

UNDERSTANDING ATTRITION AND PREDICTING EMPLOYMENT DURATIONS
OF FORMER STAFF IN A PUBLIC SECTOR SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION

By

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Introduction

State social service organizations are continually tasked to do more with less. Unlike private sector human service organizations, which are also faced with limited financial resources and higher demand than their capacity can supply, the public sector faces accommodating ever-changing policy and its related bureaucracy. Federal policies for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, and Medicaid over the past decade have devolved responsibility down to states, increasing state discretion to implement programs while congruently increasing pressure on states to meet performance outcomes for the obtainment of federal financing (Nathan & Gais, 1999). Hence, state social service organizations (SSSOs) have had to accommodate new expectations intrinsically tied to performance-based financing, such as instituting better client-monitoring and improving performance outcomes. The shift towards increasing state and local responsibility in the public sector has appeared to create a ripple effect where studies have observed a layering on of responsibilities to front-line staff (Nathan & Gais, 1999; Lurie & Riccucci, 2003).

In this context, where public sector social service employees are continually being asked to “do more,” the risk of burn-out and staff turnover is daunting. Ironically, the increase in workload is justified by the need to pull down federal dollars; however, high staff turnover is a significant financial hemorrhage for organizations. Human resource analysts generally suggest that the cost of replacing an employee equals one-third to one-half of the exiting employee’s annual salary. Agencies incur heavy costs through executing administrative functions related to termination, as well as recruitment, hiring, and training replacements (Blankertz & Robinson, 1997; Braddock & Mitchell, 1992).

Struggling in an environment of depleted resources, public social service organizations can little afford the direct and indirect costs linked with high turnover rates. To buffer one's organization against these costs, investing in the retention of high performing employees rather than replacing weak performers is often more efficacious (Abelson & Baysinger, 1984; Boudreau & Berger, 1985; Cascio, 1982).

High staff turnover has critical implications for organizational effectiveness and human well-being. Workers struggle to give quality services and suffer along with clients when positions are vacant or filled by inexperienced personnel due to attrition (Powell & York, 1992). New frontline staff in most welfare agencies cannot carry a full caseload during an initial probationary period, and veteran staff must carry heavier caseloads to compensate. High turnover rates can also discourage workers from remaining in or even entering the field (Geurts, Schaufeli, & Rutte, 1999). Ultimately, this drain on human capital and organizational effectiveness hits service recipients the hardest. High turnover rates disrupt continuity of care, impair workers' abilities to perform critical case management functions, and potentially reinforce client dissatisfaction and mistrust of the system. This study explores the reasons that 132 former staff from a southeastern state social service organization (SSSO) administering welfare, Medicaid, and Food Stamps programs opted to leave their jobs. Next, the study examines what factors predicted the durations of employment of these staff. First, however, studies illuminating the consequences of federal devolution of responsibility to state social service organizations will be reviewed, followed by factors identified in the literature that relate to employee attrition in human service samples.

Devolution of Social Services and Consequences for the Workforce

Over the past decade, state and local public sector agencies that administer Medicaid and TANF have experienced major policy changes under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 and the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. These changes devolved federal financial responsibility and implementation discretion down to states (Brodkin, 1997; Center on Budget Policy Priorities, 2006; Smith et al., 2006). State public sector departments are often managing the Food Stamps program as well. Participation in this program has climbed from around 17 million people in 2000 to close to 26 million in 2005 with federal financial incentives being tied to state performance (United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, 2007). Performance is typically measured by policy compliance. For Food Stamps, a total of \$30 million was granted to states with the highest accuracy rates (Smith et al., 2006; USDA, 2005). For TANF, states must meet their Work Participation Rates— a ratio of those participating in work-related activities to those who are not— to pull down their maximum amount of federal funding. The shift to performance-based federal financing has also been accompanied by greater discretion and autonomy at the state and local levels, where SSSOs have received the policy signals that meeting performance outcomes will be necessary to obtain federal dollars but their strategy for doing this has been unleashed (or at least, put on a looser leash) (Nathan & Gais, 1999). The implication of these policy trends is that major organizational change is necessary to optimize the use of new flexibility to meet federal performance measures.

Many state organizations, however, have undergone reactive changes, whereby their systems or procedures have been incrementally modified in reaction to new policies

(Burke, 2002; Porras & Robertson, 1992). Typically, these modifications are additive, meaning that work related to meeting policy requirements is being added onto the pre-existing organizational structures and systems, resulting in increased workloads and responsibilities for the workforce. Lurie and Riccucci (2003) conducted interviews, document collection, and observations of caseworker-client interactions in welfare-administering organizations across four states (Georgia, Michigan, New York, and Texas). They found that frontline staff in these SSSOs felt their jobs had not changed since TANF implementation with the exception of additional paperwork. Other research has similarly found minimal or no changes in case workers behavior due to policy changes (Meyers, Glaser & Mac Donald, 1998; Sandfort, 1999). Beckerman and Fontana (2001) conducted 62 telephone interviews focusing on case manager's understanding of their responsibilities under Florida's TANF program. Although they reported an initial culture shift towards TANF aims, the culture change was "incomplete and uneven" and "role ambiguity and frustration about job demands among case managers were evident" (p. 45).

As Brodtkin (1997) found in her study of two Illinois Department of Public Aid regions during their operation of JOBS, which foreshadowed the Welfare-to-Work program, caseworkers were placed in precarious positions where they utilized their discretion to develop practices that enabled them to cope with the difficult conditions under which they had to operate. Being more dependent on the organization than their clients, caseworker practices reflected the bureaucratic values of the organization, which included fulfilling quotas, accuracy of work, and that "services" were met if the paperwork was complete. Riccucci, Meyers, Lurie, and Han (2004) surveyed 256

frontline staff and found that staff still believed that eligibility determination was the most important goal three years after the 1996 welfare reform. Hence, although devolutionary trends grant increased discretion down to states, which in turn reaches the frontlines, state and local organizations have not appeared to foster cultural and structural changes necessary to enable frontline staff to utilize their new-found discretion to the benefit of themselves, their clients, or their organization. In fact, goal incongruence between discouraging welfare receipt and helping clients with needs led to confusion and demoralization in case workers (Meyers, Riccucci, & Lurie, 2001).

To summarize, staff report feeling discouraged with the organizational culture that espouses helping clients but continues to value and reward staff based on accurate and expeditious people-processing (Beckerman & Fontana, 2001; Brodtkin, 1997; Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996; Lurie & Riccucci, 2003; Meyers, Riccucci, & Lurie, 2001). These studies highlight the importance of exploring “soft” organizational factors—the cultural elements related to employee’s feeling valued, recognized, or supported—to understand employee attrition.

