CPS Caseworkers and Work Related Stress: 
An Analysis of Agency Support Services

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Developed for Child Protective Services
In Region 3, Texas
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Introduction

• Problem/Situation

Each year the number of children who suffer from abuse and neglect continues to rise in the nation and the state of Texas. In 1999 the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) reported 40,997 children suffered physical or sexual abuse or neglect in the state of Texas (CWLA, 2001). Extreme maltreatment can result in severe injury or even child fatality. The Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (TDPRS) reported 176 children died from the effects of abuse or neglect in 1998, with 36% having had prior involvement with CPS (TDPRS, 2000). Caseworkers for CPS are assigned to provide protective services to these children, their families, and foster families. These caseworkers are at risk of vicarious or secondary trauma as they witness the effects of abuse or neglect on the children and their families. In a study conducted by Gold (1998) it was presented that caseworkers repeatedly exposed to secondary trauma may suffer from stress related physical and mental illness and need support as they work through issues of trauma. The problem to be addressed in this analysis is the support services provided to CPS caseworkers that suffer from the effects of vicarious trauma. Interviews in March 2002 with CPS Program Director Michele Bland, Program Specialist Michael Lankford, and Supervisor of Contracts Ben Clawson and this author’s personal knowledge as a CPS caseworker provided CPS specific information. Good to mention sources.

TDPRS and CPS have many stakeholders who would benefit from the increased physical and mental health of CPS caseworkers. For the purpose of this analysis the stakeholders are the caseworkers, TDPRS and CPS, additional CPS staff, administration, interacting agencies, CPS clients, foster parents, Texas citizens, and Texas State Legislature and the State of Texas as the governing body and funding source. Although foster parents are volunteers they do receive services from CPS and will be included as client stakeholders for the purpose of this paper. The stakeholders create the environment for the caseworkers within the agency and the environment surrounding the agency. The setting for the caseworkers is a bureaucratic state agency that provides protective services to children who been victims of maltreatment and to their families.

• Analysis Guidelines

This analysis will assess the current support services available to Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers in Region 3, Texas, who suffer from vicarious trauma due to the maltreatment, or fatality, of the children assigned to their caseloads. Current practice by CPS for caseworker support will be assessed
to determine how it affects the stakeholders, if there is a real need for additional services, and how additional services could be beneficial to the stakeholders. The needs and capacities of the stakeholders who create the environment will also be considered in the assessment of support services for caseworkers. Good intro.

II. Problem/Situation

- Definition of the problem
  In a study conducted by Nora Gold (1998) it is presented that child welfare workers suffer a myriad of problems related to vicarious trauma, including negative effects on their physical and mental health. If the secondary trauma is chronic or especially disturbing it may lead to a more serious form of trauma, known as acute stress disorder. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), as cited by the Ohio State University in Anxiety and Stress Disorders (2002), presents the diagnostic criteria for acute stress disorder as:
  - “… The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which… the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others…
  - the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. The person experiencing the event has to have one of three or more dissociative symptoms of…
    - a subjective sense of numbing, detachment, or absence of emotional responsiveness…
    - a reduction in awareness of his or her surrounding…
    - depersonalization…
    - dissociative amnesia (ie. inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma)….
  - The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced.… marked avoidance of stimuli that arouse recollections of the trauma.…
  - marked symptoms of anxiety or increased arousal.…
  - the disturbance causes clinical significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning or it impairs the individual’s ability to pursue some necessary task.…
  - The disturbance lasts for a minimum of 2 days and a maximum of 4 weeks and occurs within 4 weeks of the traumatic event…

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and the disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance or general medical condition...and is not merely an exacerbation of a preexisting Axis I or Axis II disorder.”

The stress of being a CPS caseworker is attributed to increase worker burnout and high turnover rates (Gold, 1998). Gold’s participatory research indicated that caseworkers felt their jobs...."adversely affected both their physical and mental health.” (1998, p.702). The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect presented burnout as ....”a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment ....a gradual process....with psychological and physiological symptoms” (2002). In a study presented by Um and Harrison (1998) it was suggested that, “Social support acted as an intervening and moderating factor between burn out and job satisfaction.” Dane (2000), suggested findings presented in a study of two focus groups composed of child welfare workers that monthly group meetings, spiritual support in the case of a child fatality, and a support group were indicated as needs by the workers. Shinn, as cited in Um and Harrison (1998) reported, ....”individual coping skills did not help in relieving stress levels in the workplace.” Dane (2000) presented, “Although child welfare workers (CWW) are assigned a critical role to protect children, little focus has been placed on helping them cope with stress and secondary trauma that can occur when they observe and hear the affect-laden experiences described by clients.” Very good lit review on the needs. Maybe you should have looked at the literature on capacities also?

