Kansas Child Welfare

Contract Change Study

The Experience of Frontline Child Welfare Staff

John Poertner, D.S.W.
Michelle Levy, A.M.

September 2013

Kansas Workforce Initiative
University of Kansas School of Social Welfare
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported through a cooperative agreement between the University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare and the U.S. DHHS/ACF Children’s Bureau, Grant Number 90CT0150. The contents of this publication are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau.

The authors wish to thank Roxanne Emmert Davis for her skilled facilitation of this study’s focus groups. We are also grateful to Justin Thaw and Kathleen Holt for assisting with the focus groups and lending their expertise to the study.

The Kansas Workforce Initiative appreciates the efforts of the many child welfare agency administrators and support staff in providing access to the frontline workforce and helping with study logistics.

Finally, our thanks go to the frontline staff and supervisors who generously shared their experiences with us during a busy and demanding time. Without their participation, this study would not have been possible.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Most frontline workers are experiencing their first or second contract change.
- Contract changes do not appear to impact commitment to the job.
- Frontline child welfare workers are more likely to
  - be distracted at work due to the contract changes
  - report an increase in stress
  - report a decrease in job satisfaction and organizational commitment
  - question their choice of child welfare as a career
- Workers stay in child welfare during contract changes due to their commitment to the children and families.
- While workers report decreased organizational commitment in comparison to a time when contracts were not changing, many remain very committed to their agencies.
- There is uncertainty about new service models, roles, and expectations.
- Changes in pay and benefits are a major concern.
- Timeliness and clarity in the hiring process is critical to retention.
- Lack of communication and lack of information during the transition to new contractors is troubling, particularly as it relates to transmitting case information.
- Increased work demands, including higher caseloads and additional responsibilities, is a significant stressor for workers at agencies losing and gaining contracts.
- Contract changes impact how work is done, work quality, how workers and supervisors feel about their work, and case progress and outcomes.
- Emotional reactions and stress impact worker health and contribute to burnout.

Workers and supervisors identified a number of supports and strategies that agencies can implement to facilitate staff retention in the field during this time. These are highlighted in boxes throughout the report.
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Little is known about how the frontline child welfare workforce experiences contract changes in a system where performance based contracts are periodically put out to bid to private non-for profit agencies. This study examines the experience of frontline child welfare staff during a contract change. The focus of this study is on documenting frontline workers experiences and identifying supports that may facilitate retention in the field during this time.

In 2012, the state of Kansas issued a request for proposals (RFPs) for family preservation and foster care/adoption services to begin July 1, 2013. This presented an opportunity to launch a study about how frontline child welfare workers experience changes under a performance-based contracting system. Human Subjects approval was obtained for this study. In spring 2013, three agencies providing child welfare services under state contracts agreed to participate in the study.

This study included an online survey of frontline workers administered two to three months before the contract change date. The survey was augmented by focus groups of workers and supervisors to obtain additional perspectives on the impact of contract changes on workers. The study plan includes a repeat of the survey and focus groups using the sample study participants in September 2013 following the contract changes in order to compare responses between agencies and over time. This is a report on the survey and focus group responses for study participants prior to the contract change date. We include comparisons to data collected in a workforce study conducted in 2011 that used some of the same measures.
Online Survey

The sample of workers for the survey was selected at random from an agency provided list of frontline workers. Names and email addresses of 314 workers were provided by the participating agencies. The sample size for each agency was determined by setting the parameters as being 95% certain that the mean for any variable was within 5% of the true proportion. Invitations to participate in the study were emailed with three follow-up invitations. There were 175 usable responses (a 56% response rate).

The survey (included in Appendix A) featured questions on workers experiences with previous contract changes, their current job, intention to stay in child welfare, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, stress, and job involvement. The questionnaire also included a series of demographic questions and an opportunity to share additional observations.

Focus Groups

A total of ten focus groups were conducted in May 2013. Participants were recruited to obtain variation between offices within an agency (rural and urban) and where possible between job types (case manager, family support worker, etc.). The focus groups included 6 groups of workers and 4 groups of supervisors. Groups lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes. Questions focused on the impact of the contract change and what had helped during that time. The supervisors were asked to focus on their perceptions of how the contract changes affected workers. A standardized set of open ended questions was used with the groups (Appendix B). Experienced facilitators conducted the focus groups. One facilitator conducted the majority of the groups (8 of 10). The sessions were audio-taped and detailed notes were taken by a researcher who attended the sessions.

Recordings of each focus group were transcribed. This produced 214 pages of transcripts, a tremendous amount of qualitative data. In addition, responses to the open-ended question on the survey are incorporated with this summary. On the survey, workers were asked if there is anything else they would like to say about the effect of the contract changes. There
were 81 comments out of the 190 workers who responded to the survey producing an additional 11 pages of transcripts.

We extracted themes from these transcripts. Each of these themes is presented with selected verbatim quotes from the focus groups so that the reader can obtain a better sense of what workers experienced as a result of the contract changes. The quotes are a powerful expression of how workers experienced the contract changes. To keep this report a reasonable length we have been very selective in the quotes that we included. The themes arising from the focus groups are presented according to the frequency of the themes.