Why Do Workers Leave?

Researchers have come to recognize that retention and turnover are best understood through examining the interaction of organizational and personal factors (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). A comprehensive review of the literature on turnover and retention in human services finds that demographic characteristics were less predictive of retention than were professional perceptions or organizational conditions (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Some have argued that varying rates of employee

retention across organizations may be due to differences in organizations' cultures and values (Kerr & Slocum, 1987; Kopelman, Brief, & Guzzo, 1990; Sheridan, 1992). Given these insights, closer attention to organizational conditions that drive workers away is warranted.

Heavy workload, low salary, poor agency operation, low agency morale, poor quality supervision, and few opportunities for advancement have all been connected to the desire to change jobs in child welfare staff and social workers (Landsman, 2001; Powell & York, 1992; Sze & Ivker, 1986). Workers with higher levels of stress were more likely to think about quitting their jobs, and workers receiving greater social support were less likely to think about quitting (Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005); however, "social support did not buffer the effects of organizational stress" (p. 79). Relatedly, in a sample of 290 public sector workers from 11 New York agencies, Wright and Davis (2003) found that job dissatisfaction in public sector employees was predominantly related to high levels of routinization, poor job goal specificity, and insufficient human resource development (opportunities for training, future career growth, and skill development). Similar issues were identified in studies of frontline welfare workers (e.g., Beckerman & Fontana, 2001; Meyer, Riccicui, & Lurie, 2001), and the relationship between job dissatisfaction and absenteeism or turnover is well-established (Farrel & Stamm, 1988; Freund, 2005; Spector, 1997).

A study conducted by Light (2003) for the Brookings Institution examined some of these organizational conditions using a national random sample telephone survey of 1,213 human service workers, which was designed to examine the health of the human service workforce on seven factors. These factors were categorized as "healthy," "at

risk,” or “in critical condition” (Light, 2003). The one factor deemed “healthy” was the motivation to improve the lives of people they serve. Three factors were deemed “at risk:” 2) *training* and talent of the workforce, 3) having sufficient *resources* to succeed, and 4) perceiving *respect* and confidence from those it serves. Lastly, three factors were deemed “in critical condition:” 5) being asked *to do the possible*, 6) recruiting and *retaining* talented workers, and 7) *rewarding* employees for a job well done. The sample reported high turnover among the most talented employees. Recent recruits in the sample reported planning to leave their jobs within five years and recent college graduates reported little serious interest in human service careers. Further, 81% of the human service workers strongly or somewhat agreed that it is easy to burnout in the work they do, 70% reported always having too much work to do, 75% described their work as “frustrating,” and 51% reported their work was “unappreciated.” This study supports that the frustrations documented by research on workers in welfare-administering organizations is echoed more broadly by the human services workforce.

To summarize, studies examining employee attrition in human service and public sector employees have found a myriad of factors relating to job dissatisfaction, stress, or attrition. These include issues with workloads, peer support, resources, training, supervision, opportunities for skill development and career growth, and feeling valued, recognized, and respected. Understanding what factors contribute to employee attrition in SSSO staff has not been studied to date. In light of federal policies that continue to apply pressure to state and local social service organizations to meet performance outcomes, this mixed methods study explores how staff explain their decisions to leave the SSSO and how these factors predict their durations of employment.

Purpose of the Study

Although there have been some efforts to survey “leavers” in child welfare workers, (Bernatovicz, 1997; Harris et al., 2000; Samantrai, 1992) to date, no study has been published that examines leavers in SSSOs that administer welfare, Medicaid, and Food Stamps. This study begins to fill this gap in the literature. It was designed with a mixed methods approach to optimize understanding attrition from the perspective of SSSO leavers. Since leavers are no longer dependent on the organization, the selection of this sample buffers the effects of “organizational desirability” and directly examines the choice to leave rather than antecedents of attrition, such as job dissatisfaction. This study is predominantly exploratory; however, based upon studies of frontline welfare staff (Beckerman & Fontana, 2001; Brodtkin, 1997; Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996; Lurie & Riccucci, 2003; Meyers, Riccucci, & Lurie, 2001), I hypothesize that factors relating to organizational culture will be noted by former employees and that perceptions of organizational culture will significantly predict these former employees’ durations of employment above and beyond the effects of “harder” organizational factors or demographic characteristics.

Method

This study conducts a secondary data analysis of 132 semi-structured telephone interviews with former employees of a southeastern SSSO. Because employee attrition has not been examined in this population, a mixed methods design was used to assure that important factors related to one’s decision to leave the SSSO were captured and

adequately understood. The project was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Vanderbilt University.

Recruitment and Sample

The population of interest was the first three levels of frontline staff (caseworkers and direct supervisors) who resigned between January, 2004-January, 2006 from the state social service division that administered the Food Stamps, Medicaid, and TANF programs ($n = 389$). The division was comprised of approximately 5,000 employees, where 3,900 employees worked in field offices where these positions were located, and the remaining 1,100 worked in the state office. The organization's personnel office provided a database with contact information, dates of employment, county of employment, gender, age and race of these former employees.

Potential interviewees first received a letter from the second highest officer in the agency notifying them that a university-affiliated interviewer would be calling them for an interview. Twenty-four individuals declined participation; 233 individuals were not able to be contacted due to outdated information or failure to be reached after numerous attempts. The final sample consisted of 132 individuals; therefore, the response rate was 85% for those who were contacted by an interviewer and 34% for the total population. An analysis was conducted to examine differences between those who participated in the study ($n = 132$) and those who did not participate ($n = 257$), which is presented in the Discussion section.

Demographic and background characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Most interview participants (86%) had been employed at the SSSO as caseworkers and

the remaining 14% had been immediate supervisors of caseworkers. Eighty-three percent of respondents were female. Seventy percent were white, 27% African American, and the remaining 2% Hispanic (racial minorities were collapsed for analyses). Age was bimodally distributed, where about half of the sample was less than 45 years old and half was older. There was a positively skewed distribution of durations of employment among respondents: 44% of respondents had worked at the agency for less than two years, and the remaining 56% worked at the organization for up to 42 years. Fifty six percent of the sample worked in offices located in urban or suburban counties ($n = 74$). The SSSO requires a bachelor's degree; therefore, the entire sample was college educated.

