

Butler Institute for Families

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Evaluation of the Wisconsin Child Welfare Training System

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work (BI), was selected by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) to conduct an evaluation of the Wisconsin Child Welfare Training System. The purpose of the assessment was 1) to evaluate the extent to which all of the functions of a comprehensive child welfare training program are operating in a quality manner, and 2) to suggest enhanced or alternative methods by which these functions can be strengthened.

BI conducted the evaluation between September and December of 2008. All of the partners in the Child Welfare Training System were involved in the assessment process, including planning and design, data collection, and review of the draft report. The partners include: the Department of Children and Families (DCF), county child welfare programs, tribal child welfare programs, the DCF Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW), Special Needs Adoption Program (SNAP) and the University of Wisconsin system. The counties, state programs, tribes and universities are organized into five regional training partnerships: NEW Partnership for Children and Families housed at UW-Green Bay; Southern Child Welfare Training Partnership at UW-Madison, School of Human Ecology; Western Wisconsin Partnership for Children and Families at UW-River Falls, Social Work programs; Milwaukee Partnership for Professional Development at UW-Milwaukee, Helen Bader School of Social Welfare; and the Intertribal Child Welfare Training Partnership housed at UW-Green Bay. The regional training partnerships implement training for their constituencies.

Methods

The Butler Institute utilized a mixed method design that included collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple stakeholders within the state, as well as nationally. Data sources included:

- Document reviews
- Web-based questionnaires
 - Caseworkers (511 completed; 25% response rate)
 - Supervisors (241 completed; 48% response rate)
 - Trainers (50 completed)
 - Managers/directors (85 completed)
- 14 focus group interviews
- 32 Individual or small group interviews
- 7 interviews with external training experts

Key Findings by Domain

Domain I: Structure and Governance of Training System

The Wisconsin Child Welfare Training System is recognized nationally as a model of partnership between the counties, state, tribes, and universities. The structure provides opportunity for sharing of power and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders. It has helped to produce a system of training in which the recipients of training and the agencies they work for are, for the most part, appreciative of the efforts made to meet their needs and are highly satisfied with the results. However, the growth and evolution of the system, in response to changing workforce and policy needs, has led to a number of structural and governmental concerns. These concerns include:

Balance of the relative interests and perspectives of the state and the county-university partnerships:

Over the past five years, Wisconsin, like many states, has seen rapid growth of its Child Welfare Training System in response to program review findings, legislative mandates, promising service delivery practices, and workforce demands. Large statewide projects (e.g., pre-service, a new Foundation training to replace Common Core, and Post-QSR training) have made demands on the existing system for timely development and rollout of training. Reorganization of the state Child Welfare system and high demands/crises in service delivery (such as has recently occurred in Milwaukee) have added to the stress and uncertainty that accompanies the change that is already inherent in this rapid growth.

Much progress has been made (e.g., development of a strategic plan, the training courses noted above and other courses developed at the regional level). However, there has also been some increase in factionalism among the training system partners, in this case along the traditional lines that characterize most state-supervised, county-administered Child Welfare systems. In the past, the regional university-county partnerships made almost all decisions about training in their regions. Recently, the state, in response to concerns about findings from the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) and the Quality Service Review (QSR) processes, has made many decisions that affect training in the regions. Regional partnerships feel that not only has their authority been usurped to some degree, but that their expertise is not recognized and their detailed knowledge of local practice is not valued.

Role of the Training Center: There is not clarity about the role of the Training Center, especially in terms of a) development of statewide training-related efforts (such as standardized competencies, curriculum standards/formats, and common curriculum) and b) oversight and enforcement of Training Council decisions that affect regional implementation of both statewide and region-specific training. The lack of clarity is fueling frustration among many training system partners and eroding progress towards an important goal, i.e., a shared sense that collaborative approaches to finding solutions to training issues will work. Some of the university-based partnerships are concerned about partial loss of autonomy and less direct access to DCF as a result of a stronger Training Center role.

Decision-making Structure of the Training Council: The Training Council is large in order to be inclusive of the many stakeholders or their representatives. It has a subcommittee structure that works well for planning, as well as, sometimes, getting work done on projects such as curriculum development.

However, when the Council's tasks involve decision-making, the Council structure is too large to operate effectively, especially when the goal is to reach consensus.

Domain II: Professional Development Continuum

Strategic Alignment and Planning: Feedback from participants generally indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the connection between the training offered and their job-related needs. The responsiveness of the regional training partnerships to the counties is a significant strength of the training system and respondents expressed strong support for maintaining the partnership role.