### STUDY PARTICIPANTS

**Profile of Study Participants**

Study participants represented both agencies gaining and losing child welfare contracts. Survey respondents were primarily (88%) female. The average age was 36, the median was 31. The majority (85%) was Caucasian, 8% were African American, 2% were Native American, 2% were Hispanic and 1% were Asian. Fifty-four percent (54%) have a BSW or MSW degree, 17% have less than a bachelor’s degree. The average time worked in the agency was 4.4 years and nearly half (45%) have worked in child welfare for more than five years. Since Kansas now has some 15 years of experience with statewide performance-based contracting, survey respondents were asked how many contract changes they had experienced. Just over one-third (37%) reported going through more than one contract change.

Focus groups included a total of 67 participants (29 workers and 38 supervisors) representing both rural and urban offices.
FINDINGS

I. RETENTION AND TURNOVER DURING CONTRACT CHANGES

Survey respondents were asked if their job was being eliminated and if they were changing agencies due to contract changes. Forty percent (40%) of workers reported that their jobs were being eliminated and 55% said that they were changing agencies. While the state contracts are the largest resource for these agencies, they are all long-standing child welfare service providers with additional sources of revenue. This may account for 37% of respondents who said that their job was not being eliminated.

Workers were also asked a series of questions about their intentions to stay in child welfare. Forty-six percent (46%) of frontline staff agreed that they were thinking about quitting. Twenty-five percent (25%) of workers agreed that they would look for another position in child welfare within the next year. Fifty-eight percent (58%) agreed that the changes in the contracts have caused them to question their choice of child welfare as a career. Forty-six percent (46%) of workers said that they intend to stay in child welfare no more than 3 more years. Themes from the focus groups provide more detail on why workers stay, turnover (leaving agency or child welfare field) and organizational commitment.

A. WHY THEY STAY – COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Commitment to the children and families is the number one reason that keeps workers in their jobs and the field especially during this time. There were nearly 100 comments showing concern for the effect of the changes on vulnerable children and families. Workers also felt that they could personally relate to the families as they were experiencing similar emotions – uncertainty, confusing, anxiety and disruption - during the transition process. Workers also expressed a commitment to co-workers. Many did not want to abandon their co-workers as they transitioned to new jobs and agencies. Some were frank in saying that they were staying because of a lack of other opportunities. A few noted that the contract changes provide new opportunities such as promotions or different positions in the field.

For child welfare workers, a commitment to children and families and other connections to the work are called job involvement. The current survey as well as the study conducted in
2011 included a measure of job involvement. This asked workers to respond to items such as: 
Most of my interests are centered in my job; Most of my personal life goals are job-related.
There were no differences between the two surveys on job involvement (t=.10, p=.92). In other words, the pending contract changes did not change worker’s commitment to their job.

Investment in the children and families

- When it’s actually stable, I like what I do. So, that keeps me around. I care about my families. Some of my families I’ve had for two plus years, you know. It’s hard for me to leave them because I want to see the case out and because I worry about it getting screwed up and stuff. But, that’s just me.

- I worried about my children – probably the biggest thing. I have some that are out there just really struggling and I’m the only constant person – and the case manager – in their life right now.

Commitment to co-workers

- My team, there isn’t anyone that I know for sure is going over there... but yet they all show up mostly every day. And, they try and they support each other... they’re hanging in there. They’re going down with the ship at the end.

- And the coworkers... They need us, they depend on us, and both coworkers and family depend on each other. It’s important to be there for them through this.

Lack of other opportunities

- For right now, I am staying here but that’s because there’s not something else.

- You know when we did look for other jobs there weren’t really any openings so you kind of felt like I’ve got to take this because I need a job.

B. INTENT TO LEAVE (AGENCY AND CHILD WELFARE)

Participants noted that when new contracts were announced, several staff in their offices left almost immediately or in some cases even prior to the contracts being awarded. More than 60 comments indicated not just an intent to leave their agency but an intent to leave the child welfare field. The human service literature shows that job satisfaction is an
important predictor of turnover (MorBarak, Nissly & Levin, 2001). While the focus groups did not specifically ask about job satisfaction, the survey did include a five-item satisfaction scale. Comparing job satisfaction now with the 2011 survey showed a significant decrease (t=-2.27, p=.02). As you will read in the comments throughout this report, the child welfare workforce appears to be feeling less pleasure and more discontent with their work during this time.

**Workers leaving the agency**

- They jumped ship. They bailed. As soon as we found out people just...I mean it was just like overnight is what it felt like.

- Well, you can’t wait because if you wait then you’re going to be in a pool of like 50 other people that are looking for jobs too. So you’re chances of finding a job is even smaller if you don’t just get ahead of the ball. I mean, and that’s the other thing I’m hearing. Well, if I wait till the end of June, and I still don’t have a job, then I’m going to be applying with everybody else who doesn’t have a job. And, I’m going to have even less of a chance. So, it’s like I’ve got to go now.

**Intent to leave child welfare**

- For me it has made a significant impact. It has totally changed my mind about this field. This has been the most draining experience.

- So, the contract change is actually kind of good for me because that gives me kind of an easy out.

- I mean, had I known that contracts would change like they do 15 years ago I never would have done this.