Table 1.
Means, Standard Deviations, and Relationships between Duration of Employment and Characteristics or Organizational Perceptions

Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>r</i> or <i>r_s</i>					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Duration of Employment ¹	.44 (.82)	.42		.55**	.22*	-.07	.08	.35**
2. Age (years)	44.10 (13.72)	45.00			.13	-.18*	-.11	.10
3. Peer Support ²	5.67 (.72)	6.00				.16	.23**	.42**
4. Training ²	4.70 (2.07)	5.00					.58**	.37**
5. Resources	4.02 (1.84)	4.00						.54**
6. Organizational Culture	4.60 (1.42)	4.71						

Variable	Raw <i>M</i> (1) ⁴	<i>N</i>	%	<i>t</i> or <i>Welsh test</i> ³						<i>X</i> ²				
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
7. Gender														
Female	10.19	109	82.6	-.45	-1.94	-.36	.13	.94	.32		1.98	.17	2.04	
Male	8.43	23	17.4											
8. Race				2.77**	2.16*	.55	-2.40*	-2.11*	.74			33.85**	.54	
White	11.04	93	70.5											
Non-white	7.02	39	29.5											
9. Office Location				-7.03**	-3.83**	-2.21*	-.95	-.63	-3.05**					.22
Urban	5.43	74	56.1											
Rural	15.56	58	43.9											
10. Job title				-7.54**	-3.31**	-3.06**	-.04	-2.12*	-3.86**					
Caseworker	7.66	114	86.4											
Field supervisor	23.93	18	13.6											

¹ Duration of employment in years is log₁₀ transformed to accommodate for skewness.

² Spearman correlations are reported the following skewed variables: Peer support, *skewness* (*SE*) = -1.280 (.211); training, *skewness* (*SE*) = -6.86 (.211).

³ Welsh tests (*t*-tests for equal variance not assumed) are reported if Levene's test was significant at the *p* < .05-level.

⁴ These are the raw means for duration of employment in years.

**p* < .05 ** *p* < .01

The Interview

The SSSO under investigation had partnered with Vanderbilt University on a large-scale organizational change initiative. Leadership in the organization had identified employee attrition as one of their key targets for organizational change; therefore, the semi-structured telephone interview was originally designed to inform this ongoing project. The goal of the interview was to learn from former staff why they resigned from the SSSO. It was designed by an organizational consulting firm who was contracted to work on the larger project. The telephone interview had been used with former employees of other organizations to understand attrition; it was modified to address this SSSO (Eldson, 2006). The interview had 34 questions, which all elicited qualitative responses from interviewees. Some of these items also elicited close-ended responses, such as asking interviewees to rate statements on a Likert scale or to choose a nominal response and then to explicate the reasons for their choice.

The team of seven interviewers included the project manager, an organizational consultant, a professor, and four graduate students. Data collection occurred over six weeks in the Spring of 2006. The interview team received training on using the interview guide and was supported throughout the weeks of data collection with several team meetings to assure consistent interviewing. Each researcher was assigned a list of potential participants to contact. Interviews took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Interviewers recorded the informants' responses verbatim during the interviews.

Data Analysis

In this study, a secondary data analysis was conducted to identify factors related to employee attrition using all qualitative data from the interview. Based upon these qualitative findings and the literature on attrition in human service organizations, quantitative items from the interview were selected to model former employees' durations of employment.

First, qualitative analyses were conducted to understand the experiences and perceptions of former employees, and specifically, to understand what factors they reported influenced their decision to leave the SSSO. A preliminary grounded theory analysis of the qualitative data was conducted, where an open-coding process was used to inductively find themes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because this preliminary analysis resulted in themes that echoed the results of Light in a similar sample (human service workers across the nation), data were reanalyzed using a deductive approach that applied Light's framework (2003). These factors included: 1) motivation to improve the lives of people they serve, 2) *training* and talent of the workforce, 3) having sufficient *resources* to succeed, 4) perceiving *respect* and confidence from those it serves, 5) being asked *to do the possible*, 6) recruiting and *retaining* talented workers, and 7) *rewarding* employees for a job well done. After the data were recoded into Light's framework, data within each category were coded for emerging themes to create subcategories. Data that did not map onto Light's framework were coded into new categories.

Hence, the qualitative analysis followed an iterative process, whereby open-coding captured emergent themes in the data using a deductive, grounded theory approach while an inductive approach was used to build upon pre-existing theory from

Light's work (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process generated the following final categories that related to employee attrition: 1) Inconsistencies between job-related expectations and experiences, 2) Adequacy of training, 3) Sufficiency of resources, 4) Workload, stress, and critical incidents, 5) Organizational culture (OC), including perceptions of management, opportunities for growth, and feeling valued, and 6) Peer support.

Next, descriptive statistics were conducted on the quantitative answers to close-ended items that related to these factors, which are presented throughout the results section and in Table 1. Descriptive analyses were also used to characterize the sample and explore the data for outliers, non-normal distributions, and missing data. Bivariate analyses were conducted across all quantitative variables of interest using correlations, t-tests, and chi-squares (see Table 1) to examine relationships as well as to identify potential issues with multicollinearity.

Because beliefs and perceptions are not necessarily consistent with behavior, a multivariate quantitative model was tested to decipher what factors actually contributed to durations of employment. A schism could potentially exist between what factors staff thought impacted their decisions to leave the SSSO versus what factors actually predicted their durations of employment. For instance, staff may report negative perceptions of their organization, which may have negatively affected their experience working at the SSSO; however, these perceptions may not have been related to staff choosing to quit. Therefore, a model was tested to predict the durations of employment of the sample and to test the hypothesis that organizational culture would contribute to predicting duration of employment above and beyond demographic and other organizational characteristics.

The principle empirical technique used was a multiple regression analysis. The general model underlying the multiple regression analysis was defined as:

$$\text{DURATION OF EMPLOYMENT} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{age}) + \beta_2(\text{gender}) + \beta_3(\text{race}) + \beta_4(\text{office location}) + \beta_5(\text{position}) + \beta_6(\text{peer support}) + \beta_7(\text{training}) + \beta_8(\text{resources}) + \beta_9(\text{organizational culture}) + e.$$

The quantitative model tested in this study was developed from findings in the literature and factors derived from the qualitative findings (described below); it was limited by the quantitative items included in the semi-structured interview. The following factors were identified during the qualitative findings and operationalized by 7-point Likert items (1= strongly disagree, 7 =strongly agree) from the interview: peer support, perceptions of training, perceptions of resources, and organizational culture. *Peer support* was operationalized by “I felt a strong sense of affiliation with my work group.” *Perceptions of Training* was operationalized by “I received appropriate training on joining the department to enable me to do my job.” *Perception of Resources* was operationalized by “[The SSSO] provided me with the resources needed to be successful in my job.” *Organizational Culture* (OC) was measured by a 7-item scale of 7-point Likert items. The OC scale had three dimensions comprised of the following items: 1) Opportunities for Growth: a. “[The SSSO] promoted my professional growth and development,” b. “I was able to use my real talents at work on a daily basis,” c. “I was working at my full potential;” 2) Feeling Valued: a. “I was recognized for a job well-done,” b. “My ideas were valued while I was at work;” 3) Perceptions of Management: a. “My supervisor encouraged cooperation and teamwork,” b. “My supervisor resolved

complaints about problems.” An average scale score for respondents was created if at least 6 items were answered (n = 131). The scale had a Chronbach’s alpha of .84¹.