Although much has been done to align training with agency priorities, the strategic plan and other documents that provide direction for the training system are in need of updating and expansion to promote an integrated process for assessing needs, planning and developing training offerings, and providing a protocol for allocating resources.

Recently, the training system has been moving away from consistent use of the competency-based ITNA model to identify training needs and has been moving toward use of a different set of more skills-oriented practice principles in the Foundation and post-QSR training. While the current assessment process is clearly responsive to emerging needs as defined by the counties, there does not appear to be a systematic statewide needs assessment process that would help the Training Council plan and set priorities.

Range of Professional Development Options: The professional development continuum in Wisconsin consists of the following elements: Title IV-E stipend programs for MSW and BSW degrees, web-based pre-service training, classroom training (Foundation training for new workers, advanced classroom training options for experienced workers) and transfer of learning (QSR follow-up, Milwaukee mentoring, supervisor orientation in NEW).

The majority of respondents to the web-based questionnaire expressed satisfaction with available training for new workers, specifically the pre-service and Foundation components of the system, although some expressed dissatisfaction with the gaps in what is covered in the existing curricula. However, most respondents agreed that there are far fewer options available for experienced workers, supervisors and administrators than for new workers. New workers would like more training offerings on substance abuse, safety, legal issues and time and workload management. Supervisors would like to have more training in teaming, helping workers cope with burnout and secondary trauma, management and organizational skills, and cultural competency. Many respondents would like to have more courses offered via distance learning.

Transfer and Practice Improvement: Nationally, training programs are moving toward greater support of transfer of learning, integration of training with practice, and support of organizational change, in part in response to a greater emphasis on outcomes coming on the heels of the federal reviews. Wisconsin has undertaken specific initiatives statewide, in the NEW partnership, and at the Bureau of Milwaukee, that support transfer of learning and promote organizational change. Following the initial federal Child and Family Service Review (CSFR), DCF began a Quality Service Review (QSR) process with

the counties to evaluate practice and identify strengths as well as areas in which to target interventions that would lead to better performance on the federal outcome indicators. The post-QSR process, as well as the Milwaukee mentoring program and the NEW partnership initiatives, offer a great deal of promise in extending professional development beyond the classroom and making meaningful practice changes. The partnerships have also made available tools for supervisors to use to support workers' transfer of learning, such as summaries of course content on the web and participant action plans. These efforts would be further strengthened by integration of the post-QSR and other training into a continuum of activities in support of common competencies and objectives.

Domain III: Curriculum Development

Competencies: The Wisconsin Child Welfare Training System has historically been competency-based. With the transition from the I.H.S. Common Core training to the Foundation training, there is not now a statewide set of competencies/learning objectives for workers that provide a framework for curriculum selection, development or writing. While this allows some flexibility, overall it seems to have added to frustration with the system, and, in the view of BI, will hamper the training system in the future. A set of competencies/learning objectives (particularly if it is guided by a practice model) provides a useful guide for decision-making and curriculum development.

Curriculum standards and format: There is no common set of standards or a standardized format for curriculum in Wisconsin, although there are models used in some of the regions. There is no ongoing process now to create/adopt standards or one or more acceptable formats or to assure that these are being used throughout the state. Since Foundation training modules are not in a common format, trainers who deliver them in each region must adjust to each new module format. This seems to give tacit permission to customize these modules locally, as "standardization" seems to be missing internally.

Domain IV: Trainer Development

The current process of recruiting and selecting trainers from the counties has several clear strengths. Trainers are seen by respondents as being in touch with current practice and able to address local practice concerns. An additional benefit is that county personnel who serve as trainers are able to bring current information on best practices back to their agencies and serve as local expert resources. However, there are also limitations. Current county staff must take vacation time to train, which limits their availability, and those who are not current county employees can begin to lose the close connection to practice over time.

At this time, Wisconsin does not have a clearly defined set of competencies expected of trainers. While there is a set of trainer development guidelines for Foundation trainers, these address a set of activities rather than the knowledge, skills and abilities desired: a process focus rather than an outcome focus. As Wisconsin's training system becomes increasingly sophisticated, a set of agreed upon trainer competencies will be needed to form a firm foundation for selecting trainers, planning and conducting trainer development activities, and evaluating trainer performance.

