge and exposure scores were lower. Mann Whitney analyses demonstrated that caseworkers with low DD knowledge scores perceived themselves as having similar levels of knowledge and comfort as those with greater knowledge scores. Additionally, caseworkers with ten or more years of experience reported having more exposure and comfort in working with this population. Furthermore, having disability training and frequent interaction outside of work with people with disabilities significantly increased ratings on all three constructs. Qualitative feedback highlighted need for increased training, administrative support, and community resources.

Conclusions: Caseworkers confirmed a high prevalence of children with DD in DSS, highlighting the need for attention to this population. They also identified a lack of internal and community resources, time constraints, and insufficient supports as barriers to serving these children. Training and experience with people with disabilities can help caseworkers feel more equipped to serve this population. A non-significant trend indicated that training may be particularly helpful in increasing knowledge of caseworkers that have been working in the field for over ten years. Further work is needed with a larger sample size, both statewide and in other geographical areas.