The selection of these factors was justified by findings in the literature on attrition and welfare organizations (Beckerman & Fontana, 2001; Brodtkin, 1997; Light, 2003; Lurie & Riccucci, 2003; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Powell & York, 1992; Wright & Davis, 2003). However, the interview did not contain items identified in the qualitative analysis relating to “inconsistencies between job-related expectations and experiences” or “workload, stress, and critical incidents” or certain factors identified in the literature, including objective caseload size or adequacy of salaries (Landsman, 2001).

Gender, age, race, and office location were also entered into the model to control for demographics and to examine urban-rural differences, which have been found in welfare organizations (Arsneault, 2006). *Age* was measured in years at the date of termination. *Gender* was defined as male or female. *Race* was dichotomized as being white or a racial minority due to the small sub-samples of racial minorities. *Position* was dichotomized as caseworker or supervisor. *Office location* was a project-specific categorization of urbanity-rurality developed to be more policy relevant in the state.

Initially this classification had four categories, but these were collapsed into two

¹ Classical test theories (CTT) and Rasch modeling were used to evaluate the psychometric properties of the scale. Overall, the scale demonstrated excellent scale properties, both in regard to CTT criteria and Rasch modeling criteria. Because of the three dimensions (perceptions of management, feeling valued, and opportunities for growth) used in constructing the scale, a one-factor model did not fit the data perfectly according to exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. However, using the diagnostic criteria of the Rasch modeling, the primary dimension of organizational culture represented in the total score is clearly pronounced which justifies using the mean score of the seven items as a scale score. This is further supported by the more than satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha of .84.

categories for this analysis (Heflinger, Brannan, Schneble, & Saunders, 2007). “Urban” includes counties that have a metropolitan area with a population greater than or equal to 60,000 *or* that is next to a county with a major metropolitan area with a population greater than or equal to 500,000 (16% of counties). “Rural” includes all other counties (84%). While individuals were to some degree nested in counties, most counties were represented by only very few individuals with the mode being one person per county. Thus, because of this small design effect, the hierarchical level was ignored in the analysis. The dependent variable, *duration of employment*, was the total duration of employment at the SSSO in years.

Lastly, to examine the relative impact of different factors, the predictors were entered hierarchically based upon the following rationale. Age was entered into the model first to control for the effects of age before examining the contribution of other factors. See the Results section for the justification that led to removing gender and race from the model. Office location was entered next because the literature supports that urban-rural differences exist in welfare organizations (Arsneault, 2006). Next, position held at the SSSO was entered into the model to examine the relative impact of being a supervisor versus a case worker before examining organizational factors, but after taking into account age and urban-rural differences. According to the conclusions of Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levin, 2001, who found that demographic factors were less predictive of employee attrition than perceptions of organizational factors, organizational factors were entered into the model in two steps to elucidate how perceptions of organizational factors contributed above and beyond the impact of demographic characteristics. Organizational culture was entered as a separate and final step in the hierarchical model because I

hypothesized that organizational culture would contribute to the robustness of the model after other organizational factors accounted for variance in duration of employment.

Results

Understanding Employee Attrition

In this section, factors related to employee attrition according to former employees are reviewed. These are: 1) Inconsistencies between job-related expectations and experiences, 2) Adequacy of training, 3) Sufficiency of resources, 4) Workload, stress, and critical incidents, 5) Organizational culture (OC), including perceptions of management, opportunities for growth, and feeling valued, and 6) Peer support. It is important to note that qualitative analyses revealed that attrition was heavily related to the way in which these factors compounded to create experiences and situations that led employees to leave the SSSO.

Frontline staff expressed that retention was a problem because the workload, stress, and poor OC created a negative cycle at the individual and the organizational levels. As the workload increased due to larger caseloads, insufficient staffing, and additional work “handed down” by management, workers became more stressed and consequently quit, especially during critical incidents. As more workers quit, more work was placed upon the remaining workers until the positions were refilled. It was not uncommon for positions to be vacant for up to a year. The cycle of stress experienced by individuals was compounded by the cycle of turnover in the organization, as elucidated in this interviewee’s statement,

Everyone I worked with looked defeated. People kept quitting. It takes nearly two years to learn the job. Management wanted the work done. It was impossible. There just wasn't enough people. I gained 30 pounds and had to take anti-depressants. I felt like a rat who couldn't get out of a maze.

Although the exact attrition rate could not be determined, state administrators expressed major concerns about attrition and estimated the average annual attrition rate between 20-30% for the SSSO. The attrition rate of the SSSO also reflects a large portion of people retiring, which increases the importance of retention for those who are not retiring due to the loss of human capital and organizational memory.

Inconsistencies Between Expectations and Experiences

It is vital to understand the motivation employees had to take the job to understand their experiences once they were in the job. Analyses revealed that these motivations were rarely aligned with their actual work experiences.

Motivation. Many respondents reported that they were motivated to seek employment at the SSSO because they wanted to improve the lives of clients. Sixty-three percent of the sample agreed that, “[The SSSO]’s purpose made me feel important.” A small proportion of the sample indicated that they were motivated to work at the SSSO because their families had been recipients of services in the past. A motivation for many interviewees was that they believed the job would allow them to apply their educational degrees in areas such as Social Work, Psychology, and Public Management. For many, the motivation to work at the SSSO was not based on wanting to improve the lives of people they served but wanting to improve *their* own lives (these were not necessarily mutually exclusive). A large proportion of interviewees reported they sought employment at the SSSO primarily because they needed a job. Job security, flexible hours, location,

benefits, holidays, potential for advancement, and entry-level hiring for recent college graduates were all reported as motivations to take a job.

Job dissatisfaction. Motivation to seek jobs at the SSSO appeared to translate to job-related expectations. Because these expectations were not met once in the job, dissatisfaction abounded during interviews. Only one third of the sample felt that the SSSO effectively communicated the nature of the job. Interviewees reported “they thought” the job would entail using skills from their college degree, such as counseling; however, as one interviewee stated, “I was nothing but a glorified data entry person.”

