

REDUCING CHILD CARE WORKER TURNOVER: A CASE ILLUSTRATION

B. Scott Finnell

*Methodist Home
Waco, TX*

ABSTRACT: This article describes the efforts and results of an attempt to reduce child care turnover in a residential program for 90 adolescent girls.

Three years ago members of the girls' division of the Methodist Home in Waco, Texas, began working to reduce child care turnover. Several administrative actions were taken, including hiring married couples and placing greater emphasis on training, supervisor-employee relationship, and worker participation in decision making. Following are descriptions of the program, the problem, the theoretical basis for change, the strategies, and the results.

THE METHODIST HOME

The Methodist Home, located in Waco, is one of the oldest and largest child care agencies in Texas. Founded as an orphanage in 1890 by the Northwest Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Home has grown considerably over the years. Today, the Home serves approximately 400 children in its six program areas. Most of these children are served by the campus program in Waco. This program is divided into two divisions, which are named in honor of famous Methodists: Asbury (the boys) and Coke (the girls).

The girls' division serves approximately 90 adolescent girls in one of three programs. All girls enter the division through the reception center. The purpose of the center is to evaluate if the student can benefit from Methodist Home services and to orient the student to life at the Home. After orientation, students move into one of seven basic care houses. These houses, built 40+ years ago, are designed for up to 16 girls and two or more sets of child care workers (CCWs). In addition to the reception center and basic care programs, a ninth home is designed as an independent living program. Junior and senior girls from the basic care home units make application each May to participate in this one-to two-year program. The CCW staff at the Methodist Home works a schedule of eight days on and four days off.

THE PROBLEM OF CCW TURNOVER

The girls' division of the Methodist Home, as it is now organized, began in January, 1986, when the campus program was restructured from three divisions to two. For the two-year period beginning in April of 1986, the division averaged 59.7% annual CCW turnover. This rate is not out of line with what has been discussed in the literature for the past 30 years (Hylton, 1964; Myer, 1975 & 1980; Plotsky, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1979; Ross, 1984).

Table 1 gives data concerning the first two years of the Methodist Home's girls' division as it is now structured. The categories are generally self-explanatory. "Number of staff" refers to full-time CCWs. During the summer of 1988 and 1989 a temporary CCW was employed. These two individuals were omitted from the study. "Tenure" refers only to service at the Methodist Home. Some CCWs come from other agencies and have been in the child care field longer than this category indicates. Finally, the division is fortunate to have two couples who have more than 13 years of service at the Home. The "adjusted tenure" removes these four individuals from consideration to give a more accurate picture of the tenure of the majority of the staff.

Table 1

THE GIRLS' DIVISION CCW TURNOVER RATE, MARITAL STATUS, AGE AND TENURE FOR APRIL, 1986 THROUGH MARCH, 1988.

	1986/1987	1987/1988
# of staff	40	43
# of positions	25	27
% of turnover	60%	59.3%
% of married CCWs	30%	47%
% of single CCWs	70%	53%
ave. CCW age	36.4 years	41.4 years
ave. CCW tenure	26.5 months	26.9 months
adjusted tenure	14.8 months	15.0 months

THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR REDUCING TURNOVER

After interviewing numerous potential CCWs, hiring 31 CCWs in 24 months and directing a division in which most CCWs had an average of just over one year of experience, the administrative staff of the division realized the need to make some changes. The child care literature adequately documents the problem of turnover but offers the administrator relatively few aids in correcting the problem. The business/management literature is helpful at this point.

Most of the early research on employee turnover centered around the construct of job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is associated with an employee's interest in the work, pay, and the opportunity to gain achievement, recognition, responsibility and/or advancement (Herzberg, 1957). A moderate and consistent relationship has been found across various samples between greater job satisfaction and the length of tenure with an organization (Herzberg, 1957; Vroom, 1964; Porter & Steers, 1973).

As the early research has demonstrated, recognition and responsibility are important elements in job satisfaction. This is at least one of the reasons that management experts have emphasized the need for employee participation in planning and decision making (Preston & Hawkins, 1981; Steinmetz & Todd, 1984; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Admittedly, these experts are generally more concerned with the success of the organization than turnover. However, it is easy to see that a dissatisfied worker, one that does not have the opportunity for recognition or responsibility through participation, is more prone to terminate than a satisfied one.

A 1974 study by Porter looks beyond the job satisfaction construct and examines the relationship between turnover and the attitude construct of organizational commitment, that is, does an employee's commitment level to the organization effect turnover. Porter's study is a 10 1/2 month longitudinal study based on a sample of psychiatric technicians. The study finds that the attitudes held by the individual concerning the organization are predictive of turnover, with individuals who ultimately terminated having a less favorable attitude than those who remain. It also finds that the two attitude constructs, organizational commitment and job satisfaction, are related yet distinguishable attitudes.

