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CHALLENGES TO RURAL CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

Raymond Gaffney

June 2020

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This research project is an examination of the challenges of service delivery to clients in the child welfare system in a rural eastern California county. Coordinating and delivering services is an ongoing difficulty for all rural service providers working with child welfare throughout the country as many clients are isolated, the resources are scarce, programs may be lacking adequate structure or funding, long-distance travel is challenging, and specialized staffing is limited. This particular county is spread over 3,000 square miles of mountainous terrain, is neighbored by other rural counties, and the closest California metropolitan city is about 300 miles away. This study followed a constructivist paradigm because of the amount of different service providers from various fields, and the subjective nature of the problem being presented. Seven agency administrators and direct service providers who interact with clients participated in face-to-face interviews in order to develop a joint construction of the challenges and strengths when it comes to delivering services to child welfare clients in this community. The researcher analyzed the constructs of each participant through open coding and brought these constructs to a member check meeting.

The findings of this research show that challenges for this rural community include outreach and prevention, recruitment and retention, providers having to perform multiple roles, utilizing grants and funding streams more advantageous to urban service providers, and travel difficulties with the vast geography and inclement weather conditions. Strengths of providing rural services were also

identified which include having lower caseloads, being able to provide more individualized services, and an increased collaboration between service providers.

The implications of this research for micro social work practice allow for further adaptations of micro practice interventions and strategies in rural communities in order to best serve clients and efficiently utilize resources. This research allows for the development of macro social work considerations such as more specific policies around grant terms for rural provider, department hiring strategies, and policy improvements.

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

This chapter addresses the focus of this research project, the challenges in delivering appropriate services to child welfare clients in a rural eastern California community. Rationale for selecting the constructivist paradigm as the appropriate method for this study is explained. The literature review shows that these challenges are not unique concern to this County and it is a larger issue that needs addressed in rural communities worldwide. The theoretical orientation of ecological systems theory serves as a guide for this study. This study's potential contribution to rural social work practice is that it can create successful strategies to deliver and create appropriate services for clients in this challenging environment that can be implemented by other rural communities on a larger scale.

Research Focus

The focus of this research study was to analyze the accessibility and delivery of appropriate services for child welfare clients in a rural eastern California county. This county is home to vast high elevation mountain ranges with just over 3,000 square miles of land and home of approximately only 13,600 people. The largest city in has a population of just over 8,000 people.

For this reason, access to specific services for families is limited even in the most populated city, and especially in the outlying more rural towns.

This research project examined a variety of challenges faced by service providers and clients in rural areas including, geographical travel challenges and client isolation, difficulty with recruitment and retention, challenges for staff having to serve in multiple roles, lack of volume for specialized services, and difficulties in utilizing funding streams designed for large counties.

The services offered to child welfare clients in this county include mental health and drug treatment services, wraparound services, early childhood education, regional developmental services, domestic violence advocacy, legal self-help services, childcare coordination and financial assistance, Resource Family Approval Program, and direct child welfare social work case management.

The clients served in this county are typically locals who have been in the area most their lives, with occasional newer families in the area. The county is predominately white and has a large Hispanic minority community along with two federally recognized Native American Tribes. There is not a very large black, Asian, or middle eastern presence in the community.

This study's goal is to reveal strategies and solutions that can be modeled for policies that will help all rural communities struggling with child welfare services.

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

The constructivist paradigm was used for this research project. This approach claims that human experiences can only be known from a subjective perspective and the best way to understand a human phenomenon is to know the constructions of those involved from their viewpoint (Morris, 2013). This is the most appropriate approach for this study because child welfare services in this regard are considered human experiences. There are various types of service providers and this study takes into account each individual perception of the strengths and challenges of delivering child welfare services in rural communities.

The constructivist approach utilizes a hermeneutic dialectic process to gather and analyze data. This research gave multiple constructs equal attention and consideration. The researcher had a construction, the literature provided a construction, and each key informant provided constructions; this is considered the "hermeneutic" part of the circle. The dialectic aspect of the circle is that each participant was presented with other participants' constructions, and interpretations were compared, contrasted, and changed as needed (Morris, 2006).

The data for this project is the opinions and experiences of a social services employee and various direct service providers and administrators of agencies that families are referred to in the area. Because everyone's experience in delivering services for Child Welfare clients is unique and cannot

be summarized into numbers, subjective data were gathered and analyzed from a lens that valued each individual human experience and opinion.

Literature Review

Difficulty with access to reasonable services for child welfare clients is not an isolated issue for just one county, it is something that the whole country faces in rural communities. The literature review on this topic covers the overall challenges that rural clients and service providers have faced in other communities.

The construction presented in the literature of this study is one of the key constructions used in the dialectic hermeneutic circle of this process. This literature review presents the challenges for service delivery, challenges for social workers, and challenges for families

<u>Challenges for Service Delivery</u>

Successful child welfare services depend on a variety of factors including healthy families, a wide range of adequate supports and services, and cohesive communities (Gillespie, 2007). While these are all universally essential between urban and rural communities, there are many unique challenges in rural child welfare social work that present barriers to these factors.

