

CALWORKS AND CHILD WELFARE:

CASE MANAGEMENT FOR PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

CALSWEC

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Project Overview

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Overview

In the early years of welfare reform, child advocates and observers have expressed concern over the unknown, but most likely negative, impact of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) on families in general, and the child welfare population specifically. Worries include the possibility that decreased levels of economic support and increased behavioral expectations of parents will cause greater numbers of poor families to end up in the child protection system (e.g., Courtney, 1997; Knitzer & Bernard, 1997; Shook, 1999), and that new economic and social conditions could lessen the likelihood of family reunification and preservation. The possibility of positive reform-related effects have also been considered (e.g., Kamerman & Kahn, 1997), but little emphasized except in the arena of service innovation using welfare dollars for child welfare purposes (e.g., Berns, n.d.; Berns & Drake, 1999). The mechanisms by which these effects could occur have been based on theory and limited research, and are likely complex. Public child welfare workers, who are providing services in the welfare reform era, need an understanding of the experiences of welfare-involved families, and the pathways between welfare use and child welfare outcomes.

This course curriculum is designed to educate social workers about the experiences and needs of families involved with both public welfare, and child welfare services. The goal is to train workers to provide high quality case management services within a post-welfare reform environment. It is developed based on data from a longitudinal, ethnographic study of 10 families (4 from the Precarious Families survey, 6 from the public child welfare agency) living in an urban environment. The curriculum is divided into several chapters, including the following topics: (1) a review of what is known about child welfare outcomes in the welfare reform era; (2) a description of welfare reform as implemented in one county (Alameda County, California), including examples, from the client's perspective, of managing within a welfare-to-work environment; (3) a dollars-and-cents description of life on welfare, vis-à-vis the cost of living for families, illustrating some of the complexities of raising children in conditions

of urban poverty; (4) a set of case examples illustrating pathways from welfare to child welfare, with special attention to aspects of welfare reform which may play a role in child welfare outcomes; and (5) a discussion of how to apply qualitative research methods toward improving child welfare practice, as well as an explanation of the research methods used for the study. The curriculum includes teaching aids, suggestions for discussion, and experiential exercises to increase students' understanding of welfare and child welfare.

Introduction

In 1996 the federal welfare program that had existed since 1935, known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was dismantled and replaced with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, or P.L. 104-193) and TANF, AFDC's income maintenance program was substituted with a model intended to move parents into the workforce. In 2001, cash assistance is no longer an entitlement to low income parents raising children: cash grants are now time-limited, and parents in need of financial help must meet a number of behavioral requirements. In the early to mid-1990s, prior to the passage of PRWORA, many states obtained waivers from the federal government that allowed them to implement reforms to their welfare programs. With these state waivers and changes to the federal laws, the welfare system in the United States has undergone a dramatic alteration.

There are many anticipated effects of these policy changes. Among the possibilities are changes in labor force participation rates of single parents, shifts in family income levels, and reconfigurations in family structure through marriage and cohabitation. Parental mental health and daily functioning are thought to be influenced by changed expectations and the chances of parents succeeding in the workforce. There are likely to be effects on child well-being, as well, along measures such as child health, school attendance, and experiences in child care. One particular area of concern has been the likelihood of child maltreatment rates rising or falling in response to these various policy changes. With changes in family income and the anticipated consequences for parental stress levels, it has been expected that parenting quality could be affected. Increased (or decreased) levels of maltreatment will influence the child welfare system's organizational capacity to respond to families' needs, and may affect the use of the foster care system as an intervention. Additionally, systemic changes in public child welfare resulting from the implementation of TANF are likely to have an impact on the operation of child welfare, and to influence the outcomes of families who are involved with both public agencies.

The pathways through which these events may occur are likely to be complex, and are important for child welfare workers to consider as they respond to families' needs. The job of a child welfare worker is arguably different--and more complicated--in 2001 than it was prior to welfare reform. This curriculum explains and illustrates the essential features of welfare reform, and with the use of detailed case examples, offers ways for case managers to understand and think critically about the relationship between welfare and child welfare. It does not focus on broad aspects of child well-being, nor does it address in any depth the systemic factors influencing child welfare outcomes. The emphasis is on the relationship between participation in welfare programs and involvement with child welfare services for reasons of child maltreatment. It is guided by the overarching question: "What are some of the pathways between welfare and child welfare, under welfare reform?"