In 1982, Graen compares the constructs of leader-member exchange (supervisor-employee relationship) and leadership style to turnover. He finds, when examining the termination of 20 of 48 systems analysts and computer programmers of a large public utility firm, that leader-member exchange is a stronger predictor of turnover than leadership style. Leader-member exchange accounts for nearly three times more valid variance than does leadership style. Thus, he concludes the unique exchange (relationship) that develops between a leader and member, not supervisory style, has the greatest influence on an employee's decision to remain or leave the organization. This study was duplicated in 1985 with the researchers

finding the same results, although not quite as strong (Ferris, 1985).

Training has also been cited for the reduction of turnover in both management and child care literature (Zemke, 1989; Concilio, 1986; Kimmerling, 1986; Blessing, 1986; Meglino, 1988). In *Job Satisfaction for Child Care Workers* (Krueger, 1982), a chapter is dedicated to the importance of the supervisor's role in recruiting and training staff.

In a more recent article Krueger states, "training of all kinds is valuable in reducing turnover" (Krueger, 1989, p. 26). Krueger's main emphasis is on introductory training. He suggests that CCWs be given 40 hours of formal introductory training spread over six months. He believes that giving CCWs all their training at one time tends to cause cognitive overload. When it is spread out over a period of time, the CCWs are more able to relate what they have learned to their experience. The premise is that this type of training helps reduce some of the initial pressures and demands of the job.

THE GIRLS' DIVISION STRATEGY

Over a three-year (1988-1991) period, the girls' division administrative staff actively sought to make changes that would lower their CCW turnover rate. Four actions were taken. The first was demographic and concerned the marital status of the CCWs. The remaining three actions concerned administrative attitudes and emphasis.

The literature has highlighted numerous factors affecting turnover. The division's administrative staff targeted the three that were believed to be the most controllable. The targeted factors were CCW training, supervisor support and contact (leader-member exchange) and CCWs participating in planning and decision making. This is not to say that prior to 1988 work was not done in these areas, only that from 1988 forward these areas began receiving a greater investment of the administrative staff's time, energy and creativity. The particulars of the strategy are described below.

Marital Status

Previously, the division's philosophical preference was to hire single CCWs. A 1984 program evaluation reads:

It is the goal when hiring each new child care worker, to hire the most complete individual for the job. It seems that the hiring of couples tends to lessen the chances of attaining this goal, as most couples seem to consist of one person who is the complete child care worker and another who is good at household maintenance or running errands, but not competent at the whole job (Ervi, 1984, p.1).

Even though this philosophy to hire single CCWs was rational, practice wisdom seemed to indicate that three single CCWs had a more difficult time

sharing home unit management and parenting responsibilities than did couples. This difficulty was thought to be a factor in the division's high percentage of turnover. Beginning in 1988, the division's leadership began actively seeking to fill vacated positions with married couples.

Training

Prior to 1988, most CCW training consisted of two college courses which were taught by the local community college. The courses, which are still utilized, are specifically designed for new Methodist Home CCWs. The courses are offered each fall and spring on the Home's campus by an instructor with direct practice experience. There was also a generic orientation class that was designed for every employee of the Home. CCWs participated in the same orientation as did the school teachers, maintenance personnel and clerical staff.

Initially, training received the majority of the administrative emphasis. A 16-hour orientation course, exclusively for CCWs, was developed to replace the existing one. It is taught by the CCW direct supervisor. The course is four hours long and held on four consecutive days. A new CCW usually attends the course within one month of employment. The course covers not only the areas required by state licensing (policies & procedures, restraint, etc.) but also introduces the new CCW to theories of child development and principles of discipline, communication, and relationship building.

The division staff also committed to having new CCWs train with experienced ones for a period of not less than eight days. While the need for on-the-job-training seems obvious, for agencies that have a 60% turnover rate it is not unusual for CCWs to tell stories of meeting the children and getting the keys at the same time.

The community college was also asked to offer advanced courses for CCWs in communication skills, interpersonal relationship skills, and advanced techniques for working with at-risk children. The college was more than willing to expand its curriculum. An advanced course is offered each fall and spring and may be taken by CCWs who have completed their basic courses.

In addition to these training opportunities, in-service training is provided by the division's administrative staff several times each year. Most of this training takes the form of two- or three-hour workshops on particular areas of need. The University of Oklahoma and the Chapel Hill child care curriculum is often utilized for these sessions.

The most enjoyable in-service training experience however is an annual three-day retreat. Although this retreat began prior to 1988, it has taken on new significance. Instead of just providing CEUs for the veteran CCW, it is now geared for new CCWs. During the retreat not only are new skills learned and insights gained but group building takes place. It is the group building aspect of this training that is probably of most value in terms of how work is affected back on the campus.

Supervisory Support and Contact

Prior to 1988, most supervisory support and contact came during weekly home unit meetings. These meetings, which are still utilized, are attended by the CCWs, the casework staff, and the division administrative staff. Support may be given to the CCWs by brainstorming techniques that might be helpful in working with a particular girl or by allowing the CCWs to ventilate frustration, sadness, or anger.

