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April 23, 2007

To: Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman
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From: Patricia S. Ploehn, LCSW
Director

JANUARY 16, 2007, BOARD AGENDA ITEM #11: PLAN FOR EXTENDED AND ENHANCED TRAINING OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKER TRAINEES

INTRODUCTION:

On January 16, 2007, on motion by Supervisors Antonovich and Knabe, the Board of Supervisors instructed the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in conjunction with Department of Human Resources (DHR) and Chief Administrative Office (CAO) Classification/Compensation Branch to develop a "plan for extended and enhanced training of Children's Social Worker (CSW) Trainees." As a result, a workgroup was formed to examine hiring, training and retention issues related to CSW Trainees. Workgroup participants included DCFS Training, Policy, Education and Licensure, Human Relations and line operations staff. Representatives from SEIU Local 721 and the Commission for Children and Families also participated in the workgroup.

Initial discussions among the workgroup members revealed the common belief that most CSW Trainees are "ready" to assume the duties of the job after completing the Core Academy for new CSWs. Only a small percentage of new hires demonstrate deficiencies or "un-readiness" to perform the duties of a CSW.

> "Success on the job is as related to educational level or accomplishment as it is to the ability to handle the job stress and the ambiguity inherent in the work of the CSW. These factors appear more related to maturity and life experience."
>
> - SCSW, Workgroup Participant

To validate this general perception, a survey of the Regional Administrators (RAs) followed by a roundtable discussion was conducted in early March. Feedback from the RAs supported a general belief that the overwhelming majority of CSW Trainees demonstrate general "readiness" at the time they report to work at the regional offices.

To further substantiate this belief, CSW Trainee entrance and retention information was examined. It was determined approximately 250 CSW Trainees were hired during 2006. Of that number, only 10 were terminated during probation for performance issues and none of these terminations involved critical incidents or child fatalities. Approximately 35 additional CSW Trainees voluntarily terminated their employment with the Department. Follow-up exit information revealed workload-related stress, long commutes and perceived inadequate supervision were the motivating factors for these resignations. This low turnover rate, which is lower than the rate for journey-level new hires, indicates most CSW Trainees are prepared to assume the duties of the job.

GETTING THE BEST QUALIFIED PEOPLE INTO THE CSW TRAINEE POSITIONS

The workgroup determined in order to ensure a smooth transition of CSW Trainees into the DCFS workforce it is critical to implement procedures to ensure the best available applicants are hired. The workgroup identified several recent improvements to the recruitment and selection process that will contribute to the general "readiness" of new CSW Trainees.

The Department of Human Resources has been working closely with DCFS to devise appropriate and state-of-the-art employment selection procedures to attract and identify the best-qualified applicants available for the CSW Trainee classification. DHR has assisted the Department with targeted recruitment for CSW Trainees for the most hard-to-fill areas of the County. In March, a targeted recruitment campaign was launched for SPA 6 (South Los Angeles) where the Department experiences its greatest level of turnover, with large numbers of CSW Trainees leaving to work in locations closer to their homes. Targeted recruitment campaigns have been conducted for SPA 1 (Antelope Valley), as well. In the future, DHR will work with the Department to launch these types of campaigns for other areas, as needed.

Targeted recruitment efforts will include procedures to search for the "ideal CSW Trainee candidate." Research has been conducted to identify the characteristics and develop a "profile" of what makes applicants most likely to succeed as CSW Trainees, especially in the most hard-to-fill work locations in the Department. This information will be the basis of an extensive and comprehensive local and out-of-state recruitment campaign. Recruitment activities are currently underway throughout California, and extend to other states.

In addition, DHR has worked with the Department to provide realistic job preview information to potential applicants. During the application process, potential applicants are provided with a written listing of realistic job duties performed by CSWs. This job preview explains the requirements for CSWs to conduct home visits, to make court appearances and to perform many similar duties of which CSW Trainee applicants may not be aware. Providing this information upfront is intended to provide job seekers with a greater understanding of the job and dispel the misconception CSWs spend most of their time in the office. The desired result from sharing this information is that applicants will "self select." This will result in fewer new employees quitting during probation, because they did not have a clearer picture of what the job entailed.

Further, with assistance from DHR, the selection procedure for CSW Trainees has been strengthened. As of the beginning of this year, a written test has been added to the examination to address the concern new CSW Trainees lack sufficient writing skills to prepare court reports and similar documents. To date, the written test has a 60% pass rate and has not been shown to have adverse impact on our recruitment efforts.

The Department has also developed plans to work with DHR to provide a new round of training to raters who serve on the interview panels for the CSW Trainee position. The desired result from implementing this training is to ensure standards are applied fairly and accurately and are used to identify the applicants who have the skills, knowledge, ability and other personal characteristics needed to be successful in the role of CSW Trainee.

Also, a third component will be added to the psychological exam screening process for all CSW applicants. The purpose of third psychological component is to enable the Department to eliminate applicants whose temperament and overall psychological makeup is not suited for this very difficult job.

