The Preservice: A Key First Step

The first step the traveler takes on her journey is often the most important. Taken in the wrong spirit or in the wrong direction, the first step can make the entire journey longer and harder than it has to be.

For the hundreds who set off each year on the journey to become North Carolina child welfare workers, the “first step” is attending a course called Child Welfare in North Carolina.

Commonly known as the “Preservice,” this 12-day curriculum is designed to give new child welfare social workers a clear idea of their destination—skilled social work practice that helps families and children—and to equip them with the basic knowledge and skills they will need to get through the first part of their trip.

Structure of Preservice

To achieve these goals, the Preservice is structured in the following way:

Week 1: Participants gain an understanding of the roles, mission, vision, and responsibilities involved in child welfare. Various intervention techniques are introduced to engage and empower families to achieve a safe, nurturing, permanent home for their children.

Week 2: Participants are made aware of the day-to-day operations in a county department of social services and the philosophical and legal basis for their work in child welfare. Participants learn to identify physical and behavioral indicators of abuse and neglect and apply this information to the continuum of child welfare. The process and practice of CPS intake, functional assessments, risk assessments and investigative assessments are introduced. continued →
Experiential Learning Week: Participants return to their home agencies to apply on the job the concepts they have learned in the classroom. It is suggested that workers contact community resources and shadow experienced workers during this week.

Week 3: Participants are made aware of the placement and adoption process and its potential effects upon children. An overview of family services case plans (A–D) is given, and visitation plans are introduced and practiced. Participants learn to identify strategies involved with case closure.

What Supervisors Say About Preservice

Child Welfare in North Carolina may be the first step in a long professional journey. Yet supervisors are the ones charged with making sure new social workers reach their final destination of professional competence. Because of their multifaceted relationship with new workers—they are part guide, part mentor, and part boss—supervisors have many opportunities to assess Preservice’s effectiveness.

Therefore, between October 1999 and March 2000 the Training Partnership’s Elizabeth Lindsey conducted a series of focus groups with North Carolina supervisors to find out what they thought about Preservice. In all, 36 supervisors participated.

Supervisors told Lindsey that although Preservice was beneficial, they felt there was room for improvement. They followed up by giving many suggestions for improving Preservice.

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1. Risk Assessment. Supervisors wanted new workers to have a clearer understanding that risk assessment is a process, not a form, and that there is a clear connection between risk assessment and case planning.

2. Case Planning. Supervisors wanted new workers to come out of Preservice knowing how to use and fill out the Family Case Plan. Supervisors also stated that they thought the training should emphasize case planning time frames and should be tied to the standards for the biennial review.

3. Interviewing. Supervisors wanted to see more content on intentional interviewing, information gathering, and follow-up questions and probes.

4. Forms. Supervisors wanted workers to have a more thorough knowledge of the different forms they will use.

On the plus side, supervisors felt that Child Welfare in North Carolina does a good job of giving trainees a broad overview of the mission, mandate, and purpose of the child welfare system. In addition, they felt the course succeeds in giving new workers a beginning level of knowledge about policies regarding confidentiality, clients’ rights, and work deadlines.

Lindsey adds, “Supervisors noted that training sends a positive message to workers and that they often return from training with a sense of pride in the work they are undertaking and a sense of commitment to that work.”

The Partnership’s Response

The Training Partnership that delivers the Preservice is committed to ensuring this course is an effective first step for new workers. To this end, this focus group feedback, as well as input from trainees, trainers, and other sources, will be taken into account as the Partnership embarks on a revision of the Preservice.

Supervisors and new workers can expect to see a revised version of this course by late spring 2001.