**Improve Education Incentives for CPS Caseworkers**

It is imperative that Texas have a strong child welfare workforce in order to insure that safety and successful outcomes for children in care are maintained at the highest levels possible. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lists multiple principles for effective prevention and intervention and includes: supporting outreach and community development; establishing a helping alliance with the family; an empowerment-based practice; cultural competence; and the emphasis of family strengths. The development of these skills can directly contribute to the elimination of abuse and neglect, and all of these areas are covered in the schools of social work.

By educating and promoting a workforce comprised of social workers, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) can utilize the background of a profession that focuses on family systems and the improvement of the child welfare system. A link to increased outcomes regarding reunification and adoption for Title IV-E stipend workers and the reduction of child maltreatment and foster care placements to social workers has been shown, and by increasing opportunities to hire and retain more degreed social workers the Department has the ability to shift the culture of the agency towards improved results for children and families.

**It is recommended that:**

- DFPS expand the Title IV-E education program for Conservatorship (CVS) and apply the waiver to expand the program to Family-Based Safety Services (FBSS) and Investigative (INV) caseworkers.
- DFPS create a loan repayment program for frontline and first tier supervisors in INV, CVS, and FBSS incentivized for those who do not qualify for IV-E.

**Title IV-E**

Authorized through the Social Security Act and implemented by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 C.F.R. §§ 1355-1357; Title IV-E is a federal program created to assist states in providing foster care maintenance and adoption assistance services. As an entitlement program it is limited by the number of eligible children within the foster care system, and funds are allocated per capita based on those numbers.

Title IV-E dollars are matched at 75% for foster care maintenance and adoption assistance, as well as agency training for foster care and adoptive assistance. The training encompasses the staff who administer the Title IV-E Plan as well as current or

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prospective foster or adoptive parents. Dollars are matched at 50% for other services that include: referral to services; child placement; development and implementation of the case plan; case reviews, case management and supervision; recruitment and licensing of foster homes and institutions; and costs related to data collection and reporting. The funding does not include social services provided to the child, family or foster family to provide counseling or treatment to ameliorate or remedy personal problems, behaviors or home conditions.

Children must meet both federal and state guidelines to be eligible for Title IV-E. Prior to 1996, Title IV-E funding was linked to income eligibility and federal reimbursement rates through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC). After 1996 the emergence of TANF created a new set of guidelines for family assistance, but Title IV-E remained tied to the provisions of the AFDC. In the intervening years the federal government has not adjusted the Title IV-E requirements for any cost of living or inflationary adjustments. As a result, Title IV-E eligibility criteria remain at pre-1996 levels. Accounting for inflation, this results in a roughly $7600 disparity between what a family used to earn to qualify and the present day.

In addition, Texas is required to show that beyond the economic criteria a child is being placed out of their home either voluntarily or through court order, and that this home is an approved foster placement. Relative placements do not count under Title IV-E. Unless the family has completed a program such as Fostering Connections that allows them to take on the status of a foster placement without actually accepting further children, they will not receive any financial support and the Department will not receive federal reimbursement.

The Title IV-E funds are earmarked for “guardianship assistance” by the federal government, but since Texas grants “conservatorship” to the Department instead of “guardianship” in child welfare cases, DFPS uses the “guardianship assistance” dollars to fund its Permanency Care Assistance (PCA) program. The PCA program supports relative or fictive kin (ties defined by the family and not by blood or marriage) who are granted permanent legal responsibility for a child whom they have previously fostered.

Texas received $231.7 million dollars in Title IV-E dollars in 2012, and HHSC noted in a fiscal funds report from 2013 that due to the methodology for claiming funds based on income eligibility and the increasing number of children being placed out of the home the federal dollars are expected to continue to decline.4

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Benefits of Title IV-E and Social Workers

Beyond the alleviation of financial costs to Texas for children in care, Title IV-E is also used to support the education of new caseworkers in CVS. The Department contracts with public universities with accredited social work programs, and in return these caseworkers are contractually obligated to work for CPS for a designated amount of time after graduation: 8 months for each semester worth of stipend money received. As of March 2013, Title IV-E provided funding for educating conservatorship caseworkers at 13 out of the 22 universities with social work programs. The average stipend amount was around $11,000 per student. 6

114 Title IV-E participants graduated between 2010 – 2012 including 82 individuals with a bachelor’s degree and 32 with a master’s. 7 A study completed by the co-chair of the Texas Title IV-E Evaluation Committee, Dr. Patrick Leung from the University of Houston, polled current and former caseworkers of the Title IV-E program who received a stipend sometime over the last 25+ years. Dr. Leung received 196 responses, and out of those, 126 reported that they met the payback requirements. 123 of these were by finishing their time commitment to the agency. 8 The four main reasons listed for not finishing the post-graduate requirement were: workload, long hours, caseloads and low pay. Disagreements with agency decisions, limited opportunities for career advancement and lack of supervisor support were also listed as reasons for leaving early.

