

CHILD CARE WORKER TURNOVER: COSTS, SOLUTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Introduction

Turnover of direct-care staff continues to be a problem for residential and group care programs. Some studies have found it to be as high as 40 percent (Hylton, 1964; Coleman, 1976), with the average length of stay at an agency between 19 months and three years (Krueger, et al., 1982; Wilson, et al., 1976).

Turnover can have many negative effects on children and staff, the agency budget, and programs and services. Turnover affects the emotional and psychological well-being of children in care (Cohen, 1986), and the emotions of the supervisory and line staff who remain at an agency. Turnover also influences program effectiveness and it costs money.

The following study was designed to see exactly how much turnover was costing an agency and to see if a training program would help promote longevity among workers.

Background For The Study

This study was conducted at a residential treatment center located in Florida. The center operates a 400-bed program for emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded children and youth between the ages of six and twenty-two years of age.

The study began as a practicum report for the Master's Program in Child and Youth Care Administration at Nova University. The practicum process requires that the student identifies a problem within his/her agency and develops a practical solution which is then implemented and evaluated for effectiveness.

The center's administrators became aware of the problem while going through the accreditation process for the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals (JCAH). The center's hire and fire statistics

over a two-year period were compiled and analyzed. It was found that the total annual turnover for the center's direct-care staff was 73.9 percent.

A preliminary study was conducted to obtain actual employee replacement cost figures. These figures reflected the total of all expenses incurred by the center in the process of recruitment, hiring, and training of new staff. These expenses provided the definition for "replacement costs" used in the study. The center's per person expenses as a result of turnover or the "replacement costs" were found to total \$526.25 per employee (See Appendix A).

Discussion

For the purposes of the study, "controllable turnover" was defined as the percentage of direct-care staff who separated for reasons other than disability or any other situation rendering the individual unable to work after completing the agency probationary period of ninety days (Vander Merwe and Miller, 1975; Ross, 1984).

The center's personnel records were examined and the following categories of fulltime child care workers were developed:

1. All CCWs employed at this facility.
2. All CCWs hired over a two-year period and meeting the above criteria for controllable turnover.

The following information was recorded on computer disk for each of the above-described CCWs:

Demographic — Age, Sex, Education Level, and Prior Experience.

Job Related — Probationary Evaluation, Career Progression, and Longevity.

A computer filing system was developed to aid in the retrieval and analysis of personnel data. The annual controllable turnover rate was 40 percent. This rate was higher than the national rate of 20-30 percent (Bensberg and Barnett, 1966; Ross, 1984).

The Training Program

Unit Supervisors at the center are directly responsible for orienting new staff to specific cottage duties but, prior to the study, no uniform process for this necessary activity existed. New CCWs were placed in a cottage with more experienced CCWs where training occurred on a

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“when encountered” basis. Little time was allotted in the supervisors’ work day to directly observe new employees. Feedback was neglected despite its importance.

It was decided to introduce a specialized orientation program as a part of the study to minimize turnover among new child care workers. Due to the irregular staff hiring patterns at the center and the cost of simulating cottage life in a classroom setting, an on-the-job training model was developed.

Three meetings were held with line staff and supervisors to identify specific job competencies required of new workers. From this list of competencies, five job knowledge areas were selected: the cottage routine, emergency procedures, forms and documentation, supply management, and outdoor supervision.

The committee agreed that it was necessary for new workers to receive orientation and develop knowledge in these five areas during the first week. A five-day curriculum was developed that introduced one of the knowledge areas to the new staff on each of the days. The responsibility for this daily on-the-job orientation was given to experienced child care workers who were given the title of “guides.”

The choice of trainers was based on the concept that those best suited to train new staff are those who have recently been CCWs (Whitaker, 1971). Competent, experienced CCWs were sought from agency ranks to act as mentors and role models for new workers. Kostelnik (1980) states: “Strategies which can be demonstrated have a higher rate of internalization than those which are simply explained or discussed.”

A second reason for trainer selection was to identify and train workers with supervisory potential. Child care workers are experienced motivators of children. Using them to help train new employees gives them experience in adult motivation and can help prepare them to become competent supervisors.

