

THE KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS

Melinda Butler

Elaine Gordon Treatment Center, Fort Lauderdale, FL

ABSTRACT: The pioneering efforts of the child care profession in Kansas are addressed by focusing on the development of the Kansas Association of Child Care Workers (KACCW). Historical development and current status are explored and issues that have bearing for other child care associations are identified.

Child care workers in Kansas, like in many other states, recently banded together to form a professional association of child care workers, the Kansas Association of Child Care Workers (KACCW). This paper will focus on the success and struggles they have encountered in their efforts to promote professionalism in a state that has been a pioneer in many areas of the mental health field. It is based on information gathered by letter, telephone contacts, and attendance at the fourth annual conference of KACCW.

Historical Background

The KACCW had its beginnings in 1979 when a small group of child care workers, educators, and administrators got together and formed the Kansas Task Force on a Child Care Association, committing themselves to meeting monthly for as long as necessary to get the association started. The idea to form a child care worker association originated with two child care staff from Menninger's Children's Hospital who attended a conference in Texas sponsored by the National Organization of Child Care Worker Associations (NOCCWA). The Menninger staff called together all the conference participants from Kansas and formed the task force. This core group solicited information from other state child care associations and reviewed their by-laws and organizational structures. The president of the Texas Child Care Worker Association contributed special support and feedback to the Kansas group by reviewing their by-laws and sending the group a tape of his comments and suggestions.

After three long years of hard work, the association was officially registered with the Kansas Secretary of State in 1982. The original task force members became the charter members of the association and formed the original board of directors. Of these seven individuals, two have left the profession, four are currently still board members, and one has retired to the ranks of membership. This group, along with

eight to ten newer members, comprises the backbone of the organization. They are the movers and the shakers. Their continuous hard work is largely responsible for the successes and further development of this organization as a professional association.

The following issues and areas of concern spawned many heated arguments during the development of the association.

Early Concerns and Issues

Membership

A major issue was the question of who should be able to have membership. There was considerable concern among the task force that this be an association of child care workers, for child care workers. Some participants felt that it was necessary for the by-laws to specify that members should be involved in direct care services to allay any fears that the association would be taken over by members of other therapeutic disciplines. It was also seen as imperative that members have experienced the struggles of residential child care. At the same time, the task force acknowledged that it was important to include professionals who worked in supervisory, administrative, and educational capacities. They also recognized the need for administrative and agency support and involvement.

The issue was settled by designating four classes of membership: full members, associate members, agency members, and honorary members. Full members have at least six months experience and are currently employed as child care workers. Associate members are students or other persons who are or have been employed in the field of child welfare. Agency members are child and youth care agencies and other agencies that wish to support the profession. Honorary lifetime members are people who have made special contributions to the child care field.

Retaining members is a major task for the committee. Membership increased from seven to fifty-eight between 1982 and 1985. In 1985, the membership increased from 58 to 121. Although the membership doubled in the 1st year, this does not reflect an additional 50% new membership. More accurately, it reflects 80% new memberships and a retainment of about 20% (P. Bodine, KACCW secretary, personal communication, May 2, 1986). Most child care workers join for a year and then don't renew. Solutions might include: offering two-year memberships; sending renewal notices to members; developing a traveling bulletin board; a phone-calling campaign; free renewals for members who sign up a designated number of co-workers. A survey could also be sent to all past members who have not renewed their memberships. This might help the membership committee in determining why more

members have not been retained, and may provide the board with much-needed feedback from the membership about KACCW services.

Finance

Fiscal management was another important issue. It was acknowledged that in order to attain credibility, the association would have to be able to pay its bills and have enough cash flow to be functional. At the same time, it was recognized that most child care workers could not afford high membership dues. The dilemma was how do we offer quality services and keep fees and dues low. In this context, agency support and involvement has proven to be important. Agency sponsorships and administrative approval and cooperation in providing coverage and financial assistance to employees attending association functions produces additional revenue and cuts costs.

Receiving nonprofit status will also help. This has been talked about for four years, but to date it has not been accomplished. With non profit incorporation, the association will be able to solicit sponsorship and funding from businesses and corporations in Kansas. Corporate sponsorship will help to increase the awareness of KACCW, its purpose and accomplishments, through advertising and community service. It will also increase the association's funding base. Delegates to national and regional conferences could be sponsored, reducing the cost to individuals who otherwise might not be able to attend. Corporate funding could also be used for workshops and conferences and daily operation of the association.

Nonprofit incorporation will also allow KACCW to apply to the private foundations for additional funding. The Wisconsin Child Care Worker Association receives approximately \$30,000 annually from United Way.

Association vs. Union

The Association wanted to avoid being labeled as union promoters. Therefore, a clear need to identify as a professional organization was very important. Thus, the task force diverted concerns about unions by focusing on education and training and not on directly improving working conditions for child care workers. They believed that having higher standards, more education and training, and better skilled child care workers would lead to higher salaries and more incentives for professional growth, but this was seen as an added bonus, rather than an expectation.