**C. ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT**

In the focus groups, workers and supervisors alike whether staying or leaving their agencies typically expressed a sense of pride in where they work and a sense of loyalty to their organization. Staff frequently attributed this commitment to a sense of shared values. However, organizational commitment significantly decreased between 2011 and immediately

---

prior to the contract changes (t= -9.47, p <.00). Organizational commitment was measured in the survey and prior study by a scale consisting of 7 items that assess the perceived fit between organizational values and those of the worker.

**Organizational commitment**

- I’ve personally struggled with the transition in terms of leaving _______. I’ve been with the agency for 9 years. I’m sad about it. *This is the family that I know.*

- *I’m proud of _____ and the work we do here.* I’ve loved every second of working here.

**Alignment of values and approach with agency**

- *I feel devoted to this agency* and love the way they run things with the employees. Anytime a job opens here I’m like can I stay here? I’m desperately looking and grasping for a way to stay.

- And eight years ago, I loved this place. *I would have given them my right arm.* I loved it so much. And, I’m in a much different place now.

- *I wouldn’t leave _______, but I so want to leave child welfare.*

II. THE TRANSITION TO NEW CONTRACTORS

The entire process of transitioning to new contractors generated major concerns. This was the second most frequently mentioned area of concerns that were expressed primarily by workers in agencies that lost contracts. The specific transition concerns included changing agencies, hiring, pay and benefits, communications and the transition period and process.

A. CHANGING AGENCIES – NEW MODELS, EXPECTATIONS AND ROLES

There was uncertainty about new service models, roles and expectations. New sets of policies and procedures would need to be learned.

**New expectations**

- *So at ______, case managers can kind of work their own hours, work their own schedule but they’re responsible to do all their own visits...* There are different expectations.
• There’s a lot of responsibilities that we’re going to have to take over that I’m not looking forward to because, like I said, we’re already looking at higher number of caseloads...and then, piling all the extra responsibilities. I am dreading it.

**Distrust of the new agency**

• So just based on what I know of their company, I don’t agree with how they run things.

• I’d be a little pissed off if I lost my job and now I have to go work for this other company that I may or may not agree with their mission.

**New policies and procedures**

• So, we’re going take our ways here over there with us because that’s just what we know and this is what’s worked best us and for our families. We’ll just try to create a hybrid and hope that doesn’t violate what they do with families.

• And you’re doing things your way for however long and then some other company comes in and they’re like no, you’re going to do it this way now. Like I don’t know that I would personally like that.

**New contractor coming in to an area**

• We really truly don’t believe that they know what kind of beast that they are taking over. The number of clients, the cases that are being transferred to them, all the services that we provide here that are not going to be available there....

• Well, they’ve already adjusted the model down here for my offices because they couldn’t find the license...we sat for months and months and months with zero applications. It’s not that we’re being picky...it’s that there is no one with a license that will apply to do this job. So, I said you can want your case managers to have 15 on their case load, but it isn’t going to happen down there.

• They’ve even asked...”what are some things that we do now and what do we think about doing it this way or this way?” And they’re giving us options and allowing us to be a part of that process, which I think helps with reducing the anxiety.

**Same provider for family preservation and foster care**

• I think it’s a good opportunity though to minimize the disconnect between the people who were working with our families before we started working with them.
• ...have such a big area that if you aren’t on good terms with the new agency, you’re pretty much out of a job in regards to child welfare. So, it kind of makes people feel like they’re walking on egg shells, because if they screw up they’re out of it. So, I think it feels almost like there’s a monopoly.

B. CHANGES IN PAY AND BENEFITS

Pay and benefits were also a major concern. Many workers mentioned that they were offered jobs at less pay. Many workers expected to experience a loss or discontinuity in health and retirement benefits.

Less pay with new contractor

• The new contractor wanted to start me out at $6,000 less a year than I’m currently making and much less personal/vacation time...because of the low salary offered, I have been forced to look for other employment.

• It’s like an insult too because we go to college and do all this. You’ve worked for an agency for several years and then they’re like we’ll pay you less than you make now. It’s just kind of an insult.

Loss or discontinuity in benefits

• Having worked for this agency for over six years and accruing over 400 hours of paid time off I was told that I either had to take the time off prior to the contract change, which would in my opinion adversely affect the children that I serve or lose all the time I had earned with no payment. This I found to be one of the most UNFAIR things with this contract change.

• I will, in a sense, be starting at a brand new company and will have to earn my benefits and it is not due to a personal decision but due to the change in the contract. I will have to earn my insurance back and I will have to earn the allowed vacation time that I have been receiving. Finally, I will also have to earn the ability to participate in a 401K at the new company which will take a year.
C. HIRING

The approach of the agencies that are hiring during a contract change has a huge influence on how workers manage their anxiety during the transition and on whether or not they remain in the field of child welfare. Workers noted that one agency was particularly proactive in interviewing and offering positions immediately after the contract announcements. Confusion in the hiring process contributed to a perception of disorganization. In some cases, it was unclear whether a worker’s particular position would be available with the new contractor. In other cases, workers received contingency letters that left them wondering if they actually had a position or not. A few workers questioned why they were not offered positions when they had worked in the field for a number of years with a positive employment record.

Waiting for an interview

- I think that’s the problem here retaining existing staff and getting enough staff to fill positions down in this area is that they waited so long to do it that people are just freaking out and bailing.

- In that transition you had the “Will I have a job? Will I not? I better start applying to other things”. And then, those good workers are getting picked off.