Domain V: Training Delivery

Training delivery options: The Wisconsin system has begun to expand the range of training delivery options with distance learning and targeted site-specific training. Online pre-service training has been well received and distance-learning courses under development are increasing in sophistication. The bulk of training within the system is still delivered in the classroom. A substantial number of respondents see classroom training as providing important advantages, and are not in favor of expanding distance learning as a delivery option. A commonly reported barrier is lack of computer technology in select counties at this time. However, respondents also saw the need for better utilization of distance learning options, especially as resources become less available to send staff to training. At the present time, most areas within the state have sufficient classroom training capacity to get staff through needed training in a timely way. There are exceptions, however. For example, problems were noted with access to training in Milwaukee, where turnover is especially high. BI believes that in the future Wisconsin will need to continue to expand the use of e-learning, teleconferencing and other types of training delivery such as brief, targeted, trainings on-site in the counties to maximize the efficiency and timeliness of training delivery.

A major need that the training system will have going forward is a learning management system. Such a system is needed to allow centralized tracking of completion of training requirements for reporting purposes. It will also help training participants and their supervisors to track progress and provide a vehicle for storing and administering evaluation tools and transfer of learning tools.

Domain VI: Research to Practice

There is a great deal of expertise in program evaluation in the university systems that house the partnerships as well as a strong research orientation through the state Office of Performance and Quality Assistance. Both of these factors provide the foundation for the possible development of more work in these areas. While there is interest in utilizing and strengthening the existing capacity to conduct child welfare research, as well as utilizing existing literature to inform and support the work of the training system, much work remains to be done to set a research agenda, identify resources to support the work, and identify the most appropriate model for the research function.

Domain VII: Training Evaluation

As in many training systems, the training evaluation done in Wisconsin is primarily level one, participant feedback. This information is used informally to make decisions about what curriculum is needed, how effectively current curricula are meeting participant needs, and how trainers are performing. Although this level of evaluation provides a great deal of information for program improvement, many informants expressed a desire to build capacity to conduct higher levels of evaluation that would provide information about staff's acquisition of needed knowledge and skills, transfer of learning, and the relationship of training to practice changes and improvements in child welfare outcomes. At the same time, they recognized that this type of evaluation is costly. Difficult decisions must be made to allocate scarce resources in such a way that essential training functions are not compromised, but crucial evidence of training program impact is gathered and disseminated to build support for the training

system. The mechanism that several states have adopted to guide these decisions and to plan for an incremental building of evaluation capacity is the strategic plan. A strong strategic plan can guide how the Training System can move gradually to higher levels of evaluation over a period of time in a way that will maximize learning about training outcomes without overtaxing training resources.

Key Recommendations

- **Convene a facilitated, structured reconciliation process.** The Wisconsin Training System is a highly competent and sophisticated system that has benefited from the structural partnership between the state, universities, counties, and tribes. For a number of reasons, the partnership has not been functioning as a collaborative in recent years, as it did in the past. The Training Partnership would greatly benefit from a structured reconciliation process, facilitated by an outside Child Welfare training system expert who can help the members realign the rules, roles, boundaries and governance of the Training System. The training system needs to engage in this work to strengthen the collaboration of the partnership *before* moving into the strategic planning process.
- **Review and make decisions about how to change the structure, governing rules, and processes of the Training Council to make it more effective.**
 - Institute a smaller executive committee to make final decisions. The advantage would be that all issues requiring a decision would be addressed, that decisions would be timely, and that ways of ensuring that decisions get carried out could be addressed. The disadvantage is that fewer members of the Training Council would have direct input into a decision.
 - If an executive committee were established, the full Training Council might be better utilized for raising and discussing issues, convening smaller workgroups, providing context and guidance to the executive committee, and reviewing the results of decisions.
 - Conduct full Training Council meetings less frequently (such as quarterly) and rotate them around the state to facilitate county participation. The executive committee meeting schedule could be planned based on needed decisions and those decisions' timeframes. Holding less frequent meetings in various locations might also encourage more participation by county directors.
 - The Training Council needs clear criteria for decision-making and mechanisms to enforce decisions, as well as to support implementation of decisions.
 - The Training Council needs to improve its communication mechanisms with members, e.g. more timely postings on online of requests for input about meeting agendas, agendas themselves, follow-ups to meetings (decisions and minutes), and information.
- **Review and make decisions about the role and functions of the Training Center staff.** DCF needs to clearly communicate the roles and responsibilities of the Training Center staff so there is a shared understanding among stakeholders about the functions of the Training Center staff and the functions of other partners (i.e., post-QSR planning).
 - The Training Center staff should have clear authority for enforcement of decisions made by the Training Council or Executive Committee if established. If training projects are not being carried

out in ways that reflect these decisions, the Training Center staff should be able to take action and hold stakeholders accountable.