The low starting salary, lack of financial incentives for good performance, and small differences in pay scale among positions in the organization contributed to employees’ dissatisfaction once they were working at the SSSO. Although interviewees knew the starting salary when they took job, almost all interviewees noted that the salary became unsatisfactory once they were dealing with the large workloads, stress, and working overtime.

Another source of dissatisfaction was the constraining impacts of organizational systems, structures, and policies. Management’s value for quantity over quality combined with outmoded operational systems hindered staff from meeting their goals to improve the lives of clients. Although 90% of informants felt they helped make a difference in their clients’ lives, only 63% felt they had an opportunity to help their clients to the best of their abilities. The following comment elucidated the schism that employees perceived between wanting to improve clients’ lives and organizational expectations:

I wanted to really take time with my clients and help them as much as possible, refer them to all the correct services that they needed and listen to their needs. [The SSSO] wanted me to hurry up and move ‘em in, move ‘em out.

Employees did not often perceive that the organization's administration or management prioritized improving the lives' of clients, and in fact, they often felt that the organization's leadership valued meeting federal policy regulations over employee or client well-being. This was especially salient for those who worked with the welfare program.

Perceptions of Training

Although 66% of interviewees agreed with the statement, "I received appropriate training on joining the department that enabled me to do my job," most interviewees reported they were not accurately told during training "how much work was involved." Many workers did not feel sufficiently prepared or supported to deal with the "reality of the job" once they were past training.

Amount. Interviewees reported differences in the amount of time they were trained, from no training to over 3 months of training. Longer-term employees entered the organization when induction training was not formalized, which accounts for some of this variation. However, some employees reported their training sessions were cut short because management needed the employees on the floor. Some employees reported going to training eight hours per day while others reported only getting two hours of training per day.

Timing. Additionally, interviewees reported that training took place at different times over their initial months at the SSSO, which appeared to influence the efficacy of their work on the floor. One employee reported being in the office for three months prior to attending a training session and stated, "It was such a waste of the state's money to let me sit there." Some had never spent a day in the office prior to training. Informants who

reported spending one or two weeks in the office prior to training appeared to find training most efficacious because it was contextualized.

Quality. Informants reported that the content and delivery of training varied across the state, which may contribute to disparate reports on training efficacy. Many interviewees held positive views of training, reporting it as “excellent” or “great at times.” Other interviewees reported their experiences of training as “not very good” or “bad,” explaining that they felt ill-prepared for their jobs or found the content irrelevant to their actual job demands. More often than not, respondents felt that training was overwhelming due to the large amount of information presented. Many informants reported that training examples were simplistic and did not prepare them for “real” cases. Lastly, some informants felt that they received insufficient on-the-job training and insufficient support from supervisors once they left training.

The primary consequence of poor training was that employees misinformed clients or omitted important information during interactions with clients. They also felt unsupported and inadequate based upon the reactions of management. Many interviewees explicated that co-workers provided informal training and support, which was beneficial once they were in their jobs; however, a portion of the sample did not report having supportive co-workers. Lastly, the need for specialized and ongoing training was expressed to address the variation in program requirements and constantly changing policies.

Perceptions of Resources

Only 45% of the sample agreed with the item, “[The SSSO] provided me with the resources needed to be successful in my job.” Almost the entire sample identified a lack

of human resources. They explained that more staff was needed to keep up with the caseloads and to provide quality services. Other resource needs identified by informants are presented below.

Health and safety. A major concern was having unhealthy working environments. Multiple respondents reported comments such as, “I left because I was tired of working in an unhealthy building with mold.” Reports of unhealthy environments included large amounts of dust, liberal use of industrial cleaners, unsanitary bathrooms, mold, poor air quality, and creatures in the building: “We had birds in the ceilings and you could smell mold. I now have to take allergy shots for mold.”

Safety was also reported as inadequate. Multiple respondents reported that their cars had been broken into in the parking lot. Additionally, an interviewee mentioned feeling unsafe while telling clients that they were denied services during cuts in the state-run health insurance program. Another concern regarding safety was based on client safety: “The cabinets were supposed to have locks and mine did not. They were never repaired. Client files should have been confidential and under lock and key but they were not.”

Supplies and technology. Some informants reported that their offices did have the supplies necessary to succeed at their jobs. Others reported that supplies, such as paperclips or paper, were not available. This may be related to the states different allocation of funds by division. One person explained, “There was no money for my division. I had to spend time begging for money from churches for basic resources for the office.” More than one person reported having to buy their own supplies. A large portion

of the sample reported inadequate computers, printers, and software to effectively perform their work.

Programs and policies. Lastly, multiple people reported that, “There was not a good resource when trying to make a determination about policy. We had manuals, but they were not updated.” New or modified policies would be put into effect that changed clients’ benefits; however, staff did not have the means to actually perform or document them, “They instituted policy before giving us the instructions on how to implement it.”

Workload, Stress, and Critical Incidents

Workload and stress was compounded by the lack of human resources, especially during critical incidents at the organization that demanded even more from their staff.

Workload and stress. Almost the entire sample reported that the workload was “overwhelming,” “too heavy,” or “unmanageable,” and the amount of work contributed directly and indirectly to leaving the organization. The heavy workload negatively affected many of the factors referenced as motivation for taking the job. For instance, interviewees explained that they did not use their benefits, such as sick days or holidays, because the resulting stress and workload would not be worth it. Additionally, interviewees who explained that the hours and benefits motivated them to take the job also stated that, “It was expected that you would work overtime.” Workers were expected to see clients back-to-back during business hours so they did not have time to learn new information or file paperwork. One interviewee explained that she would have to come in early to read a large number of e-mails regarding new regulations or policy changes that potentially affected her work. Another person explained that her supervisor told her she

should take this kind of work home. Informants reported that working overtime was typically unpaid.

The amount of work that was expected to be completed during the working day was in and of itself “overwhelming.” Many workers expressed this view, such as: “We really needed one hour to explain the [welfare program], but we were scheduled to see one [client] every 15 minutes.” Hence, interviewees felt that they could not adequately or optimally work with clients due to the pressure from the organization to handle high volumes of cases. One interviewee reported that in training she was told her caseload would be no more than 110 individuals, “but the reality was 470 cases per worker.” Others reported caseloads of 500-600 clients, and one reported a caseload of a 1000.

Stress was often reported as a consequence of the overtime and workload. A portion of interviewees reported worsening mental and physical health as a consequence of being asked to do the impossible, such as being “mentally exhausted.” A couple of interviewees reported that their doctors suggested they quit their jobs due to worsening health conditions.

