

# Retention of Child Welfare Staff: Implications for Social Work Education and Research

Joan Levy Zlotnik, PhD, ACSW  
Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research

Diane DePanfilis, PhD  
University of Maryland School of Social Work

CSWE Annual Program Meeting  
February 18, 2006

# Goals for the Presentation

- Context for attention to child welfare workforce issues
- Strategy to implement systematic review of research on retention in child welfare
- Outcomes of the study
- Implications and recommendations for social work education and research

# Making Workforce Improvement a Priority

- Growing recognition that there is a crisis related to child welfare workforce.
  - Competence and qualifications impact outcomes.
  - Turnover is costly (both \$\$ & child and family outcomes).
  - Difficulty attracting the “right” workers.
  - Paperwork, agency environment/support, caseload impact professionals’ interest in child welfare careers.
  - Continual questioning – Is social work the right degree for child welfare work?

# Documenting the Problem

- GAO Study (2003)
- Annie E. Casey Foundation Report (2003)
- Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care Report (2004)
- NASW Report (2003)
- Child and Family Service Reviews
- APHSA (2001 & 2005)

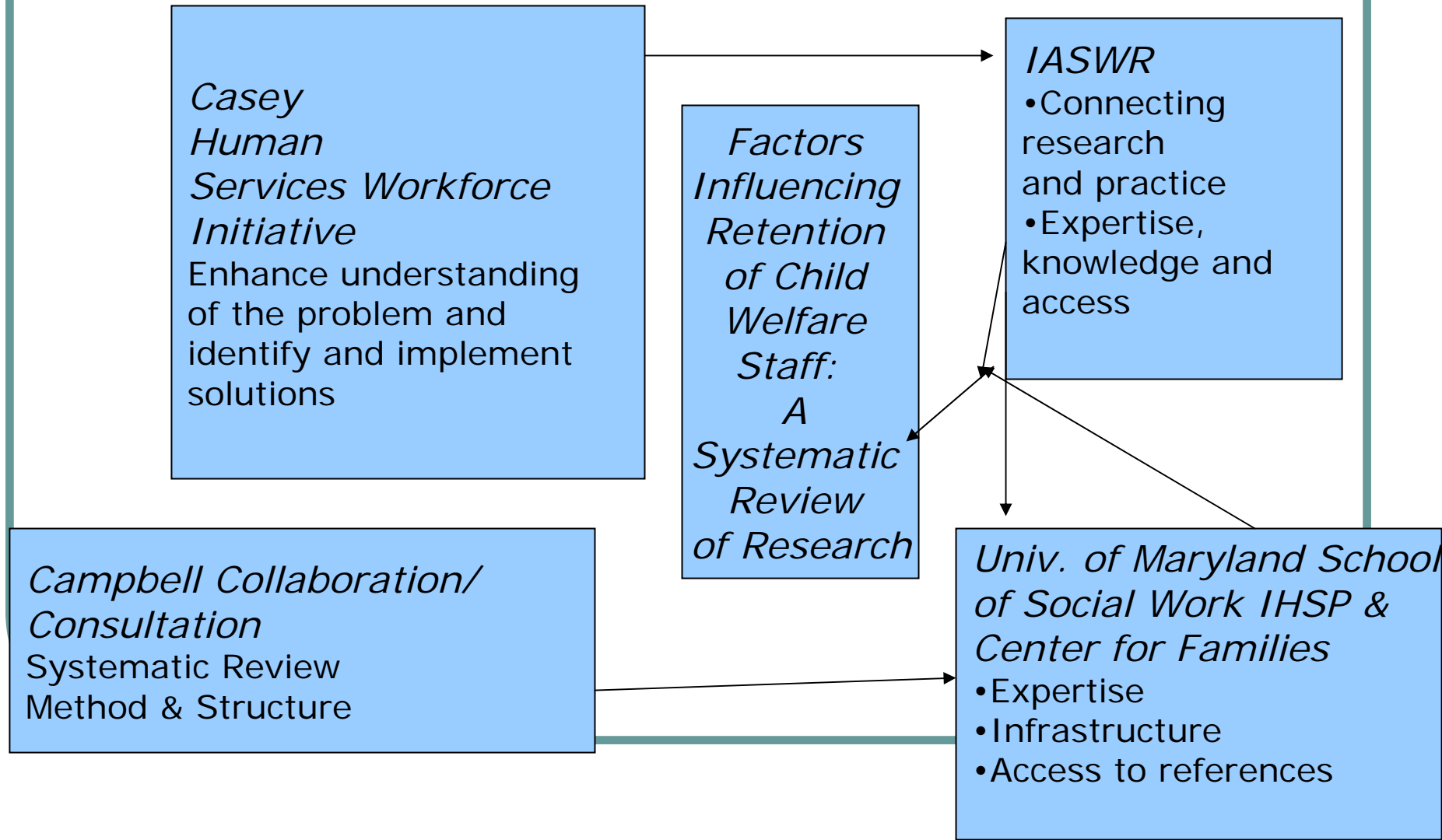
# Promoting Partnerships

- Concerns about service quality (CSFR/PIPs)
- Media attention
- Class action lawsuits
- Funding opportunities (Title IV-E)
- Network of graduates who become employed in human service agencies
- Agency employees who become university faculty

# Addressing the Problem

- Annie E. Casey Foundation launches *Human Services Workforce Initiative*.
