

APSAC, Social Work, and Child Welfare

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Social work and child welfare professionals have been the backbone of APSAC's membership since its inception. This article considers their intersection with APSAC and traces where they have journeyed together since 1987, starting with the Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Partnerships, then moving to other child welfare accomplishments related to Title IV-E as well as other legislation and lawsuits. Finally, the article explores more areas of joint accomplishment along with APSAC's role in (a) responding to child sexual abuse, (b) emphasizing the need for evidence-based practice (EBP), (c) sharing membership and evidence with other EBP organizations, (d) recognizing the role of culture in working with consumers of child welfare and social work services, and (e) taking on the importance of workable caseloads.

Many professionals consider social work the basic orientation of most child welfare workers. In fact, many such workers call themselves social workers, yet fewer than 30% of child welfare workers have professional social work degrees (BSW/MSW), according to a report by the Social Work Policy Institute (2010). The same report noted that child welfare agencies have had long-standing difficulties in recruiting and retaining professionally trained staff. In an attempt to remedy this, since the late 1980s, states and public agencies have partnered with university social work programs to draw down a specific training provision of federal Title IV-E funds to stipend both bachelor- and master-level social work students, preparing them for careers in child welfare.

It should be noted that the bulk of Title IV-E funds goes to the states to support services for children who have been removed from their homes. This is one of the last federal entitlements to the states; rather than risk the dismantling of it, many states and communities have sought what has become known as Title IV-E waivers to obtain permission to use these funds for services to assist children in their own homes. Several waivers have demonstrated promising success, and cost savings have been applied to local discretionary programs, including large-scale prevention efforts (Casey Family Programs, 2009). APSAC members have been involved in crafting waivers and evaluating their outcomes.

Different Title IV-E training partnership models emerged across the states, many of which provided or coordinated agency-based, state-of-the-art training programs and funded additional practice-based research or curriculum development. The largest among them is the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), which has grown to include 20 schools of social work. As of June 2011, nearly 4,400 graduates have started work

in California's child welfare system since the program began in 1990 (CalSWEC, 2011). In California—as well as in Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Washington, Oklahoma, and other states—APSAC members have been engaged with Title IV-E Training Partnerships as deans, program coordinators, curriculum developers, trainers, and contractors (NASW, 2003; NASW, 2004).

Nationally, Title IV-E Training Partnerships have been found to improve both worker retention and worker competence; they are considered key to addressing deficiencies in the child welfare workforce as well as meeting the goals of child safety, permanence, and well-being (NASW, 2003). The last three goals are the mantra and central focus of the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA), which became law in 1997. This groundbreaking legislation drives the current child welfare system's shortened timelines to establishing a permanent home for each child, insistence on safety first, and facilitation of the child being seen in a more holistic way: happy, thriving, and nurtured rather than simply abuse free. ASFA also mandated that states report specific data and be held accountable in program reviews. APSAC member Richard Gelles took a congressional sabbatical from his university position in 1996 and was instrumental in the crafting and the passage of this Act. In recognition of this and his other research, APSAC gave him its Career Achievement Award in 1999.

The ASFA legislation, Title IV-E Training Partnerships, and Title IV-E waivers have combined to dramatically lower the number of children in foster care. For example, only 408,000 of our nation's children were in foster care in 2010 compared with 662,000 during the previous fiscal year (AFCARS data as cited in Casey Family Programs, 2010). This one-year drop is so dramatic that it is hard to believe it was the result of legislation passed more than 10 years earlier, but the cumulative effects, coupled with other initiatives, have coincided with many fewer children remaining in out-of-home care.

APSAC has served as a crucible for ideas that have launched important changes leading to this impressive achievement. APSAC has also provided a home base for child welfare and social work practitioners since its beginning, with conference sessions and *APSAC Advisor* articles consistently focusing on topics related to their practice. Moreover, the *Advisor* was consciously conceived to be useful to the practitioner: short articles, interviews, and commentaries without an abundance of footnotes and citations. APSAC membership rates were tied to income levels to specifically encourage child welfare and social work participation. The initial APSAC Board

meetings reflected this focus on needing to target the organization to meet the interests of direct service professionals, widely recognized as child welfare and social work practitioners (David Corwin, personal communication, January 25, 1988).

As a measure of this success, the two largest categories of APSAC membership (self-identified) are Child Protective Services (241) and Social Work (561) (APSAC, 2012). Through its early publication of practice guidelines, APSAC has promulgated concise, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed assistance that is at the heart of the child welfare worker's daily practice—from *Psychosocial Evaluation of Suspected Sexual Abuse in Children* to *Psychosocial Evaluation of Suspected Psychological Maltreatment in Children and Adolescents*. Lucy Berliner, MSW, took the leadership role in chairing both editions of APSAC's guidelines on child sexual abuse.