Knowing whether they would have a job

- Having the ______ interviews over here, having them do that was beneficial so that people could start to have some idea what...you know not knowing what’s going to happen with your future is a really big thing for people.

- They came in and interviewed and offered jobs to staff, I think it was within three weeks of contract announcements, which was a very smart move because they retained most of the staff.

Confusion in the hiring process

- The contract change has caused a lot of stress, and the new company is not helping as I had my interview with them almost 2 months ago and they are still saying they should know in the next two weeks.
• Everybody has got offered a job except one. And, normally she’s pretty good but you know it’s affecting her attitude because she doesn’t know if she’s getting a job or not...it’s almost to the point where it makes her want to walk out and quit and I don’t...you know, I don’t want to lose her.

D. COMMUNICATIONS

Workers and supervisors gave mixed reviews to communication going on at their agencies. Some staff talked about various means for information sharing such as brown bag lunch and conference calls with managers/administrators. Some of this was done early in the contract transition process but has since disappeared.

• When they knew for sure that we didn’t get the contract, we actually were told pretty quickly. I mean, that’s a good thing. Then they immediately had conference calls with everybody ...what are your concerns? What do you need to know?...I really thought that was great. Then we got absolutely no feedback.

• We do not hold bi-weekly office meetings anymore to catch up, we do not hear from our CEO anymore.

• There are rumors going around constantly. That’s a frustrating part for frontline staff because they don’t feel like they’re being communicated to as well as they’d like. It causes anxiety and meetings and stirs up stuff. Rumors about what kind of changes are being made, who’s going where.

• I think the information that we got...every little bit you get is helpful. The more you know the better you are. Keeping people as informed as possible is so, so important because it’s the fear of the unknown that just is really unsettling for people.

E. TRANSITION PERIOD AND PROCESS

There is a transition period for everyone involved in the contract change. Most workers and supervisors suggest the transition period takes from around 3 months to a year. Workers appreciated supports such as workshops on resume writing, unemployment benefits and retirement, job fairs and job counseling. However, getting necessary information was a major concern. Workers don’t know what information they are allowed to retain and what they need
to take to the new agency (many keep contact lists or other pertinent information outside the case files).

Workers described specific plans for the physical process of transferring files from accordions to notebooks or vice versa per the agency procedure. Staff volunteers and temporary staff plan to go to new offices after July 1 and walk new staff through procedures. However, it is less clear how information will be transmitted in the case transfer process. Some workers were concerned about how they would share information about cases or get to know new cases that they would receive. In one group, it was noted that there would be a “case study” overview completed on each case though no one in the group had seen this form yet. This group also mentioned that the new contractor planned to staff a small number of high needs cases with outgoing workers, though it was noted that the new agency picked the cases to be staffed whereas the current workers suggested that they might have identified different cases as “high needs”.

Transition time to new system

- Well, what it produces is just we’re all in a holding pattern for six months. And, if you went...if there’s a contract change every four years that means 25% of the contract is in a holding pattern.

- That’s what’s awful about it. It’s going to take us a year to get used to the new way that the agency does things and then in three years later, it’s all going to change again. You know, it’s just terrible.

- I’m tired of the families and children getting lost in the shuffle. Every time a contract changes it takes another six months or a year before the families and children even come close to getting the services that they need again because it takes that long you know, for the workers to catch up – no fault of their own, but I just takes that long for the transition to happen.

Workers’ preparation for the transition

- One of the things I’ve been wondering about is my email. I wonder if they’ll give us our email in advance so that we can start sending things over. My cell phone, I’m not looking forward to having to go through and write down all those numbers.
They’ve been meeting with us on a regular basis, biweekly, and they’ve also met with all the staff transitioning over. They did like a dinner thing. They already have an office and they’re answering a lot of our questions ahead of time. I think that’s helped [inaudible] not only for us, but for our families because we can say well we know this is where the office is going to be. They’re talking of trying to get our phone numbers all transferred over too – including the cell phone numbers of the workers.

Transition of cases

- **It drives me nuts that I can’t face-to-face staff my cases with someone.** There’s more than that file, you know what I’m saying? To go through the whole file, to know personally how this person is, what this person’s like, what’s their triggers, if they have drug and alcohol, if they have mental health issues…I can’t staff and tell someone. It’s just going on paper, which is nothing. You get some of it but not all of it.

- It would also have been nice to have direct involvement with staff at the new agency in order to discuss transition of my cases to someone else instead of going through multiple middle men.

- Assuming that you could go over July 1 and sit down and casually read through all your files that are this thick and absorb all that knowledge before you did one thing with the family...there’s so much that’s walked out the door already that’s never going to be able to be conveyed.

Cases staying with same worker or supervisor

- After I interviewed and I got the job, I do feel confident that at least some of those cases, those will remain with me...and that helped me lighten up a little bit.

- What’s going to happen with my families and how is the judge going to rule on these cases? **If they stay with my supervisor, that’s great. If they don’t, what happens?**

- **Why would you want to select and choose and then mix up the families and the workers when obviously it’s going okay?** If everything is going fine, I don’t understand why.
Preparing families

- I don’t like that I can’t tell my clients anything because I don’t know anything to tell them. That’s really frustrating. I’ve gotten I don’t know how many new kids lately and I don’t even think that those people know the contract change is coming because you don’t want to tell them when they’re in the middle of a crisis and their kid is just taken, hey by the way, in a month and a half it’s going to go from ___ to ____. To me, that’s not appropriate to tell them.