- IASWR committed to strengthening research-practice connections.
  - IASWR involvement in child welfare and aging workforce issues.
  - National leadership in promoting use of and documenting models of university/agency child welfare partnerships and use of Title IV-E funds for professional education
- Literature reviews, growing body of research and evaluation studies.
- No systematic approach to reviewing and assessing the research to understand the strength of the outcomes.

# Addressing the Problem



# Systematic Review of the Research

Question:

What strategies and conditions influence the retention of staff in public child welfare?

# Characteristics of a Systematic Review

- Careful specification of inclusion and exclusion criteria
- Clear identification of independent and dependent variables
- Detailed documentation of search strategies, coding procedures, analytic methods, and results

# Systematic Review of the Research

- Outreach to identify published and unpublished studies that focused on studying the impact of conditions or strategies on retention of child welfare personnel.
- Included studies only if retention or turnover were identified as dependent variables

# Systematic Review of the Research

- Identified 154 studies/articles (1974 through May 2004)
- 58 specifically focused on child welfare population and retention of workers

# Inclusion/Exclusion

- 29 studies included in final review
- Excluded studies;
  - Not specific to child welfare workers
  - Not new research
  - Not focused on retention
  - Program description rather than research
  - Ten focused on job satisfaction and/or burn-out – which can be an antecedent.
- 25 studies in analysis - duplications – due to published and unpublished sources