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are affected monetarily either directly, or indirectly, by caseworkers who experience secondary stress, acute stress disorder, burnout, and a state agency with high turnover rates. Um and Harrison presented, “Outcomes of burnout usually include job dissatisfaction or intention to quit the job” (1998, p.100). In the year 2000 the State of Texas had a turnover rate of 18.3 per cent for full time state employees (Texas State Auditor’s Office, 2001). The estimated cost to the state of Texas for this turnover rate was estimated at $262 million dollars (2000). In Region 3 the turnover rate for CPS for the 3 rd quarter of the fiscal year 2001 was 23.9% (interview with CPS Supervisor Michael Langdon, 2002). This excessive amount of money to hire and train new employees has a negative ripple effect from the State of Texas Legislature through the state agencies, the clients the agencies serve, interacting agencies, and the citizens of Texas. High turnover rate of CPS staff depletes monetary reserves that could have been utilized for improvements in program services and resources to State of Texas agencies, TDPR clients, employees, and foster parents and agencies that contract with TDPRS to provide services.
Caseworkers having difficulty coping with workplace stress may experience difficulty in providing case management services to clients and performing other job related duties. The National Clearing House on Child Abuse and Neglect (2002) presented that caseworkers may experience “….irritability…physical ailments …deterioration in performance…increasing rejection of clients…continuous use of inappropriate or distasteful humor…rigid adherence to bureaucratic rules …apathy…excessive absences from work; and excessive use of alcohol or tobacco and use of illegal drugs”(2002). These problems may lead to increased stress and work for CPS supervisors and the other caseworkers to meet the needs of the agency and the clients. CPS caseworkers are responsible for protecting and serving one of the most vulnerable populations, children. A caseworker that depersonalizes and disassociates as a coping mechanism would have difficulty in assessing critical situations appropriately and this could have possible dangerous and devastating effects for the children they serve.

• **System, subsystems, and environment:**

  Systems theory is utilized to assess the situation of CPS provision of adequate support for CPS caseworkers experiencing stress. Schoech presents, “A system is a group of related elements in interaction” (1999. p.185). The system that is involved in this analysis is the support system available to meet the mental health needs of CPS caseworkers suffering from acute stress disorder or burnout, through TDPRS, in the 13 counties of Region 3, Texas. The elements in this system are CPS and CPS caseworkers. The subsystems that interact with this system are numerous, open, and interactive. Subsystems are comprised TDPRS, interacting agencies, CPS clients, Texas citizens, Texas State Legislature and the State of Texas as the governing body and funding source are subsystems.

  Schoech presents, “The internal elements are technology, task, purpose, people, and structure” (1999, p.191). The structure of CPS is hierarchal beginning with the state legislature, TDPRS Board of Directors, CPS and the upper, middle, and lower administration, caseworkers, and clerical staff. The people involved are all of the people who comprise the system and subsystem. The purpose of CPS is to protect and serve children who suffer from abuse and neglect or children who are at risk of abuse and neglect. The task is to provide support services to caseworkers that are suffering from work related stress and in extreme cases acute stress disorder. Technology is an important element in the system as it can be the means to provide information and interaction between the system and subsystems and help to prevent entropy between systems. The environment surrounding the system are the political forces and institutions of TDPRS and the Texas State Legislature, sociocultural forces and agencies that interact with CPS, economic forces of funding by the State of Texas, and the
technological forces and institutions utilized by CPS. You describe the elements of the system well. However, it is not very clear how the various elements of the system impact your problem/situation. Better analysis of the impact of citizens, the legislature, etc. would make this a much better section.

- **History of Services to address the problem:**

  CPS is very aware of the cost of caseworker turnover due to stress related burnout and has implemented services to address this problem. Historically, training is offered to supervisors so they can recognize the symptoms of worker stress and give support to the caseworkers. CPS also provides caseworkers the availability of training through the Protective Services Training Institute (PSTI) where they can learn symptoms of stress and burnout how to use appropriate coping skills to combat the problem. Recently IT has played a part in providing services through caseworkers intra-gency web site, but the site only gives definitions of problems, such as burn out, and helpful things caseworkers can try to decrease the effects of burnout. IT also provides online training, The Source, through the Professional Development Division which addresses various issues including managing stress, delegating work, harassment in the workplace and other employee related concerns. CPS caseworkers have the benefit of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to access 5 sessions per year of individual therapy, free of charge to the employee. CPS is moving toward implementing a Care Team that would be comprised of CPS workers and foster parents to help foster parents address issues of grief and loss over a child leaving their home, or the unfortunate death of child. The CPS supervisors in Dallas have a support group for new supervisors where they can receive support from peers and learn skills needed to support the caseworkers It would be nice to explain this a little more since it is key to your problem/situation, e.g., what services are provided, success to date, etc. CPS currently has a contract with the Parenting Center, which includes training for CPS staff, and grief counseling for staff could be included in the contract. There are no current contracts with outside agencies to provide counseling to CPS caseworker. However, current contracts could be amended to include therapy sessions for caseworkers if it was requested. and the outside agency agreed. **Good**