Travel distances serves as an ongoing issue that workers face in rural communities. In the county being studied there is one office serving the whole

county that spans a distance of about three hours driving. Some states have piloted programs to better utilize caseworker time so they can provide more direct services to families, for instance, South Dakota has added six social worker aids to their staff primarily to drive to and from child-welfare related appointments (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

One of the ongoing challenges for rural child welfare agencies is that many of the infrastructure decisions are made in urban governmental settings, for instance in California most of the decisions are made in the larger urban state capital of Sacramento (Belanger, 2008). This is a challenge for rural social work because programs, policies, and funding are often times based off larger population sizes or case numbers.

Murty (2006) believes that the future of rural social work can go in two directions: it can either become a distant field that is forgotten and most rural communities will be forced to adopt urban practices or become absorbed by surrounding urban areas; or rural social work can be revived by the advocacy of rural social workers and larger regional organizations focusing more on how they serve their regional communities. This is an important consideration for this study, because while it is unlikely the community will be absorbed by any surrounding urban area anytime soon, there does need to be continued advocacy by rural social workers along with larger regions providing support to this community through things such as trainings, policy implementations, and direct service assistance when needed.

Another challenge for delivering services in rural communities is recruiting and retaining social workers. Even though rural child welfare workers tend to report lower stress levels, there is a need for recruitment of more professional staff due to the lack of availability of job opportunities and lower salaries in rural areas (Kim & Hopkins, 2017). These factors have potentially contributed to less workers wanting to work in rural communities. In a study of 97 BSW students and 18 MSW students it was found that 54.3% of BSW students choice of practice location was in a community with 20,000 people or more and 49.5% of MSW students agreed, 19.4% BSW students wanted to live in a town or area of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metropolitan or urban area and 22.5% of MSW students felt the same way (Phillips, Quinn, & Heitkamp, 2010). This presents an issue for rural social work because it left only a small fraction of students that were willing to work in rural communities that are not adjacent to metropolitan areas, which the community in this study falls under.

It is critical for agencies to provide the right "organizational climate," as Kim and Hopkins (2017) have discovered, rural child welfare workers tend to value collaboration and cooperation in the workplace and look to opportunities for professional growth and promotion more so than their urban worker counterparts. This also poses a specific challenge to rural social work because there are times when professional growth may not be as accessible in a

smaller workplace if supervisor and manager positions do not become available as often.

<u>Challenges for Social Workers</u>

Research shows that there are distinct differences in the workplace and community dynamics for social workers in rural settings compared to urban settings. Landsman (2002) conducted a cross-sectional survey in which 990 workers (384 rural and 606 urban) from 115 child welfare county offices in Missouri were surveyed and variables from their experiences were compared. It was found that degrees of specialty, available jobs, and adequacy of resources was greater in urban work; while educated workers are less common in rural offices. 26.8% of rural workers had bachelor's degrees and 2.3% had master's, while 31.5% of urban workers had bachelor's degrees and 7.8% had master's degrees (Landsman, 2002). This goes to show the difference in education between child welfare workers in rural and urban communities, especially when it comes to master's degrees. The issue here is that the less educated the workers are, the less skill they will have in delivering services, creating policies, and advocating for their rural agencies to get appropriate resources needed.

Mackie's (2007) study of 876 social workers (416 rural and 351 urban) found through the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) revealed that there were no significant differences in levels of education between bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees; however social workers in the

rural group were more likely to have grown up in a rural community and participated in rural practicum in their education. It was found that 21% of rural undergraduate level social workers had received some rural education versus 15% of urban workers and 81% of rural graduate level social workers had received rural education compared to 75% urban social workers. This study outlined the need for more intensive recruitment in rural areas and for educational programs to offer more rural based curriculums in order for social workers to become more prepared to the rural workforce (Mackie, 2007). This is a problem for rural social work because there is a reduced number of applicants from outside the rural area interested in working in these communities, especially if there are no opportunities to further develop their education. This in turn affects the service delivery if agencies are understaffed or do not have a sufficient variety of educated staff members.

Social workers in rural communities also face difficult challenges with dual relationships and managing their professional role and their community role while running into clients outside of the workplace. Social workers in populous urban settings have the luxury of anonymity with their personal life, this is not something that is common in rural communities, therefore social workers must always balance the chance of having clients interact with them outside of work and make decisions about their behavior in ways that will not negatively impact service delivery (Pugh, 2006). This can be very taxing on workers who may have mutual friends with clients or like to enjoy the same

community activities as clients. For instance, if a social worker enjoys having a couple drinks at Sunday night football with his friends and he runs into a client on his caseload who is required to stay sober, the social worker may feel hypocritical and uncomfortable doing a normal community activity. This can also create less authority for the social worker's service delivery as they try to help the client maintain sobriety.

Challenges for Families in Rural Communities

Travel distances are not only a barrier to delivering services, but also to accessing them. Unfortunately for children that have gone into foster care and for the Resource Families responsible for their care, there are no easy ways to deliver specialized medical care or therapies in rural areas. Caregivers are sometimes mandated to transport children far distances for the services needed in neighboring states. Rural parents can find themselves in predicaments in which they do not have the gas to drive to treatment needed or maintain sufficient employment, making them less likely to keep custody of their children (Belanger, 2008).