- I’ve been trying to prepare our families...Yes we’ve been told that you’ll be able to stay with us as workers. But, I can’t promise you...more than likely be a lapse in communication and a lapse in services until we can get everything transitioned over...we’re trying to be proactive with our families and prepare them and also service providers

Workers and supervisors identified a number of supports and strategies that agencies can implement to facilitate staff retention in the field during this time. The strategies that they suggested related to the transition are highlighted in the box below.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TRANSITION

Planning
★ Include frontline staff with agency leadership in planning the transition process
★ Require a more explicit transition plan that addresses both the workers and families. Provide details and benchmarks so that everyone knows what to expect or, at least, when to expect to know more.
★ Offer more meet and greets with the new agency (once a month suggested) for new staff to learn about the organization and their model.
★ Schedule new worker training throughout the transition period not at the end of June (if necessary, a short refresher could occur in June). This would allow workers to share what they learn about the new contractor with families on their caseload.
★ Try to limit other changes or new initiatives at the agency during this time.

Hiring
★ Recognize worker longevity through providing the same level of pay and benefits.

Transition of cases
★ Provide access to the new contractor’s computer system to set up meetings and visits prior to July 1.
★ Offer opportunities for workers to sit down face to face and share pertinent case information (e.g. tips for working with a particular family) that may or may not be in the file.
★ Use a case overview document that summarizes important contact information and family strengths and weaknesses.
★ Start taking new referrals prior to July 1 through subcontract arrangement.
★ Hire new staff a couple weeks in advance so workers at the current agency could have a phone conference on cases.
★ Move a few cases at a time.
★ Have a period of time where there is a brief overlap in contracts (two weeks suggested).

Accountability and oversight
★ Increase supervisory oversight during this time to ensure that case documentation is completed.
★ Engage a neutral third party to oversee the transition to facilitate communication between the agencies and ensure that necessary processes and procedures are being put into place.
★ Do not allow the agency losing the contract to cut essential staff and services prior to the end of the contract.
★ Suspend other DCF oversight, such as file audits, for a short period of time during the transition or provide additional support to meet these demands.
III. WORK DEMANDS

The year in which contracts are rebid is extra busy and stressful with several months devoted to many staff preparing the response to the RFP and the subsequent periods of waiting for the decision and ultimately responding to contract changes. With this extended period of tension workers were asked if they found themselves distracted from their casework due to the contract changes. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of responding workers reported being distracted, 19% reported that they may be distracted and 23% reported no.

Based on the frequency of comments, increased work demands was a result of the contract changes and is a significant stressor. Caseloads increased as a result of staffing changes. Additional roles and responsibilities were also expected of staff. While some workers lamented that no additional support was offered for increased workloads, others noted that their agencies brought back former staff or contractors as part-time employees to assist case managers in holding case plans and doing paperwork. In addition, they reported that floaters and trainer case managers were taking on caseloads and unlicensed staff were helping with tasks such as filing.

A. WORKLOAD / OVERLOAD

Increased workloads/caseloads as a result of layoffs or internal staffing changes

- **With people leaving our case loads are doubling and tripling**... I’ve got to make time for each, each family that I have on my own case load plus what I’m taking on. It’s starting to get to the point where we have to really triage which issues are more important than other family’s issues, which should never happen.

- **The cases don’t stop. We’re still getting new cases** every day and will be until June 28th when...that’s the last Friday...you’ve got all these new cases and people leaving. So now, not only are they covering cases, now they're getting new cases.

- **For our office, we came into contract change understaffed already. It’s more than you can do even when you strip it down to the bare bones** of what has to be done.

- **People have been hired but not officially starting so they’re trying to do two jobs.**
Taking on new roles and additional responsibilities

- With the contract changes, there have been many positions that have ended, which has then led to those job responsibilities falling upon us as the case manager. I am currently doing my job, plus the aftercare, independent living, adoption, and kinship specialist work. That all is a huge burden upon us - the workers that are left. It is highly unreasonable for this agency to expect us to carry on the same case loads, which are approximately 26 kids per team, in addition to those added responsibilities.

- Transportation, we’re getting fewer and fewer assistance with transportation because those drivers are looking at different employment or dwindling off. So, workers are running up and down the road…traveling six to seven hours as they’ve never had to do before.

- Right now I think me and my support worker are sitting at 40 some kids, if you count aftercare. Then, we can times that by two because you have two parents for every kid. Even if you can’t find them, we still have to log it. On top of, now they made it a requirement that we have all the case plans done that are due in July and all the court reports that are due in July by June.

No additional support for increased workload

- I think the frustration when this first started, when we knew the contract was changing, that the agency chose to let a lot of staff go... they should be able to provide the services for the year and not start looking at ways to cut.

- I think a lot of our staff feel dumped on. Staff who are moving positions, we can’t give them any new referrals...then we say hey, this person’s leaving and we need you to step up and take these cases – less people to do that. We don’t have a solution.

- So your team is down workers and they just split those caseloads among the two or three that are left. There’s no additional support.