Board Meetings

Board meetings are held quarterly at various locations around the state to even the travel distance among board members. In the past, problems stemmed from cancellations and rescheduling of board meetings. These problems have been addressed by formulating a list of meeting dates and locations at the annual board meeting retreat in June of each year. Conflicting dates are cleared with each member's calendar until a final set of dates are agreed upon. These dates are non-negotiable. Attendance at meetings is viewed as part of the commitment to holding office in the association. Special board meetings have been called about once a year for various purposes. Some board members have expressed concern that the president's ability to call a special meeting can be used to pass controversial measures when opposing board members are unable to attend these unexpected meetings. To date this has not happened.

Officers and Committees

Officers

The association has four elected officers: President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. In order to promote continuity, the association uses a membership system in which current officers groom other board members to run for elected positions.

Two Committees

Education A very active standing committee is the education committee. This group has been responsible for developing a list of speakers and presenters available for workshops and conferences, a workshop evaluation format, a workshop topic survey that culminated in a list of desired topics and possible presenters, and a list of child care facilities and additional locations willing to host workshops and conferences. The committee's objectives are to provide top-notch training, to increase membership, to make a profit, to increase KACCW visibility among child care professionals, and to increase KACCW name recognition among news media, administrators, legislators, and the public. This committee actively develops new child care presenters and encourages contributions from the membership to the newsletter and other child care journals. Committee members are available to interested child care workers to improve writing skills and presenting techniques, increasing the involvement and commitment of KACCW members to professional development.

Standards The major work of the standards committee is the devel-

opment of a certification program for child care workers. There are several issues which the committee is trying to address. First, they do not want to duplicate the errors that were made when the Kansas legislature mandated a licensure program for mental health technicians in 1974. The statutes included a "grandfather" clause that allowed all practicing mental health technicians with two or more years of experience to receive licensure without taking a qualifying exam. This resulted in many licenses being granted to poor-quality personnel. The standards committee also wants to be able to screen applicants through personal interviews. It is felt that some individuals who perform well on tests and in educational settings but who may have poor interpersonal skills would need to be identified and avoided. It is the consensus of the committee that those individuals receiving certification through KACCW need to be professionals that the association and the child care field can be proud of. They are also considering opening their certification to child care workers from states without certification programs. Although the logistics and practicalities of this practice have not been worked out, it is felt that providing this service will improve the quality of child care workers everywhere. It may also serve as an incentive to NOCCWA to move forward on a national certification program.

A Challenge for the Future: More Involvement

Although an appeal has been made to the membership to become more involved in committee work, no direct methodology for attaining commitment and distributing tasks has been offered. The core group of involved members, mostly board members, do all the work. There seems to be some reluctance to let go. Perhaps, as often happens when people invest considerable personal energy in getting something started, they are struggling with issues of power and control. If so, they need to help each other become aware of those natural feelings. Then committee chairpersons can actively recruit more helpers and work closely with them on specific tasks. Recognition can be given to contributors through the newsletter, projecting an image of involvement. In order to get more members actively involved in the tasks awaiting the association, each task can be broken down into smaller steps. We all know that the time any one person can donate is limited, so the workload should be broken down correspondingly. A work group of four or five people can all be working simultaneously on separate but related steps of a task. Members expressing interest in volunteering time to the association can be given specific steps to accomplish, accompanied by the needed additional resources, advice, contacts, and

moral support. Involvement can be accomplished by finding something for everyone to do. We all know there is plenty to do. No taker should go away empty-handed.

Members can be encouraged to explore their own interests. The important thing is to get them to commit their time. This requires some added incentives. Recognize them in the newsletter. Present them with a certificate of appreciation at a general assembly meeting. Don't bury them with boring, menial tasks. Turn a work group meeting into a pot-luck dinner. Give a party to celebrate a success. Getting people involved means bringing people together, sharing knowledge, information, war stories, and good times. In order to "hook" them, an association has to give them something they need and may not get enough of.

Accomplishments

KACCW has made great gains as a state association. They have the fifth-largest membership of any state child care association. They are one of the few states that has a licensure program for mental health technicians and soon, hopefully, they will have their certification program operating. They have had four very successful annual conferences and two tri-conferences with other Kansas child-oriented associations. Their conference planning skills have been recognized by other states as well. For example, the Nebraska Association has inquired about co-sponsoring conferences and they have been invited to be a co-sponsor of the Midwest Regional Conference for Child Care Workers.

Kansas child care workers should be proud of their association. They may not realize what a valuable resource they have until they leave the state for greener pastures, as this writer did. To those who look in other places for that certain something that is lacking, refer to the parable of the bluebird of happiness: it may be right in one's own back yard if one can allow oneself to see it.

Summary

Although this paper has dealt exclusively with the KACCW, the issues that have been addressed apply to all state child care associations. They are especially relevant for child care workers who reside in states that have not yet formed an association. As President of the newly formed Florida association, this writer can attest to the obstacles encountered in starting a state child care association. Establishing a board of directors is one thing, but transforming a group of uniquely different individuals into an integrated, productive, committed group is a real challenge.