- The resource needs for all Training Center functions need to be reviewed, as the current functions are not adequately staffed.
- **Conduct Strategic Planning Process.** Strategic planning should be facilitated by an external person to address the above recommendations as well as make decisions about how best to ensure strategic alignment of training products with the state principles or model of practice.
- **Develop Statewide Training Plan.** Building from the strategic planning process, develop a statewide training plan. The plan should identify what training will be delivered statewide based on the competency model and the needs assessment described above, as well as clear timeframes for the trainings.
- **Develop standardized sets for competencies for all training audiences.** Adopting a common set of competencies that are aligned with the Wisconsin practice principles (or model if this is developed) and the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by staff to perform their jobs would provide the basis for an integrated training system in which the needs of stakeholders at the state and local levels could be met efficiently and effectively.
- **Revise Foundation Training Courses.** A common set of competencies should be used to guide the revision of the Foundation Training. Competencies should be ordered into a design that follows a “life of the case” model and should be used to guide the revision process for Foundation training and the development or selection of curriculum to address gaps.
- **Develop a systematic needs assessment process tied to a competency model.** Use of a standardized needs assessment process or set of tools will help provide the training system with information that clarifies statewide versus local needs. Such a system does not and should not preclude local responses to specific county needs, but can inform strategic planning and resource allocation to ensure that key needs are addressed without duplication of effort.
- **Further develop a model for post-QSR training and technical assistance and integrate with pre-service, Foundation and in-service training.** Strategies may include:
 - Design and implement formative evaluation strategies to collect feedback that looks at the effectiveness of different post-QSR learning strategies for different issues and locations.
 - Design an outcome evaluation to measure transfer of learning of specific post-QSR skills.
 - Involve regional partnerships strategically through the exit interview, post-QSR planning, training and TA, coaching and facilitation of peer networks would be an effective way to maximize limited training resources and integrate learning along the continuum of professional development from classroom training to skill transfer.
- **Expanding the range of professional development options for a variety of Child Welfare staff.** Many suggestions were offered by respondents, including expanding course offerings for experienced workers and supervisors; promoting communities of practice for supervisors and managers; and developing training for Case Aides.

- **Develop a common set of standards for curricula and one or more approved curriculum formats.**
- **Develop and implement a plan for making decisions about standardization and customization of statewide curricula.** The Training Council should develop a standardized set of curricula for Foundation training and other future statewide training projects. Yet there should be room for a limited amount of customization in order to meet legitimate county and regional differences.
- **Review process for trainer development and revise if needed.**
- **Develop an array of training and information delivery strategies and a plan for making decisions about which are appropriate.** Utilizing a larger range of delivery options for various types of training would not only maximize resources, but also promote learning and transfer of learning to the job. For example, more purely informational pieces of classroom training could be moved to web-based applications, saving time for skill development in the classroom.
- **Develop a training plan that addresses unique needs of Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare.** The benchmarks and fundamental principles for a highly functioning training system are the same for BMCW as for all partnership regions of Wisconsin; however, there is a need for an individualized training plan that addresses the practice challenges that are unique to BMCW either in occurrence or in scope and magnitude.
- **Develop a Training Evaluation Plan.** As Wisconsin develops a training plan, it would also be helpful to have a training evaluation plan to set direction and serve as a map for future evaluation activities and resource decisions. Such a plan would lay the foundations for systemic expansion into higher levels of training evaluation that yield information regarding learning outcomes and transfer to practice, and relate training outcomes to outcomes for children and families.
- **Build research and evaluation capacity.** Building a research and evaluation capacity responsive to current program needs and plans for future initiatives will be necessary as the training system moves toward more sophisticated levels of training evaluation and practice related research. As part of building evaluation capacity, both staffing and infrastructure will need to be addressed.
- **Explore creation of a research to practice consortium.** Representatives from DCF, the Partnerships, the Training Program and interested University Deans or their designees should come together for a one day meeting to explore the idea of establishing a research to practice consortium.

Expand and coordinate access to available research to practice literature. This effort might involve consolidation of resources from individual partnerships to a centralized website. The universities could participate in a process of synthesizing and evaluating the quality of the research literature on a given topic, through the lens of Wisconsin's child welfare system.