As APSAC expanded its role in encouraging and expanding evidence-based multidisciplinary practice, child welfare and social work have also moved in this direction, but the process has not been without challenges. For example, a colleague and I presented "Training the Trainers on Evidence-Based Interviewing Techniques" at the APSAC Colloquium in Hollywood in 2004. As we went around the room for introductions and to determine why participants were there, we noted sadly that the majority thought we were going to help them gather fact-pattern evidence to build a better case in criminal or dependency courts. At the 2010 APSAC Colloquium in New Orleans, a team of social workers and expert interviewers (Kathleen Faller, Linda Cordesco Steel, and Debra Nelson Gardell) presented the "Evidence Base for Extended Forensic Evaluations in Child Sexual Abuse Cases"; every seat was taken and no such confusion arose.



Since the late 1980s and probably at the behest of lawsuits and liability issues, child welfare has moved, albeit slowly at first, into this new territory of evidence-based and multidisciplinary practice. For example, multivictim, multiperpetrator child sexual abuse allegations in that decade led child welfare to move into collaborative arrangements that the emerging Child Advocacy Center (CAC) movement provided. Today, every state has at least one CAC and many communities have several; all require child welfare representation for full membership (NCA, 2008). Many APSAC members were integral to the success of this CAC movement.

APSAC members have taken leadership positions in other innovative child welfare practice trends as well. The largest public child welfare agency in the country, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), has become a more trauma-informed child welfare and evidence-based system, partially due to a number of local and national initiatives, including the grantees, affiliates, and learning communities developed from the National Children's Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants at four sites in the Los Angeles area (Friend, 2009). The NCTSN has raised the standard of care and services provided to traumatized children, adolescents, and their families. DCFS has recently settled a lawsuit and has taken a leadership role in retooling its training, practice, and quality assurance to ensure that it is meeting the mental health needs of children and families under its protection. This new practice will stand as a model for the many states facing lawsuits concerning child welfare's ability to meet children's mental health needs. This agency has integrated the use of the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for child welfare (CEBC) into its new mental health training, using this Web-based resource that allows child welfare (and other) practitioners to access the latest research on effective interventions. APSAC members have anchored the successful NCTSN, participated in its grant network, created the CEBC, and provided training to meet DCFS clients' mental health needs.

Social work has also struggled with the quest toward evidence-based and multidisciplinary practice. The profession was long immersed in theory, unresolvable ethical debates, and an obsession with social work-specific interventions (Thyer, 2008). With the establishment of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWAR) in 1994, the profession and its educators have reflected a new nexus of understanding that, because social problems are not discipline-specific, interdisciplinary evidence-based approaches are the likely solutions. Members of SSWAR have served as editorial review board members of *Child Maltreatment* and the *APSAC Advisor* and have published in both venues. Indeed, social workers in the United States and Canada who are also members of APSAC and SSWAR have played an important role in the leadership and membership of the Campbell Collaboration, an organization dedicated to transparent, systematic evidence reviews that we hope will bridge the research-to-practice chasm.

APSAC's presidents have included five social workers: Jon Conte, Charles Wilson, Diane De Panfillis, Veronica Abney, and currently, Ronald Hughes. Hughes and APSAC member (and former *APSAC Advisor* editor in chief) Judith Rycus are coauthors of the *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, the most widely published child welfare textbook in the history of the social work profession. In addition, they have developed the Pro Humanitate Literary Awards, recognizing outstanding books and scholarly articles with subject matter important to child welfare or social work practice. Hughes and Rycus were among several APSAC leaders who were invited to attend the first Russian-American Child Welfare Forum in August 2011, where the Russians collaborated with Americans to develop their child welfare system.

APSAC has called upon its experts to contribute to three editions of the *APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment*. Both a textbook and *New York Times* bestseller, it covers all aspects of child maltreatment. It has been described on Amazon.com as the most comprehensive resource for individuals working within the child welfare system and for students preparing to work in that field. This handbook has probably been one of APSAC's greatest accomplishments and recruitment tools because it has launched social work and child welfare students into an appreciation of interdisciplinary and research-based practice.

Future directions for APSAC in meeting the needs of child welfare and social work professionals include doing more to raise the importance of culture and workable caseloads. Social work and child welfare professionals without exception respond that these are important areas to explore. Please see the article by Lisa Fontes (this issue) for more details about APSAC's efforts that have given this issue the prominence it has today. One of the most important dilemmas facing child welfare and social work today is the overrepresentation of African American and Native American children on child welfare caseloads. APSAC has done more than any other organization to raise the flag of culture when dealing with consumers of child welfare or social work services. We will need a concerted campaign to unravel this further, but the ball started rolling with APSAC. Regarding worker caseloads, the Council on Accreditation (COA, 2008) has guidelines for human services organizations in both public and private sectors. Accreditation is designed to be a framework within which an organization can reliably measure a variety of its outcomes and achievements—with confidence that the results are valid. Undergoing the accreditation process and abiding by its recommendations does result in lowering caseloads.

Given serious client needs and these difficult economic times, workable caseloads may seem like an impossible goal. Could a solution be within reach utilizing cost savings from Title IV-E waivers? Might this build on the work of the Title IV-E Training Partnerships? Would APSAC be able to bring its focus on evidence-based multidisciplinary practice to a cost benefit

analysis? Could APSAC do for this issue what it did for cultural diversity? With APSAC's increased recognition as the leading national organization supporting professionals who serve children and families affected by child maltreatment and violence, it may be able to take this on. The real question is: Can we afford not to?

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