Prior to entering the cottage each day for their “guide” orientation, the new staff met with a unit supervisor for 45 minutes to review the events of the previous day and to preview the schedule for the current day. During the supervisory conference, new employees had an opportunity to discuss their activities and observations. The supervisor was also able to provide feedback and evaluate the new worker’s daily progress.

Eighteen CCWs were selected from 130 fulltime staff to act as “guides.” Unit supervisors, under the supervision of one of the lead-authors, trained “guides” in the curriculum content and the format for its dissemination to the new staff. Unit supervisors remained available to advise “guides” of appropriate methods for handling routine staff

problems and to receive any recommendations for revisions in the training curriculum.

The criteria for staff selection as a "guide" were developed by the supervisory staff as follows:

1. Completion of one year service as a CCW.
2. Completion of all workshops offered by the center.
3. Not more than two unexcused absences in the past year.
4. Rank within the top 25 percent on the last annual supervisory evaluation.

A commitment was obtained from senior administration to fill a minimum of 75 percent of prospective supervisory openings with child care workers who functioned at that time as "guides."

Outcomes

During a two-year period prior to implementation of the on-the-job training program, 223 CCWs were hired. Eighty-six completed at least three months of employment and were included in the study. Of these, 35 separated from the center for reasons other than disability or death. Personnel data for all 86 were recorded on computer disks and will be referred to as the Pre-OJT group.

After OJT program implementation, 142 CCWs were hired and participated in the five-day OJT program over a two-year period. Three months of employment were completed by 85 of the workers included in the study. Of these, 25 separated from the center for reasons other than disability or death. Data for these employees were also recorded on computer disk and will be referred to as the Post-OJT group.

Prior to program implementation only three of the 14 supervisors had been promoted from child care positions. At the end of the study half of the supervisors, nine of 18, were former child care workers.

The controllable turnover rate decreased and is currently within the range of reported national averages (20-30 percent). The reduction in controllable turnover can be attributed to the five-day OJT program since other working conditions, such as hours, starting salary, policies, and procedures remained generally the same.

Demographic variables (i.e., age, sex, education, and prior experience) were also examined in relationship to CCW turnover. Figure 1 shows four Demographic variables and the percentage of controllable turnover that took place within each sub-group of each variable.

Discussion

As stated earlier, this study was a part of a field-based practicum report. These findings have not been derived from research-based statistical analysis. This is a preliminary study that has attempted to look at the costs of turnover and the potential implications for staff training and development.

The issue of staff turnover has had a critical impact on the profession and on the delivery of quality service to children and youth. In the view of the writers it is important for the field to study this problem and develop some viable solutions.

There is a great need for formal comprehensive research in the area of staff turnover. The information gained from such studies could be of benefit to the profession and to the quality of care for children.

Recommendations

Based on these findings and our experience in the field, the authors recommend that child and youth care programs should include an introductory training component in addition to the preservice orientation generally provided by most agencies (Krueger, et al., 1986). Such introductory training should orient new staff to specific knowledge and skills required for the position, but not delivered in canned lectures or in meetings where staff are talked at (Studt and Russell, 1958). Supervisory interaction and feedback are suggested as vital for new direct-care staff (Krueger, 1982).

To increase job satisfaction and minimize turnover among line child care workers, it is recommended that agencies incorporate step plans and career progression systems within their personnel policies. It is imperative that all members of the agency administration be actively supportive and committed to the plan. It is important that all elements of these "turnover prevention strategies" receive official agency recognition and be included in the agency personnel policies and procedures manual.

Child and youth care programs should establish ongoing incentive programs for line staff that include financial support and general encouragement for attendance at local, regional, national and international conferences for child and youth care workers. Agencies should provide financial support for line worker participation in formal academic degree programs and informal training opportunities.

In-service and pre-service training for line staff should be based on specific competencies that have been identified and developed by the agency. Line staff should play a major role in the identification

and development of these competencies so that they feel some ownership for the program and the process.

To further enhance worker motivation and stimulation, educational sabbaticals, role variations, and formalized training functions should be systematically and regularly examined to assess their impact on turnover (Cleland and Peck, 1967 and Sarata, 1975).

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