- **Relevant assumptions:**

  The relevant assumption of this analysis is that adequate support services provided by CPS to its caseworkers who are suffering from work related stress, and its effects, would have a positive impact for the caseworker, client, CPS, and the State of Texas. An additional assumption is that more could be done to meet
the needs of caseworkers for support and that the use of technology could enhance the provision of these services. _Good_

### III. Decisions Involved

- **Decision Process:**
  This analysis addresses the decision of how CPS can provide an adequate support system to caseworkers that suffer from job related stress. The decision of CPS on how to accomplish this task will be based on entities within the agency and its surrounding environment. The Texas State Legislator and the citizens of Texas must decide if this is an important enough program to be funded, if funds are available, and if the citizens will support the decision. CPS must decide what additional services are needed and how they will be implemented. The caseworkers will decide if they will access the services if they are provided. A survey involving the caseworkers could determine their commitment to access the services being offered. The decision-making process presents the needs and capacities of each of the entities involved in the decision. _Good information._

- **Current use of IT:**
  The current use of IT by TDPRS in providing services to caseworkers is an interagency web site where training can be located and a web site for caseworkers. This use of IT is available for all TDPRS staff in Adult Protective Services, Child Protective Services, and Child Care Licensing. The caseworker web site is an information site and gives links to resources including EAP. Current IT within the agency is not utilized to offer additional support to address the problem of work related stress. _It would be nice to list the hardware and software and communications resources of each caseworker._
  The current IT in place for TDPRS could be enhanced to incorporate additional support services for caseworkers in the form of online support groups and message boards. Online therapy could also be incorporated if the decision is made to include this aspect of support.

### IV Assessment of Needs and Capacities

- **Priority of Needs** (in numerical order listing the highest priority first), **How was the priority established?**
  1. TDPRS, as upper management staff, needs to explore how technology can enhance support to caseworkers.

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2. CPS Administration, as middle management staff, need to assess the ways they are providing support services to caseworkers and how those services can be enhanced.
3. CPS needs to determine if caseworkers will access online services.
4. Supervisors, as lower management staff, need to have access to more ways to support caseworkers.
5. Caseworkers need additional support services to combat the work related stress they suffer due to vicarious trauma.
6. The state legislature and the community need to be aware of the effects of work related stress for the caseworkers, the clients they serve, and the productivity of TDPRS.
7. The state legislature needs knowledge of research on effective treatment of work related vicarious trauma.
8. The state legislature needs knowledge of IT and the cost and effectiveness in providing support to caseworkers as a means of reducing employee turnover rates.

- **Priority of Capacities** (in numerical order listing the highest priority first)
  1. TDPRS staff are already used to accessing technology-based solutions through the TDPRS network system and intra-agency web site.
  2. The Texas State Legislature is knowledgeable of the monetary cost of caseworker burnout and turnover. **Source of this fact?**
  3. Middle management and lower management staff are aware of the need for additional support for caseworkers that suffer from vicarious trauma. **Source, or did you give the source earlier?**
  4. Caseworkers have access to an intra-agency network (**WAN and Intranet**) which could support additional IT as an enhancement for caseworker support.
  5. Caseworkers, for the most part, are social workers that value therapy as a source for positive change.
  6. Research supports the need for services to caseworkers that suffer from vicarious trauma and work related stress.

**Conclusion**

This analysis addressed the problem of secondary trauma in relation to work related stress on CPS caseworkers in Region 3, Texas. This problem can be applied statewide and nationwide as child welfare agencies struggle to meet the demands of increased incidence of child maltreatment. The main findings of this analysis is that: CPS caseworkers do not have a sufficient support system from the agency to address the secondary trauma they face on almost a daily basis, CPS and TDPRS need to seek additional resources to
give these caseworkers the support they need, and technology already in place in TDPRS could be used to enhance support services to CPS caseworkers.

V. References


Good list of references