B. CHANGE IN HOW WORK IS DONE

Workers and supervisors both provided specific examples of how contract changes impact their approach to doing the work. Some examples given were transferring cases without a typical face-to-face staffing, logging case notes without the usual detail and not being able to
provide an extra phone call to a family or a teacher. Supervisors also discussed not having enough time to adequately train new workers. Focus group participants discussed workers’ reluctance to exert extra effort on new cases and their strategies to prioritize and manage work demands.

Focus group participants also discussed the impact of the contract changes on the progress and outcomes of cases. In some instances, workers felt that children and families lives are put on hold or set back as a result of the contract changes, though workers also described situations where permanency was expedited against their recommendations so that a family might avoid having to transition to a new agency. While workers expressed some concerns about the impact on case outcomes, they also felt there were positive differences in how work is done.

**Reluctance to put in extra effort or make decisions on new cases**

- Beginning a transfer case and knowing you only have a month and a half or a month or you know a few weeks, and even with new referrals that are coming in – because we’re still getting new referrals – it’s hard to meet the families and go okay, I’m your case manager but only for a short about of time. You know, that trust isn’t built.

- Unfortunately some families are being put on the back burner because they’re stabilized in a case and we have to deal with the problems that are transferred over to us. Some cases that are getting transferred over to us, the workers may not have been doing the best work that they could because knowing that they were leaving, it’s like I’m going to do the bare minimum to keep my job until I go somewhere else.

- It’s basically like a new referral being transferred to us for families that have been in the system for six months to a year. Come to find out, nothing really has been done with the case and a lot of stuff has slipped through the cracks. Now we have to clean up and apologize for their lack of work, their lack of commitment to the family. That is the biggest stress...It’s like getting a case from square one.

**Prioritizing and managing work demands**

- And we have to make decisions at the team level about prioritizing because we can’t do everything. I don’t think it’s fair to force a worker to make decisions about what they do and what they don’t. I feel like our agency should have taken some stands about okay,
we can’t do everything… I go around, office by office every night before I leave and say, do all your babies have a place to sleep?

- Expectations were ‘do anything and be everything’ and at this point it is…the expectation is make sure your kids are safe.

- I’m taking a lot more work home with me. I’m doing more reading and reports on my own time. It seems like more and more of that is expected before July 1.

- I’ve taken vacation days just so that I can come in and do the court reports that need to be due and the case plans that are overdue.

Work quality suffering as a result of increased demands on time

- I pride myself on quality service to my clients. Since the contract change we have been severely understaffed and overloaded and my work quality has declined greatly. This causes extra stress for me due to lowering my expectation for myself.

- I know when we started this process everybody had this, okay, we want to continue to do our best and provide for these kids the best we can and we want our files to be in order because when we pass them over we want them to look good. When we got them from previous contract changes, the files weren’t in good shape. Now all my staff are like well, now you know why the files were crappy. Yes, we do. There’s not enough people to get all the stuff done…things are falling through the crack document wise because you forget, because you don’t have time, because there’s so much other stuff to do.

- The cases don’t stop…so you’ve got people who…they’re used to doing A work. They’re now being expected to do C and D work to get through.

Workers feeling inadequate as a result of how work is done

- I feel like it also reflects poorly on us because it looks like we’re just bad workers and that’s not really the case. It’s that no one could possibly do this well right now.

- I have to do the bare minimum to get through the week and get through the day to get to the next day. So, you know, it’s very crisis oriented. It’s not quality work. A lot of my clients that I’ve had for years and years are so confused. They don’t understand. They think I hate them. The new families think I am a terrible worker because I am not
providing quality work …I put a lot of personal pressure on myself because of that. So I’m miserable by the time I get home from work.

- It’s the reputation of the agency also that is being dragged down by us being overwhelmed and not being able to provide quality work.

Case progress and outcomes

- The previous worker isn’t available for us to ask these questions. We have to go back and redo all the work and find out what service providers they did have and reorder reports. It’s basically puts the family back another three to four months because we have to start over. It hurts the case.

- You don’t want to make any major case decisions probably within the first three months. You’re not looking at terminating rights. You’re not looking at finishing an adoption or going through an adoption because you don’t know that family. You don’t want to put your name and your license on it till you feel the comfortable.

Positive differences in how work is done

- I think the staff are learning to become a little bit more independent because they know that they may not be able to go talk to a supervisor and get to them right away. So, they start coming up with ideas on their own, which is good.

- People seem to be more networking more and working together because they have to…they’re helping each other out a lot more. That’s what I’ve seen in our office.

Again, workers and supervisors identified a number of supports and strategies that agencies can implement to facilitate staff retention during contract changes. The strategies that they suggested related to meeting or managing work demands are highlighted in the box below.
SUPPORTS FOR MEETING/MANAGING WORK DEMANDS

★ Availability of supervisors

*Our supervisor really has stepped in to help out with whatever we needed.* And, that’s been the biggest help, is you know you have a crisis and you’ve got to be in two places at once and both of you are busy with other commitments.

You know, they’ve been really **helpful and just reassuring**. If you do need to vent or you do need to...I need some expertise. I need to know what to do here because it’s a new family, I just got them, and I have a month left to work with them. You know, what do I do with them? *They’ve been there and they know that and they can help guide you.*

★ Continuity in supervision

I’m just happy that our supervisor is coming over. That will contribute to continuity because *our supervisor knows our cases*. Rather than someone who may or may not have experience, that has no idea what cases are like, what we’ve been doing, and may or may not have the experience in the child welfare field that all of us is going to have.