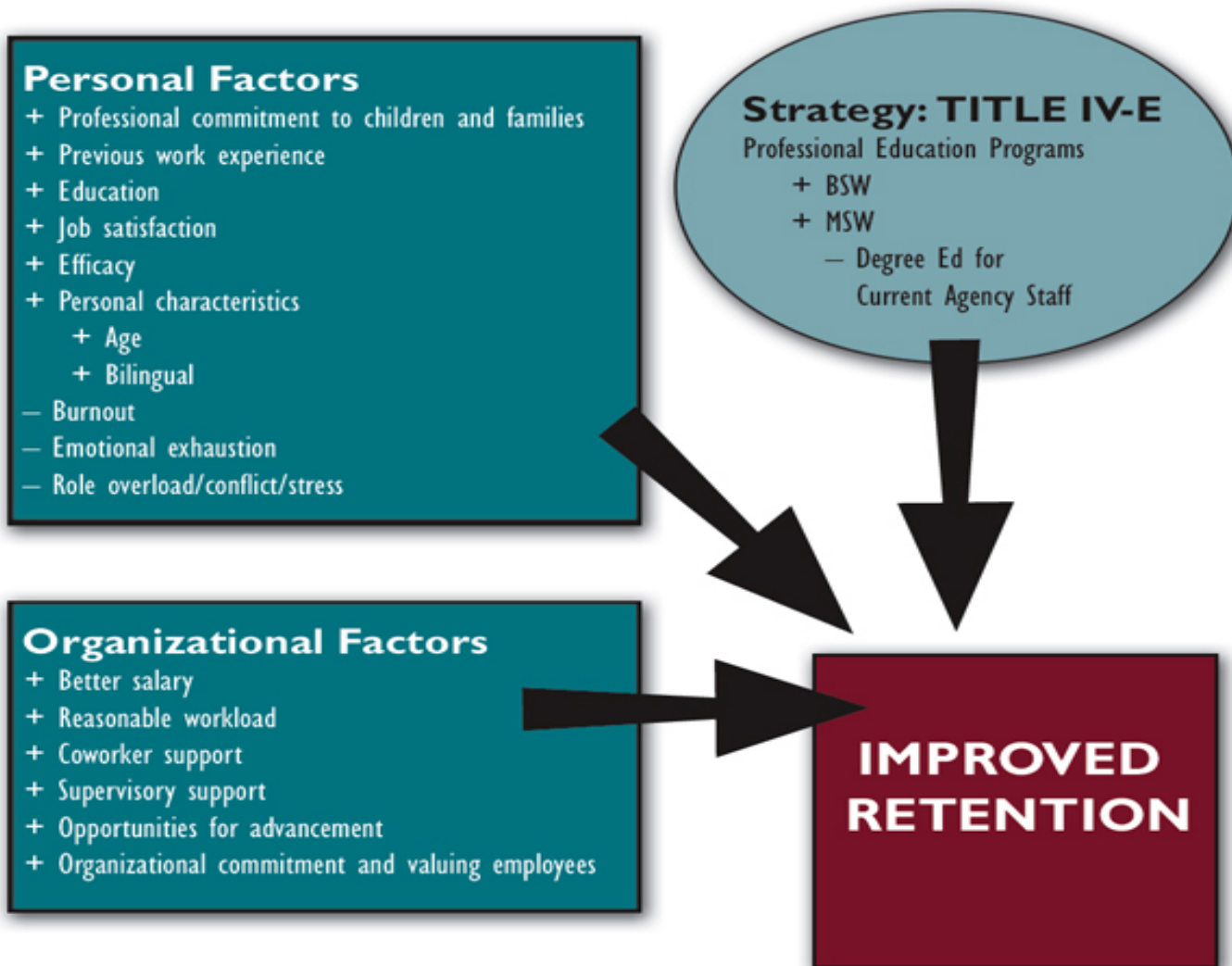
# Study Descriptions

- Retrospective record reviews of who exited
- Qualitative individual or group interviews/focus groups/narrative
- Surveys of current and/or former workers, supervisors and/or managers.
- Survey of state administrators
- Comparison of high and low turnover counties
- Study intent to remain/leave
- All but one study since 1990 and 65% since 1999
- Seven studies specifically examined Title IV-E education graduates and retention
- Few studies use standardized measures or instruments

# Dependent Variable Definitions

- Retention
  - Intent to remain employed in child welfare
  - Still employed as of a certain date
  - Intent to remain employed after completion of IV-E contract obligations
  - One study combined intent to leave with those who left
- Turnover
  - Workers who leave for reasons that are preventable
  - Job exit
  - Unpreventable, desirable and undesirable turnover
  - Intent to leave

# What strategies and conditions influence the retention of staff in public child welfare?



# Findings

- Educational level findings – Mixed apples & oranges (Findings in context of state staffing requirements)
  - Jones – MSW tended toward significance in predicting retention
  - Ellett, et al – social work degree – higher intent to remain
  - Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin – MSW – higher stress, higher intention to leave
  - Lewandowski – Title IV-E Educated BSW more likely than MSW to remain
  - Rosenthal, et al, 1998 – most likely to remain are master's other than social work but risk of termination for IV-E workers is lower
  - Four studies – prior child welfare placement factor in retention and one study – not a factor.
  - Rosenthal, et al, 2004 – IV-E grads greatly reduced risk of leaving