CHANGES TO THE CLASS SPECIFICATION

The Department is working with the CAO Classification/Compensation Branch to make three specific changes to the classification specification. The first proposed change is to remove the word "Trainee" from the job title in order to attract "stronger" applicants and to increase credibility with clients. Currently, with the word Trainee in the title, some clients may question the competence of their social workers and may not be as willing to cooperate as they would be if they believed they were working with a more qualified person. Removing the word Trainee is expected to encourage clients to have confidence in their Children's Social Worker, foster a greater environment of trust and better enable the CSW to work toward the desired outcomes of improved safety of children, reduced reliance on out-of-home care and reduced timelines to permanency.

The second proposed change is to remove language which states CSW Trainees will be given "less difficult" work assignments, as this is not always possible; frequently cases appearing at first glance to be less difficult often evolve into complex cases. This change will give applicants and new hires more realistic information about the job.

The third proposed change to the class specification is to expand the minimum requirements to allow verifiable and directly related volunteer experience (such as unpaid internships) to serve as qualifying experience in the examination process. This change will increase the applicant pool for the classification and enable applicants who have not previously worked officially as social workers but who have performed related social work duties to be more competitive in the examination process.

Over the next few weeks, CAO Classification/Compensation will assist the Department by analyzing the proposed changes, obtaining input from all concerned stakeholders regarding the proposed changes and effecting the changes in documentation, as appropriate.

STRENGTHENED APPROACH FOR PROVIDING ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND SUPPORT TO NEW CSW TRAINEES THROUGHOUT THE PROBATION PERIOD

Historically, the Department has provided tools for assisting CSW Trainees and their assigned supervisors to facilitate transition from the Core Academy classroom training experience to field work. Feedback from Regional Administrators, Core Academy trainers, and others supports the need for continued development and strengthening of this individualized, skill and application focused method for training/equipping new CSW Trainees, as well as other new hires. Instead of implementing sweeping, generalized changes to the way CSW Trainees are hired and trained, an enhanced "passport/portfolio" concept will be implemented. The enhanced "passport/portfolio" will serve as a comprehensive communication tool to be used by Core Academy trainers, work site supervisors and CSW Trainees to track progress in key areas of knowledge and skill acquisition based on the CSW Trainees' assigned roles and responsibilities. The passport/portfolio will include: an array of checklists to verify the acquisition of learning by CSW Trainees; the results of the Trainee's evaluations and tests; a three-way communication tool for Trainers, Supervisors and Trainees; and, copies of relevant work products based on Core Academy Training experiences. While a passport/portfolio has been available for the past several years, its use and utility have been limited. The enhanced passport/portfolio will add additional information that will better identify CSW strengths and needs for further training. Under the new system, the passport/portfolio will be incorporated as a communication tool as soon as the CSW Trainees enter the Academy. By providing information regarding the educational backgrounds and prior experiences of CSW Trainees, it will allow Academy trainers to tailor classroom training and will guide worksite supervisors in providing "practical" emphasis in these areas to ensure transfer and application of learning.

Further, use of the enhanced passport/portfolio will extend beyond the Core Academy experience and be utilized throughout the probation period, identifying areas where additional training or corrective action is needed. It will serve as a tool to assist in documenting and tracking employee progress and will permit completion of more meaningful interim performance evaluations. This will provide supervisors with a clearer picture of the employees' skills and abilities and will help determine whether the CSW Trainees are suited for the job or should be encouraged to pursue other career options.

This enhanced passport/portfolio will be a very useful tool for work site supervisors. By receiving information on the employees prior to their full-time arrival in the office, the supervisors will be advised as to the specific strengths and needs of each CSW Trainee as demonstrated by the employee during Core Academy training. This will help them develop on-going plans to build on strengths and shore up areas of weakness. Currently, supervisors frequently report performance problems are not clearly identified until the latter part of the rating period. This poses a significant challenge in developing and implementing an improvement plan that must be completed prior to the end of a probation period lasting nine months. The intent of utilizing the passport/portfolio is to identify performance issues earlier in hopes of improving the effectiveness of corrective action plans and reducing the number of CSW Trainees who terminate their employment during the probation period. The ultimate result anticipated from implementation of this concept is a better-trained CSW Trainee who is fully equipped to provide quality services to DCFS children and families.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINES

Getting the Best Qualified People into the CSW Trainee Positions

The improvements to the recruitment and selection process are already underway and will be ongoing.

Changes to the Class Specification

Changes to the class specification are expected to be completed within the next two months.

Developing a Customized Approach to Providing Additional Coaching of New CSW Trainees Throughout the Probation Period

A draft of the passport/portfolio has been developed and is being reviewed/revised by Department managers and supervisors. Once the format has been finalized, training on the use of the tool will be conducted for all line supervisors and managers. This training is essential to ensure the tool is used properly and maximum benefits are gained from its introduction and usage. Department-wide use of the passport/portfolio will begin by the fall of 2007.

Should you have any further questions, please call me at (213) 351-5600 or your staff may contact Armand Montiel, Board Liaison, at (213) 351-5530.

PP:CC:sn

c: Chief Administrative Officer
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
Director of Personnel