

WORKFORCE



Through their Lens: Case Managers' Experiences of the Child Welfare System

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Issue

Case managers play a significant role in the child welfare system. Although previous studies have examined the multiple demands and requirements for case managers, few studies have utilized the perspective of case managers to highlight practices and areas of need within the child welfare system. The purpose of this qualitative study was to expand the understanding of issues related to child welfare by exploring the perspectives of current and former child welfare case managers.

Findings

Thirty-one current and former child welfare case managers participated in this study. Case managers were recruited through snowball sampling via a social media outlet. Participants had the option of taking an online survey or completing a semi-structured in-person or phone interview. Twenty-two case managers completed the online survey, six completed the phone interview, and three completed an in-person interview. Each of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. All participants were asked five questions to examine their experiences with the child welfare system:

- 1) What brought them into the system?
- 2) What were their expectations of the system?
- 3) What expectations did the system have of them?
- 4) What were their relationships like with individuals in the system?
- 5) What were their recommendations, if any, for changes to the system?

Five themes and 13 subthemes emerged from the analysis.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
What brought case managers into the child welfare system	Personal Experiences	Some case managers reported that personal experiences influenced their decision to become a case manager. One case manager stated, "the reason I went into child welfare [was]...because I was adopted as a child so I kind of had my own personal happy ending so I really wanted to help other people achieve their happy endings."
	Desire to Make a Difference	Several participants described a desire to make a difference in children's lives. One case manager shared how being persistent with a child can make a difference, "you know there is hope at the end of the tunnel and in every small thing that you do. You know it does end up making a difference for that child, eventually."
Roles of case managers	High level of responsibility	Various participants indicated that case managers possess a high level of responsibility. One participant noted, "case management is ultimately responsible for all children and everything that goes along with them and their families, in the system of care."
	Multiple roles and expectations	It was evident that case managers take on multiple roles and expectations that create significant levels of stress throughout their tenure in the child welfare system. One case manager reported that administrators often have unreasonable expectations, "without thinking about the pressure or stress they put on staff." Another participant noted, "foster parents also have unrealistic expectations of case managers and do not understand their role in the system."



Findings

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Support	Expectation of support	Case managers reported that they expected support within the complex child welfare system: “where I worked previously there was a strong sense of partnership and shared ownership and that sort of thing. You could share the responsibility and have that partnership without having that animosity.”
	Stress of not being supported	Participants also highlighted how stressful a lack of support can be and discussed how it negatively affected their perception of the child welfare system. They noted that management focused more on tasks that were not completed by case managers: “like all these 500 things I did right you don’t care about that, you care about the one thing that I didn’t do or I wasn’t told to do.”
	Lack of support	Several case managers reported that they lacked support to perform their jobs properly. For example, one participant stated that “[case managers] are not provided with what they need to do the job; the tools provided to complete the job are inadequate.”
Relationships and collaboration (or lack thereof)	Relationships with other case managers	Several participants stated that their relationships with other case managers were critically important to them and their work. One noted: “partnership is strong with workers and there are some of us that have been here and done this for many, many years and not [in] a competitive way but a respectful way.”
	Multiple entities work in collaboration	Several participants discussed the importance of case managers working collaboratively rather than individually within the system. One case manager commented, “With my coworkers, those are still like my best friends. So, I developed amazing relationships with my coworkers because I felt like nobody else could understand the job like my coworkers. Even if I gave a scenario to my husband, my husband would have an easy solution of move that child and that child should never go back home—it’s just that my coworkers understand the dynamic of everything and the children I work with have taught me everything I know about the foster care system.”
Learning and growing in the system	Specialized pre-service training	Although case managers noted their lengthy pre-service training, they hinted that training might not always prepare case managers for everything they will encounter on the job. For example, one commented that “pre-service training prepares you for child welfare in the same way that having a degree in psychology prepares you to work with schizophrenics.”
	Lived experience	Several case managers noted that lived experience in the child welfare system greatly increased knowledge. One participant noted that after “a couple months of training and then ongoing training and then working within the system you kind of learn very quickly.”
	Learning from others	One participant commented that his/her knowledge came almost entirely from others in the system: “the people I work with and the children I work with have taught me everything I know about the foster care system.” One case manager noted the importance of a helpful supervisor: “having a qualified supervisor who had experience was the most helpful thing in learning what I needed to know.”
	Need to be actively involved	Multiple participants noted that it was important for those working in the child welfare system to be actively involved in learning about the system, on various levels: “I think every case manager or foster parent, everyone should be aware of the macro level things that are going on. You need to get to know the judge and what the heck she is talking about. Talk to the attorneys...Go to lobby [advocacy] day, go and sit with your representatives that are making these statutes and then these administrative codes that you are operating under. I think that it is such an important part of this system because it not only impacts you as a worker, it impacts your families you are working with, [and] it impacts the children directly.”

Implications

Despite case managers’ invaluable role in the child welfare system, this study revealed a consensus among participants that case managers often face a lack of support. The findings also suggest places for change. For example, administrative-level policies can be examined and refined to ensure that more support or ongoing supervision is offered to case managers, especially ones new to the field or dealing with particularly stressful cases. It would be beneficial to clarify case manager roles within the child welfare system and delineate how to manage the multiple tasks and responsibilities handled by these professionals. In addition, incentives for case managers to meet or exceed agency regulations and standards should be considered, such as merit pay or non-monetary recognition.

To inform policy, future research should evaluate effective means of promoting a supportive environment and an atmosphere of collaboration. This may assist case managers as they navigate the demands of the job and roles within the child welfare system. Finally, researchers need to identify specific, effective ways that case managers can better understand the system and grow professionally.