# Findings

## ● Personal Factors

- Those who remain – higher job satisfaction, goodness of fit, preference for child welfare, professional commitment
- Stronger commitment to child welfare – stronger intention to remain (see also NASW study)
- IV-E workers – commitment to stay in CPS
- Connection between human caring and intention to remain
- Those without previous experience, lower educational levels and exposure most likely to leave

# Strategy: Title IV-E

- Federal entitlement for foster care and adoption, created as part of P.L. 96-272.
- Increasingly used (more than 40 states) to support professional education for child welfare staff – those in BSW & MSW programs and current staff returning to get an MSW degree.
- Each program is different – contract between the state and the university

# Strategy Findings: Title IV-E

## Studies of only one implemented retention strategy

- Cahalane & Sites, 2004 – MSW employed – those who stayed & left post payback;
- Dickinson & Perry, 2002 - MSW – those who stayed compared to combo of left and intent to leave.
- Jones, 2002 - new MSW compared to all other hires (records).
- Lewandowski, 1998 – BSW & MSW, some with previous exp. (privatization)
- Olson & Sutton, 2003 - MSW grads, not all yet completed payback, most with previous experience
- Rosenthal & Waters, 2004 - BSW & MSW compared to other hires at same time (records)
- Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003 - BSW & MSW, mostly employees

# Findings: Qualifications

- Title IV-E participants also referenced in:
  - Garrison; Ellett, et al; Rosenthal, McDowell & White; Cyphers; GAO
- MSW studies: Samantrai, 1992; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984
- Assumptions about professional level of staff respondents: Rycraft, Ellett, Ellett, et al., Drake & Yadama

# Research Issues

- Different measures and unclear definitions make it difficult to compare studies
  - Title IV-E outcome studies – compared to other workers, comparing those who stay or leave, current and prospective workers, BSW or MSW
  - Child welfare workers, professional social workers, differential state staffing patterns
- Few standardized instruments (Maslach Burnout Inventory)
- Cross-sectional studies
- Convenience samples
- Low response rates
- Is intent to leave proxy for actual job exit?

# Recommendations

- Develop a process to rigorously and regularly evaluate retention strategies being implemented (APHSA survey – in-service training improvement most common).
- Encourage Title IV-E education for child welfare practice programs to use similar measures, methods and instruments in evaluation and research.

# Recommendations (continued)

- Develop multi-site, multi-year initiatives to test intervention strategies across agencies and settings.
- Create research efforts to develop, test and validate instruments and measures.
- Create a clearinghouse to regularly gather, track and analyze studies and provide information to impact workforce policies and decision-making.
- Support longitudinal evaluation efforts.
- Follow IV-E graduates career trajectories.

# Implications for University/Agency Partnerships

- Recognize that recruitment and retention are influenced by the intersection of multiple factors and impact service and client outcomes.
- Schools of social work are uniquely positioned to support improved agency outcomes (research, analysis, evaluation, consultation, technical assistance).
- Title IV-E educational preparation and training are only part of what needs to be done.
- Implementation and sustainability are major issues – how can the university help.
- Develop research-based briefs to address workforce policy improvements.
- States need to track staffing qualifications, preservice and inservice training programs, and inputs/outcomes of child welfare professional education for practice strategies.

# Conclusions

- Need for more systematic analysis of the state of the research.
- Need for greater rigor, cross-site studies and analyses.
- Research can influence the agenda-setting process.
- Many retention strategies have not been studied.
- Universities have multiple roles for greater engagement with agencies and service delivery improvements.
- Specialized preparation for child welfare practice is beneficial.

# Copies of the reports available:

- IASWR web page at <http://www.iaswresearch.org>
- Center for Families web page at <http://www.family.umaryland.edu>