In addition to these weekly home unit meetings, the administrative staff has developed other means for providing contact and support. For the new CCW the support begins in the initial interview. Prospective CCWs are told that humanness is an acceptable characteristic. All workers make mistakes. The division's goal is not to have perfect workers, but to have workers who are willing to learn from their mistakes. This message is reinforced by other CCWs. When the new CCW begins, correction and instruction are done in a dignified and respectful manner. Corrections are also always accompanied by praise for something the CCW is doing well.

Additionally, the CCW has at least one and often several informal contacts with the division's leadership each week. During these contacts, the topic of conversation can range from: "Julie's driving me crazy," to "Let me show you the new picture of the grandchildren," or even "We really need a new...." The importance of these times is not in what is discussed, but is in communicating to the CCWs that they always have ready access to administrators who are genuinely concerned about what concerns them.

The final activity that is used for support and contact is a monthly CCW meeting. This meeting occurs in two forms. The first is a division-wide meeting which has been utilized for years. During these meetings a host home unit is selected to provide the meeting place and the refreshments. The agenda can range from formal workshops, to an overview of the next month's calendar, to the annual Christmas party. All on-duty staff are expected to attend.

The second monthly meeting is a home unit team meeting. This meeting involves only the CCWs of a given house and the supervisor. The purpose of this meeting is primarily to build oneness among the team members. At times problems need to be discussed, at other times there are victories to be celebrated. The result is that problems are resolved and a spirit of trust and support develops among the individual team members.

Planning and Decision Making

The final management emphasis developed in hope of reducing CCW turnover was the involvement of CCWs in the planning and decision-making process. CCWs are given credit for being intelligent, invested individuals who have the most direct influence on the well-being of the child. Whether planning involves a summer program for 90 girls or determining the appropriate consequence for a "crisis" behavior, the CCWs are asked for input and their ideas are heard.

It is difficult to determine just how much the CCW staff participated in the planning and decision-making process prior to 1988. However, since that time every effort is made to involve the CCWs. Developing a spirit of openness and the total team effort has been so successful that, when decisions are made without CCW input, it is a cause of embarrassment to the administrative staff.

THE RESULTS

With the exception of hiring married couples as opposed to single CCWs, the administrative staff's commitment to training, support, and CCW participation were the only orchestrated changes made in the management of the division. It was only after the division's turnover rates were analyzed that the increase of CCWs' age was discovered. The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2

THE GIRLS' DIVISION CCW TURNOVER RATE, MARITAL STATUS, AGE AND TENURE FOR APRIL, 1988 THROUGH MARCH, 1991

	1988/1989	1989/1990	1990/1991
# of staff	33	38	29
# of positions	27	27	27
% of turnover	22.2%	40.7%	7.4%
% of married CCWs	60%	67%	83%
% of single CCWs	40%	33%	17%
ave. age	44.7 years	46.0 years	50.8 years
ave. CCW tenure	35.5 months	36.3 months	50.6 months
adjusted tenure	19.0 months	20.9 months	30.0 months

When comparing 1986/1987 with 1990/1991, a 52.6% reduction in turnover is seen, along with a 100% increase in adjusted tenure. Of course, it cannot be expected that every year will be as successful as 1990/1991. However, a comparison of the first two years of the study and the last three yield encouraging results.

Table 3 shows this comparison.

Table 3

A COMPARISON OF THE GIRLS' DIVISION CCW TURNOVER RATE, MARITAL STATUS, AGE AND TENURE BETWEEN APRIL, 1986-MARCH, 1988 AND APRIL, 1988-MARCH 1991.

	1986/1988	1988/1991	Results +/-
% of turnover	59.7%	23.4%	36.3% (-)
% of married CCWs	38.5%	70%	31.5% (+)
% of single CCWs	61.5%	30%	31.5% (-)
ave. age	38.9 years	47.2 years	8.3 years (+)
ave. CCW tenure	26.7 months	40.8 months	14.1 months (+)
adjusted tenure	14.9 months	23.3 months	8.4 months (+)

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The study of the Methodist Home's girls' division is not a scientific one. It has not been proven that any of the variables (couples, training, support, or participation in decision making) can have a statistically significant effect on CCW turnover. It may be that only one or two of these variables increase CCW tenure. Or, it may be that what has caused the decrease in turnover at the Home has not even been identified in this study.

It seems highly unlikely that a demographic change from singles to couples will universally reduce turnover in child care agencies. What this change probably represents is a compatible match between the programming of the division and the characteristics of the staff. Agencies should be mindful that an improper match might directly lead to an increase in turnover.

Based on this study, two assertions can be made. First, the three management emphases of the administrative staff are consistent with the literature. Second, CCW turnover in the girls' division has been reduced. Further research is needed to determine if any or all of these factors can be used to reduce CCW turnover. Until then, however, agency administrators who are battling the problem of turnover might find elements of this strategy helpful at their agency.

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