★ Team and co-worker support

I have a great, great team that I work with. I’m going to miss them dearly since I’m not going over, and some of them aren’t. **The only way to really survive in this is to have that environment that supports you.** If you don’t, especially in this time when it does become hectic and it does become overwhelming, all you want to do is just sit and pull your hair out because you don’t know what next to do because you have so much already to do.

*You lean on your team members* and they’re able to be there and help you out with whatever needed – to go pick up a kid or take him to therapy or move placements or you know whatever the case may be.

★ Not all strategies were helpful

*They’ve had two clean up days...where we were all supposed to stay in the office and document and get filing done. I don’t have time to stay in the office all day.*

★ Hire support or clerical staff to ensure that case files are complete and up-to-date with current school records, dental records, etc.
V. EMOTIONAL IMPACT AND STRESS

Workers report a variety of emotional reactions to all of the changes occurring during this period of contract rebidding. Workers’ level of perceived stress was assessed in the current survey as well as the one conducted two years previously. The stress scale assessed emotional reactions and burnout related to workers jobs. Results showed that workers report significantly more stress during this period of transition than two years ago (t = 4.25, p = .00). Focus group participants reaffirmed feeling an increase in stress and its impact on their physical and mental health.

A. EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Anger, grief and loss

• Everything from tears to anger…mad, shocked. It was…it’s still…it still can be very emotional depending on the day and what you’re talking about.

• I feel for my team, after getting over the initial shock, there was of course some anger. We kind of went through that grief and loss process and then eventually some acceptance…not only how do we make sure our families that we work with are taken good care of, and our personal families are also greatly impacted.

Uncertainty about Job/Future

• We don't know who will be the next people asked to be laid off, so it has you not knowing what is next.

• With a contract change there is a lot of fear. You don't know for sure if you have a job.

Exhaustion and burnout

• ...we’re just numb to all the changes.

• It’s very emotionally draining…I don’t want to be here anymore. There’s just too much work.

• ...you’ve got workers that are leaving because they’re taking different positions or come July 1st they know they’re not going to be here...either workers are gone because they’re trying to use up all their vacation time or just emotionally they’re checked out.
• I’m **burned out** and **exhausted**. I’m **annoyed** and **bitter** that I had to go back to a job that does not highlight my better skill set, but I did not want to change agencies and lose all my PTO and flexibility in my schedule so I can continue functioning successfully as a single mother.

**Work morale**

And you know, it’s just frustrating every day at work that you **run into somebody that’s done, checked out, pissed off**. It’s frustrating.

The worst part of the contract change is the **low morale/negative attitudes** around the office.

**B. STRESS**

**Increase in stress**

• I’ve never felt just **so overwhelmed and stressed**. I mean, when they told me I had two caseloads, I freaked out.

• **One issue is stress of the unknown** – people aren’t sure who they will be working with or for. I think staff are excited but also a little scared.

• **I don’t like my job anymore.** It’s too stressful. I dread coming to work every day now.

**Additional Pressures/Stressors**

• **Because like the six months leading up to the contract it was we have to do everything perfect and if you don’t it’s going to be the reason we lose the contract.** There’s just a lot of pressure.

• A lot of it is our **court systems aren’t being very nice**...they’re just being really, really nasty to workers and making it difficult. So there’s workers that are like you know, I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t have any staff here that are transferring over.

• **I thought it was hard at the time before we knew to hear bad things about our company**...like they’d say to us, we hope your company doesn’t get the contract. **As a worker who has no control over that, that was really hard to hear.**
• I have to make sure the homes want to stay because without homes where is foster care department? So, I am fighting for my job. The more homes I lose, the less they need me.

Impact on physical and mental health

• I was freaking out because I had been under so much stress that day because my supervisor and support worker were on vacation. I had everything by myself. I went to the doctor and they were like your blood pressure is sky high...I’ve never had blood pressure problems ever in the past.

• That workday, that should have been a vacation day, was super-duper stressful. The next day, I thought I was having a heart attack. I went to the emergency room. I was admitted for a day or so for observation and it was all stress related.

• The toll it takes on your physical and mental health as a worker is just I think something that a lot of my staff has come to the decision that they are not ready for just yet, or no longer willing to sacrifice at this point.

Finally, workers and supervisors identified a number of supports and strategies that agencies can implement to help workers manage the emotional impact and stress of contract changes. These strategies are highlighted in the box below.
SUPPORTS FOR MANAGING EMOTIONAL IMPACT AND STRESS

★ Everyone at the agency can help

Support here, we all get it. **We all understand what we’re going through.** I think it’s just **we’re in this together.** And, I think the people that are left right now...we’re just trying to support everyone we possibly can, whether that’s a peer or somebody on another team. And, trying to be as happy and as positive as possible.

★ Supervisors are a huge source of support

I mean honestly, I attribute a lack of anxiety in all this to my supervisor. I mean, our supervisor has been wonderful through all of it. And, I think she’s the reason maybe we’re all doing okay.