Critical incidents. Critical incidents at work often exacerbated the workload and stress and increased turnover at a time when the organization needed employees most. Informants identified multiple “crises” that the organization had to handle, which increased stress and contributed to turnover. For instance, at least twenty-two interviewees referenced how the implementation of a large-scale cut in the state-run health insurance program resulted in them leaving the organization. Workers were pulled from the floor (resulting in more work for their colleagues), and those chosen to work on the cuts reported that management, “put pressure on us as to how many appeals we had to

process. We had to work 10 to 15 hours overtime per week plus weekends.”

Additionally, as one worker said, “I always felt negative because of the work we did;” however, interviewees did not report receiving help to cope with this emotional task. The perceived lack of support and compassion from management resulted in many employees opting to leave, particularly during critical events.

Organizational Culture (OC)

As supported by staff’s level of stress and reactions to critical incidents, informants reported that the organizational culture and systems did not foster growth and innovation or make them feel supported, valued, and heard.

Perceptions of management. Respondents had mixed perceptions of feeling recognized by their immediate supervisors and leadership within their office. Some respondents did not feel their immediate supervisors or local leadership appreciated them. Multiple respondents reported feeling like, “there was very little upward communication to the supervisory level. They tended to be very dogmatic and not listen very well to the lower position people.” A minority of interviewees believed that “they [management] abused their power” based on specific negative experiences. For instance, supervisors and local leaders yelled at staff in front of their co-workers, which made staff feel humiliated. Many people reported instances of feeling micro-managed to such a degree that they felt treated like “little kids,” such as being chastised for taking longer than five minutes in the bathroom.

Multiple informants felt that supervisors and local leaders only acknowledged mistakes and inadequate performance, rather than excellent performance. For instance, one woman reported having a suicidal client that she took extra time to assist. The

client's doctor wrote her a thank you note, but her supervisors did not say thank you, "They only wrote up bad things, not the good ones." Another person explained, "When I went above and beyond to help customers, like when I stayed late to help a client, I was never recognized. But if I had one little mess up, supervisors were all over me." These interviewees explicated events and perceptions of local management as highly punitive, which led one interviewee to enter therapy and another stated, "my co-workers were afraid to speak up, they were afraid of being on the backlist."

Alternatively, other interviewees did feel rewarded and recognized by their local managers but almost the entire sample felt unrecognized by leaders further up the organizational hierarchy. For instance, one person responded to the statement "I was recognized for a job well done" by stating, "only by my supervisor who gave employee of the month awards and really encouraged us. There were no real incentives from the department." Many people shared similar perspectives on feeling recognized by their office leadership, but felt they had "no impact whatsoever further up the organization."

One institutional procedure of recognition that employees felt acknowledged their work was performance evaluations. However, hearing compliments during evaluations or exit procedures may have been too little too late for some. For instance, after an employee had decided to leave the SSSO, she was surprised to find out that "they [managers] gave me compliments in my job performance rating."

Other institutional systems of rewards did not make employees feel appreciated. For instance, rewards for accuracy of performance were inaccurately granted to workers, which undermined the meaning and recognition of the certificates for employees. Certificates are generated for caseworkers who accurately administer the Food Stamps

program, but “the problem with certificates was that many people would work on a case. They [leaders] would use the user ID on a case and sometimes the wrong person would get the certificate instead of the person who deserved it,” as one interviewee explained. A new employee explicated, “measures were not always accurate. At the first staff meeting I attended, I received an award for Food Stamp accuracy, and I had not done anything. I got the award because the ID number for the previous worker had been transferred to me when I took the job.”

Opportunities for growth. While some employees felt that the financial incentive for advancement was insufficient to try to work towards promotion, a larger proportion of the sample reported feeling disappointed by the lack of advancement opportunities. For instance, one person stated, “I realized that in 15 years I would still be [a caseworker], that there would be no opportunity for advancement, and I need incentives and goals to work towards.” Many interviewees viewed their positions as “dead-end jobs.”

In terms of career development and professional growth that was not related to promotions or raises, the sample held disparate views. When asked whether “[The SSSO] promoted my professional growth and development,” some interviewees felt that it had. People who maintained a more positive view of their development often conceptualized their job as a “stepping stone” to employment in other organizations. Some of these interviewees also mentioned that the SSSO promoted their professional development by paying for Master’s degree classes.

Conversely, other interviewees held the opposite perspective. In this vein, interviewees reported that they felt their input, creativity, and innovation was not used or appreciated in their jobs, which increased their desire to leave. Interviewees reported that,

“workers’ voices never made any impact on decisions at the office,” and that, “It’s not a stimulating or challenging environment. Most of my suggestions for new approaches or changes got shot down right away.” The lack of growth appeared to contribute to high attrition rates.

Feeling valued. The predominant perspective maintained by staff was that the organization valued policy over clients or staff. It was bureaucratic, and bureaucracy obscured valuing or promoting innovation and agency in employees, as illustrated in these comments: “Ideas couldn’t be used because they were not in the regulations or guidelines. I had to go straight by the book,” and “They were not open to suggestions to increase efficiency. They already had their policies in place and were not open to change.” These types of comments highlighted that workers believed the organization was uninterested in their input, did not recognize or reward them for their work, and did not provide them with avenues to contribute to the improvement of the organization. Thirty nine percent of the sample disagreed that “My ideas were valued while I was at work.”

The lack of rewards for a job well done, as well as feeling that their hard work was overlooked, led to a handful of interviewees disclosing that they stopped working as hard for the organization. Others felt punished for a job well done, explaining they would be asked to do more without recognition or rewards.

Ultimately, employees felt unrewarded, and sometimes punished, during their time working at the SSSO. Bureaucracy appeared to foster an organizational culture where recognizing employees was not typical and a deficit-based approach to management was normative. The lack of rewards and recognition, from pay to

compliments, led to staff feeling devalued, disrespected and unsupported, especially when they attempted to use their agency to innovate and effect change.

Peer Support

Feeling valued and recognized by co-workers was an important reward. Approximately 79% of participants endorsed the statement, “I felt a strong sense of affiliation with my work group,” and 93% agreed that, “There was at least one person at work who seemed to care about me as an individual.” Sixty-two percent of the sample stated that what they missed most about working at the SSSO were their co-workers. During qualitative probing, these statements revealed that the “work group” and “one person” were typically referring to co-workers holding same-level positions as respondents. Perceiving positive professional and personal relationships with co-workers was very important to job satisfaction, and sometimes, these relationships were maintained even after leaving the organization. Additionally, respondents reported that co-workers were a valuable source of support and learning on the job.