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Most tellingly, the study discovered that of the 196 respondents, 14.8% reported that they were no longer working for CPS.\(^9\) This is significantly lower than both the national (30% to 40%) and Texas CPS turnover rate (34%). The majority of those who left the agency were still working in the field of child welfare. Over 34% of the remaining DFPS employees received a promotion, and 70% had been with the agency 6 years or more.

Not only are Title IV-E workers able to make substantial impacts in the prevention of the recurrence of child maltreatment and placement stability, but their increased tenure suggests that they can impart their education and experience to other caseworkers, thereby providing more of a social work framework within the agency. Their increased job preparedness and performance are invaluable to their interactions with the judicial system and service providers, and since Title IV-E workers decrease the time to achieve reunification as well as the time to achieve adoption, they also reduce the cost in services and supports to children and families.\(^10\)

A study that reviewed the reasons leading to increased tenure at DFPS found that social work education, Title IV-E involvement, organizational support and job desirability were shown to be the greatest factors on why staff remained at the agency.\(^11\) The more workers felt that their knowledge was being utilized within the agency the more they felt valued, and when they applied their social work experience to their cases the overall outcomes in multiple areas increased.

As an example of another state recognizing the importance of social work in the field of child welfare, Florida passed SB-1666 this year with a start date of July 1\(^{st}\), 2014. It provides for a tuition reimbursement for caseworkers who attend an accredited school of social work, and mandates that by July 1\(^{st}\), 2019 “at least half of all child protective investigators and supervisors will have a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree in social work from a college or university social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education.”\(^12\) To achieve this goal the bill requires that 80% of all new supervisors and investigators hired after the implementation date be a social worker.

Florida has traditionally had major issues with abuse and neglect, and in 2010 had the highest rate of abuse and neglect deaths of any state at 4.44.\(^13\)

**Recommendations**

Since the impacts from Title IV-E supported workers are shown to have a positive effect on outcomes while at the same time these funds are declining; DFPS needs to find ways to invest in the education of its future workers. By creating and retaining a staff

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\(^{9}\) Ibid.
\(^{10}\) Leung, P. Willis, N. (2012) The Impact of Title IV-E Training on Case Outcomes for Children Serviced by CPS. Retrieved online from: http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol12/iss1/9/
comprised of social workers who are experts in the fields of family systems, trauma and strengths-based casework, the agency should provide children with the tenured caseworkers they need in order to succeed and leave the system. Without higher salaries, manageable caseloads and supervisor support there is the danger poor retention will continue to trump the recruitment of qualified individuals.

The Department should look at maximizing its Title IV-E dollars by studying the potential to include FBSS and INV workers in the stipend program. Adoptions workers are eligible, but the dearth of openings in those units and the desirability of those positions make this less of a concern. By bringing more social workers to a front-line response area like investigations, families in crisis will have the potential to begin the continuum of services and agency involvement along a social work trajectory. This initial contact may prove the key to avoiding reentry in the future. Likewise, FBSS workers handle large caseloads with more voluntary cooperation by families, and a social work background comprises an ideal set of skills for this situation. Likewise, the legislature should consider increasing the match funding that it puts into IV-E.

Last session, Representative Dawanna Dukes introduced HB-969 pertaining to the reimbursement of caseworkers who sought a degree in social work. This bill went beyond the amount Florida allocated per person for repayment assistance and validated the need to invest in the future workers of CPS. Unfortunately this legislation did not pass, and so efforts will need to be made during the 84th legislative session to again make loan repayment through employment a priority of the legislature.

The necessity to bring more social workers to DFPS is borne out by the number of children who enter the child welfare system each year. In 2010, when Florida was number one in abuse and neglect mortality rates Texas was number three behind New Mexico. It would be a travesty to replace Florida on this list and then adopt a more comprehensive plan, when the examples and the evidence show that we can avert negative outcomes through a systematic inclusion of more educated individuals with the tools needed to eradicate ignorance and harm to children. Social workers are in the unique position to truly change the culture of the agency, and by funding more degrees for workers we will be investing in the future of a safe and stronger Texas.

14 Ibid.