**My supervisor really advocated for our team members to stay on her team** because she knew that a lot of us would not be comfortable switching teams. I’m really thankful and very appreciative that she advocated like she did to make sure that our team wasn’t changed at all.

★ Supervisors share previous experience with contract changes

So my supervisor has been through contract change before....she has **encouraged us to stay positive** through this and has told us that she made it through and that it turned out for the better.

**Our supervisor has been real helpful. She has gone through a change. She’s been able to kind of help us...you know if we’re frustrated we can go in and just kind of unload on her and she can understand** that. So, I think we’ve had that level of support.

Other ideas suggested:

★ Offer mental health resources
★ Hold staff-oriented activities like potluck lunches
Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

Kansas Child Welfare Contract Change Study

Welcome

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by the Kansas Workforce Initiative with the University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

The School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. We are conducting this study to better understand how child welfare workers experience changes in Kansas child welfare contracts. This will entail your completion of a questionnaire.

The questionnaire is expected to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The content of the questionnaires should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life. Although participation may not benefit you directly, we believe that the information obtained from this study will help us gain a better understanding of your work experiences. Your participation is solicited, although strictly voluntary. Your choice to participate or not participate will not affect your employment. Every effort will be made by researchers to preserve your confidentiality. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, please feel free to contact us by phone or mail. Completion of the survey indicates your willingness to participate in this project and that you are at least age 18.

If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, contact

Human Subjects Committee
Lawrence Campus (HSCL)
University of Kansas
2385 Irving Hill Road
Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563
(785) 864-7429
HSCL@ku.edu

Michelle Levy
Principal Investigator
KU School of Social Welfare
210 Watkins Home
Lawrence, KS 66045
(785)864-2291
mlevy@ku.edu
We are interested in your job experiences as the Kansas Child Welfare system goes through contract changes. **This is a pre-change survey.** We will follow-up with you again in early September. This survey contains several short scales. It is important that you answer each item so that we obtain an accurate picture of your experiences.

Please enter your survey number below. You have been given a number so that we can keep track of responses. Your number will not be disclosed or associated with your name in this survey.

How many child welfare contract changes have you gone through?
My position will be (has been) eliminated due to the contract changes.  
I will / did change agencies due to contract changes.  
Do you find yourself distracted from your casework due to the contract changes? 
Yes          No          Don't know

Please indicate your intentions to stay in child welfare. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- It is not likely that I will look for a job outside child welfare in the next year
- I seldom think about quitting my job
- The changes in the child welfare contracts have caused me to question my choice of child welfare as a career
- I will probably look for another position within child welfare within the next year

How long do you intend to stay in the field of child welfare?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.
I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for
If the values of this organization were different, I would not be as attached to the organization
My attachment to this organization is primarily based on the similarity of my values and those represented by the organization
Since joining this organization, my personal values and those of the organization have become more similar
What this organization stands for is important to me
I feel a sense of "ownership" for this organization rather than just being an employee

Please respond to each of the following items regarding your satisfaction with your job.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job.
- Most days I am enthusiastic about my job.
- Each day of work seems like it will never end.
- I find real enjoyment in my work.
- I consider my job rather unpleasant.
How often did you have any of the following experiences during the last month?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once in a Great While</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling depressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being emotionally exhausted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling &quot;burned out&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling rundown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being &quot;wiped out&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being physically exhausted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please respond to each item regarding your feelings about your job.

The most important things that happen to me involve my present job.
To me, my job is only a small part of who I am.
I am very much involved personally in my job.
I live, eat and breathe my job.
Most of my interests are centered in my job.
I have very strong ties with my present job which would be very difficult to break.
Usually I feel detached from my job.
Most of my personal life goals are job-related.
I consider my job to be very central to my existence.
I like to be absorbed in my job most of the time.

What is your **primary** job responsibility?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Working with birth parents</th>
<th>Working with children</th>
<th>Working with foster parents</th>
<th>Other (specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What is your highest degree?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Type</th>
<th>Less than Bachelors</th>
<th>Bachelors in social work degree</th>
<th>Other Bachelors</th>
<th>Masters in Social Work degree</th>
<th>Other masters</th>
<th>Doctoral</th>
<th>Other (specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

How many years have you worked in child welfare (child protection, family preservation, foster care and adoption)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Less than 1 year</th>
<th>1 to 3 years</th>
<th>3 to 5 years</th>
<th>5 to 10 years</th>
<th>more than 10 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

How long have you worked for this agency (in years) ________________

What is your current job title? ______________________________________

We will contact you again in a few months. Please provide a non-work email address so that we can follow-up after July 1.

_________________________________________________________ If you do not have a non-work email, you can get one at http://new.mail.yahoo.com/addresses

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about your work experiences with the contract changes, please use this space:

What is your age?

What is your gender? Female Male

Please select the category that matches your racial/ethnic identity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>African American-Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White / Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Other (specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

31
Appendix B: Contract Change Focus Group Questions

Tell us about your experience in going through the contract changes.

Follow-up questions:
  • How have the changes in child welfare contracts affected you at work?
  • How has the change affected how you feel about what you do?
  • Has the contract change made an impact on your plans to continue to work in child welfare?

What has helped you during this time?

Follow-up questions:
  • What has your agency done to help during this time?
  • What has your supervisor done that has been helpful?
  • Who or what else has helped?
  • What would be helpful?