Predicting Duration of Employment

Informed by the qualitative results, this section presents the quantitative findings related to employment durations in this sample of former staff. Presented in Table 1, the descriptive statistics and relationships between independent variables and the dependent variable are presented. Due to a large positive skew in duration of employment ($M (SD) = 9.88 (12.33)$, $Mdn = 2.64$, $skewness (SE) = .98 (.21)$), which violated assumptions of normality, the dependent variable was transformed using a \log_{10} transformation ($M (SD)$

= .44 (.82), *Mdn* = .42, *skewness* (*SE*) = -.17 (.21)). No more than one data point for any variable was missing; therefore, missing data was not an issue in any analyses conducted.

Bivariate analyses found that being older, being white, being in a rural office, being a supervisor, and higher ratings of peer support and OC were all related to longer durations of employment at the $p < .05$ level (see Table 1). Higher ratings of peer support, higher scores on the OC scale, and being older were positively related to working in a rural county or being a supervisor, and rating resources as more adequate was associated with being a supervisor. Age and training were negatively related, where older employees perceived their training as less adequate. Also, former staff who were white were more likely to be from rural areas than their non-white counterparts. OC was positively related to all other continuous variables (peer support, training, resources) except age.

In the multivariate analysis, age was entered as a control variable to understand whether other predictors contributed above and beyond the effects of age to duration of employment (since employees becoming one year older worked one year longer). Because no significant relationships existed between gender and any other variable, a directional hypothesis was not proposed, and the sample size limited the number of factors entered into the model, gender was left out the final analysis. Preliminary analyses revealed that there was insufficient difference in race and office location variables to include both in the model because 95% of racial minorities worked in urban counties (Cramer's $V = .506$, $X^2 = 33.85$, $p < .001$). Numerous regressions were conducted to examine the relationship between race and office location (Baron & Kenny, 1986), which revealed that race only contributed to predicting duration of employment if office

location was omitted from the model. Therefore, only office location was included in the final model due to issues of multicollinearity. According to multicollinearity test results, all other variables were sufficiently independent of one another.

Table 2.

Duration of Employment¹ Regressed on Characteristics and Organizational Perceptions

Predictors ²	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔF	ΔR^2
Constant	-1.104	.262		[-1.622, -5.86]	.000		
1. Age (years)	.021	.004	.357	[.013, .029]	.000	67.176	.342***
2. Rural Location	.602	.107	.370	[.390, .815]	.000	27.751	.117***
3. Supervisory position	.641	.151	.273	[.342, .939]	.000	26.445	.093***
4. Peer support	-.013	.031	-.027	[-.074, .048]	.676	.376	.004
Training	-.008	.034	-.017	[-.075, .059]	.823		
Resources	-.036	.028	-.090	[-.092, .020]	.204		
5. Organizational culture	.117	.046	.206	[.027, .208]	.012	6.566	.022*

¹Duration of employment is \log_{10} transformed.

²Predictors are numbered according to the steps in which they were entered into the model hierarchically; the ΔF and ΔR^2 correspond to these steps. All other values are taken from the final model, where all predictors were entered together. For the overall model, $F(7,123) = 24.188$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .579$, Adjusted $R^2 = .555$, $SEE = .541$.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

As presented in Table 2, the overall multivariate model was significant ($F(7,123) = 24.188$, $p < .001$) accounting for 56% of the variance in duration of employment. In order of their relative impact according to standardized Beta weights, office location, age, position, and perceptions of OC, significantly contributed to predicting duration of employment ($p < .05$). Perceptions of training, adequate resources, and peer support

were not significant when entered as a step in the model together or when they were entered as separate steps. As seen in the bivariate analysis, age and duration of employment are strongly related; however, after controlling for this effect (which explained 34.2% of the variance), office location, position, and perceptions of OC significantly contributed to explaining an additional 23.2% of the variance in duration of employment. Hence, duration of employment was not simply a function of age. Contributions of each step in the hierarchical model are presented in Table 2.

Because the model was predicting to a \log_{10} transformation of duration of employment, the Beta weights were transformed back to the original unit (years) and revealed that: 1) a one year increase in age is associated with a 1.05 year increase in duration of employment, 2) working in a rural county rather than an urban county was associated with a 4.00 year increase in duration of employment, 3) holding the position of supervisor rather than caseworker was associated with a 4.38 year increase in duration of employment, and 4) increasing 1 point on the OC scale (range 1-7) is associated with 1.31 year increase in duration of employment.

Discussion

To summarize, the overall model accounted for 56% of the variance in durations of employment of 132 former SSSO employees. Being older, working in a rural county, holding a supervisory position, and higher OC scale scores were significantly associated with longer durations of employment. Based upon qualitative findings, it is important to note that this model did not take into account the effects of stress or workload or the

motivations of employees who opted to take a job at the SSSO. These factors could have additionally contributed to modeling employment durations.

The quantitative findings do, however, point to potential targets for organizational intervention and have implications for future research. The magnitude of the urban-rural finding is quite substantial, where working in a rural environment predicted an additional 4.00 years with the SSSO. Additionally, after controlling for age, office location contributed to explaining an additional 11.7% of the variance in duration of employment when the model was conducted hierarchically (see Table 2). An important limitation of this finding is that it is unclear what characteristics in rural and urban office locations are contributing to this effect. For instance, analysis revealed that race and office location were strongly related; therefore, at least part of the effect may be due to race. However, a myriad of other factors may be underlying this finding, such as smaller office sizes, smaller caseload sizes, better working relationships among office staff or with community partners, or fewer external job opportunities (Arsneault, 2006). Correlations revealed that working in a rural office was associated with higher scores on peer support and OC; hence, discovering what attributes of rural environments make employees in the SSSO stay longer may inform targets for organizational change.

In the final model (after controlling for age), being a supervisor was associated with staying an additional 4.38 years at the organization. The position held by organizational members contributed an additional 9.3% to explaining the variance in duration of employment after age and office location were entered into the model (see Table 2). Based upon qualitative data, some former employees acknowledged that few opportunities for promotions contributed to their decision to leave the organization. This

finding may simply be attributed to the fact that staff who have been at the organization longer are more likely to hold higher organizational positions. Nevertheless, holding a supervisory position only yielded a small fiscal benefit according to informants, but supervisors maintained more positive perceptions of OC and peer support than case workers. They endorsed more strongly than their case worker counterparts feeling valued and recognized by the organization. Based on the qualitative findings about perceptions of management and this quantitative finding, one potential consideration would be to add an intermediary position between caseworkers and supervisors. This intermediary position could be designed to develop management skills, which may have a trickle down effect to positively impact case workers and their perceptions of management. Although this recommendation may seem expensive to SSSOs, high rates of employee attrition cost organizations a significant amount of money due to administrative and training expenses, loss of human capital when experienced employees quit, and resulting inefficiencies due to being understaffed or having new staff. Consequently, additional financial costs may be incurred if poor organizational performance impacts the receipt of federal funding.

