

Protect a child at every turn

Strengthening welfare work force helps families

By **MARY MCCARTHY**

First published: Sunday, May 3, 2009

Thankfully, most of us never come into contact with the child welfare system, a system designed to protect and keep our children safe. And most of us are unaware of the system unless a child has died or has been seriously injured and his or her story is headlined in our local media.

But the child welfare work force is on the front lines every day, investigating the more than 150,000 reports that are accepted by the state's central register for possible abuse and neglect, working with families to link them with services and monitoring children in foster care who have been removed from their families out of concern for their safety.

These workers come in contact with families who suffer the effects of poverty, joblessness, family strife, drugs, alcohol and many other social ills that sometimes reach a crisis point and push parents over the edge.

Day in and day out, caseworkers and supervisors make tough, heart-wrenching decisions that few of us will have to make in our lifetimes. Is a young girl's home too unsafe for her to live there? Should I keep a boy in foster care rather than return him to his family? And they live with the fear that making the wrong decision can have tragic consequences.

Child welfare workers do this job without the resources or time available to do it well. It's not just the workload. These are tough jobs that require training, skill, judgment and dedication. Though New York reinstated important child welfare funding, including about \$2.6 million for reduced caseloads and technology support, it took away more than \$6 million intended for caseworker training and education.

In our 2008 Annual Report and Recommendations, the New York State Citizen Review Panels for Child Protective Services call for investments to strengthen and support the child welfare work force. These investments are necessary to keeping our children safe and in their homes.

The recommendations call for revisions to civil service requirements for child welfare positions to allow local social services departments to hire those candidates who are best suited to these positions.

Currently, these positions are considered entry level, requiring passage of a basic exam that has little relationship to the job responsibilities in child welfare. If a choice applicant is thrown off by the math portion of the exam and does not score at a high enough level on the test, the social services department is prevented from hiring that applicant even when well-suited to the job.

Such rules have kept some applicants with bachelor's or master's degrees in social work and successful internships in child welfare from being hired.

Additionally, improved recruitment practices are needed to hire the best candidates who will more likely remain on the job. The positions in child welfare require specialized skills. Changes should allow targeted recruitment of candidates and incentives to attract BSW and MSW candidates.

When a worker leaves or retires, a local social services department spends \$27,000 on average to hire and train a new person to fill the position. Many local social services departments experience high turnover. If potential candidates are given a more realistic understanding of the job before accepting employment and improvements are made in recruitment and hiring decisions, turnover can be reduced.

Most importantly, caseloads need to be reduced to retain workers. A change in the law is needed, along with increased federal and state funding, to reduce workloads.

The work force simply cannot keep children safe with workloads that are nearly double the recommended standard. Yet, workers are held accountable for the difficult decisions they make. Over time, the system has accepted more reports for

investigation and asked more of child welfare workers without considering capacity of the work force to meet these mandates.

In an ideal world, all children would grow up in safe, loving environments that nurture them to reach their full potential. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen.

A qualified, high-quality work force is indispensable to achieving the best outcomes for the children involved in the child welfare system. It is time to recognize the essential role that the child welfare work force performs and to support them with the resources and skills needed to do the job well.

Instead of increasing the regulations, regimentation and accountability for workers when things go wrong, we must provide them with the necessary training, supervision, and critical decision-making skills to work with families with complex needs.

Mary McCarthy is chair of the Eastern Citizen Review Panel, one of three in New York. The panels are mandated by federal and state law to evaluate how effectively agencies discharge their child protection responsibilities and recommend changes.

For more information about the citizen review panels and their recommendations, go to <http://www.citizenreviewpanelsny.org/>