Supporting the hypothesis, organizational culture contributed significantly to attrition and the robustness of the overall model. Overwhelmingly informants noted in the qualitative data that they did not feel challenged at work; they did not feel they were able to use their skills or talents; they were not recognized for their work or innovation; they did not feel consistently supported by management. Although organizational culture only contributed an additional 2.2% to explaining the variance in duration of employment after all other factors were entered into the model (see Table 2), it is important to note that moving from a rating of 3 (slightly disagree) to a rating of 6 (agree) on the OC scale—

approximately one standard deviation from the mean—is associated with an additional 3.93 years of employment. OC is perhaps the most feasible and efficacious target for organizational change since the effects of office location and position may be at least partially driven by OC issues as well.

There are numerous limitations to this study. Although few people declined participation if they were reached by an interviewer, a large portion of the population was unreachable; which introduced sampling bias. Those who participated in the study ($n = 132$) and those who did not participate ($n = 257$) differed significantly on some characteristics. On average, participants were 4.8 years older than non-participants ($t = -3.40, p < .001$). The average duration of employment for participants was 10.89 ($SD = 12.61$), while non-participants averaged 5.28 years ($SD = 8.7$) ($t = -5.15, p < .001$). Participants were more likely to come from rural counties ($X^2 = 17.50, p < .001$) and identify as white ($X^2 = 15.16, p < .001$). They did not differ significantly on gender ($X^2 = 2.05, p = .152$).

Therefore, those who did not participate were younger and had shorter durations of employment. Also, they were more likely to identify as minorities, and relatedly, had worked in urban offices. According to bivariate analysis in the sample (see Table 1), shorter durations of employment and working in an urban office were associated with negative perceptions of peer support and organizational culture, while being a minority was associated with positive perceptions of training and resources. Assuming that the trends in participants and non-participants were congruent, a representative sample may have found that peer support made a significant contribution to predicting duration of employment and the impact of organizational culture was stronger. These trends would

have been supported by findings in the literature (Arsneault, 2006; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005). Of course, evidence of a sampling bias may also suggest that those excluded from the sample uniquely differed in their perceptions of organizational factors from participants; hence, the impact on the results is ultimately unknown. Although this study still makes an important exploratory contribution to the literature because SSSO leavers have not been studied to date, further research that targets a larger representative sample would improve the knowledge of attrition in SSSOs.

An additional limitation is that only one item was used to operationalize each of the following concepts: training, resources, and peer support. Hence, findings can only be attributed to the items posed. Also, quantitative items not included in the interview excluded important concepts that could have been associated with employee attrition according to qualitative responses and the literature, including stress (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Nissly et al., 2005) and workload (Light, 2003). Further research should examine additional organizational factors that may relate to attrition. Lastly, the sample size by office location was too small to allow for multi-level analysis. Future research is necessary to elucidate the influence of office location, county characteristics, or the varying division of resources on employee attrition.

This study does provide the literature with an initial exploration of attrition in SSSO staff upon which future research may be built. As supported by the qualitative findings, the factors contributing to employee attrition are complex and context-specific. It is important that future research ecologically examines how state administration of federal policies impacts employees' day-to-day realities, including workloads, stress, and job satisfaction. Further research should quantitatively measure more of these factors

while concurrently capture the complex ways these factors interrelate to form staff experiences that provide the impetus for their departure.

Conclusion

By tapping into the voices of those who have left a SSSO, this research begins to illuminate what organizational conditions obstruct the retention of workers. The findings imply that workers need manageable workloads, support and recognition from their co-workers and management, and opportunities for growth and innovation.

Many of the organizational issues identified in the interviews appear, at least on the surface, to be structural or technical problems to be corrected or adjusted by the organization's administration. Problems with high quality pertinent training, adequate staffing, healthy office environments, and sufficient resources to succeed at one's job are consistent with previous findings in human service organizations (Light, 2003). However, this study highlights how "softer" factors related to organizational culture are impacting employee attrition. As supported by studies of workers in welfare organizations (Beckerman & Fontana, 2001; Brodtkin, 1997; Lurie & Riccucci, 2003; Meyers, Riccucci, & Lurie, 2001), this study documents an organization whose implicit cultural messages are "do more with less," "do more for less," "do as you're told," and "deal with ever-changing policy." This bureaucratic culture has developed over time in response to messages and demands from state and federal policies, which has been passed down to new members entering (or exiting) the organization. These are not, contrary to conventional change approaches in this sector, issues that can be rectified only with changes in workflow patterns, more efficient tracking systems, better training procedures,

or more selective hiring practices (as supported by our findings). Fundamental shifts in OC, or “deep structure,” are warranted (Gersick, 1991).

OC is perhaps the most efficacious target for change to improve employee retention. One of the key challenges, however, is that OC is an elusive concept rooted in informal organizational practices (i.e., communication, peer and managerial support for learning and innovation, frames and mental models of staff) as much as formal systems and structures of the organization (e.g., systems of recognition and promotions).

Therefore, working collaboratively with staff in SSSOs to identify and define targets for OC change would increase the voice and agency of staff. Additionally, and specific to the public social service sector, it is vital that organizational change targeting OC accounts for the complexity of federal policies as well as “deeply” challenges employees at all levels of the organizational hierarchy and state government to think outside of the bureaucratic “black box” (Brodkin, 1997). This task is particularly challenging in light of Lurie & Riccucci’s findings, where welfare practitioners maintained a superficial notion of organizational culture and change (2003).

In light of federal financing being made more contingent on performance, as well as SSSOs not optimizing their new found discretion granted by federal devolutionary policies, I advise that SSSOs study private sector organizational change and learning models (Garvin, 2000; Senge, 1990) to assure that federal performance outcomes are met through fostering organizational cultures that value innovation, learning, and radical change. Organizational culture change is an expensive endeavor; however, high turnover and poor performance is likely to cost these organizations more over time, especially as performance measures become harder to meet.

Based upon the distribution of ages in the SSSO sample, it is important to note that approximately half of these staff will age into retirement within the next 15 years. Prioritizing ways to retain new staff will become increasingly important to assure that the organization does not lose more of its human capital and with it, its ability to serve those in need. Although this could be conceptualized as a “crisis,” it could also be conceptualized as an opportunity to shift the pre-existing OC away from one of regulation towards one of innovation. This shift may facilitate SSSOs taking advantage of their new-found discretion to not only improve client outcomes but to also meet federal performance outcomes. This study documents that frontline staff want to be supported in pursuing such a shift.

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