A 2008 study found that urban counties had significantly higher availability to services than rural counties; services included substance abuse treatment, mental health, transportation, daycare, parent education, and domestic violence services (Belanger & Stone, 2008). This is significant for this research because it shows that clients do not just have difficulty in accessing a few types of services in rural counties, they essentially have

issues with accessing the majority of services needed in a typical child welfare case.

The United States is a country of immigrants. In urban cities there is communities of migrants who have more access to services and supports that are culturally relevant than there are for migrants in rural areas. Pine and Drachman (2005) recommend that relationships are established between rural child welfare agencies and public and private agencies that serve immigrants, and members from these supportive agencies can help walk families through the child welfare process and represent their best interests in meetings such as family team meetings.

The data shows that there are ongoing challenges with rural child welfare service delivery that need addressed. These challenges include travel difficulties for service providers and consumers, a further need for more rural curriculum in higher education, poor recruitment of workers on behalf of child welfare agencies, and lack of community-based resources from the state and federal level. This study is needed in that it will further analyze and expose similar challenges this community faces and create an action plan to help address them.

Theoretical Orientation

Ecological systems theory is the theoretical orientation that guided this research project. This is especially useful to use in this constructivist approach

to the topic because ecological systems theory is a very flexible and open perspective, as is constructivism. Ecological system theory accepts the fact that the world is endlessly complex, therefore models must be implemented as drafts in order to do justice for clients when their rich and restlessly changing lives are taken into consideration (Rothery, 2008). Ecological systems theory is an adaptation of general systems theory and ecological theory. The general systems theory states that all individuals in a system have a reciprocal influence on one another, while the ecological aspect attempts to further describe one's embeddedness in their environment (Rothery, 2008).

Ecological systems theory is an effective way to view rural challenges that clients face by placing them in the center of the system and analyzing the layers of the system outside of them that impact their life. Specifically, the layers in rural communities tend to be different than urban communities, such as the exosystem being more impacted by lower economic conditions and less employment opportunities (Bauer & Dolan, 2011). This study utilized ecological systems theory to understand the complex factors in individuals lives that have placed them in a more disadvantaged position to utilize appropriate services.

Contribution to Social Work Practice

This research contributes to the study of micro social work practice in terms of individual approach and service delivery techniques with clients and families struggling in rural communities.

For macro practice, this research contributes to policy decisions made on a countywide level all the way up to a national level for specific practices and services that are best served to rural communities. Programs and services need to be better understood from a rural lens in that everything cannot be provided in one centralized location and services delivery may need to be creative and community based. Policy makers may not fully realize the limitations of rural communities in regard to no public transportation and the vast geographical distances clients and providers must travel.

Specifically, for this region, this study revealed strengths and gaps in service delivery. Ideally, strategies for utilizing unique resources available in the area can help formulate ways to create and implement informal services for clients that would otherwise go without proper intervention.

The study of this topic is drastically needed on a national level as delivering and accessing services in rural communities has become such a struggle in child welfare as a whole. With more successful strategies and better policies in place, less children will be harmed by maltreatment, more families will be kept together, and agencies can better utilize their resources around the country.

Summary

Child welfare is a complex service that is relatively new to social work as a whole. With rural communities being somewhere between 72 and 95 percent of land area in our country, it is no surprise that child welfare services for these clients in this area needs to be effective and accessible (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). The constructivist approach to this research topic allowed for in depth conversations that captured the complexity of the issue in ways that quantitative data cannot. Using theories such as ecological system and relational theory as frameworks for this study helped guide the data gathering and analysis process.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Selecting a relevant study site and proper key participants is critical to the constructivist paradigm. Participants were chosen through a networking process as the researcher is a current employee at the research site agency and already has established rapport with partnering agencies. The researcher managed the impact of any possible influence on the participants by keeping a neutral tone and ensuring that his working relationship was taken into account during interactions. Throughout the study the issues of diversity, ethics, and politics were taken into consideration while gathering data and engaging stakeholders.

Research Site

The study site for this research project is a rural mountainous community in eastern California with a population of less than 14,000 people ranging over 3,000 square miles. The largest city is about 8,000 people and is a ski resort town that is the heart of the county's economy. The county is made up of various other smaller towns, with the county seat being one of them with just over 500 people.

One major agency this study examined is the county's social services child welfare agency. This agency provides screening of child maltreatment reports for the community, implements emergency response investigative services, court ordered and voluntary family maintenance and family reunification services, adoption coordination with the state, and a Resource Family Approval (RFA) program.

The other sites are various other agencies that provide services to clients in the area which include mental health, drug and alcohol treatment, wraparound, domestic violence advocacy, public health foster care nurse, childcare licensing and funding, early childhood education and developmental services, and regional center services.

Clients served by the county social services agency and partnering agencies are either community members receiving abuse prevention services, have been referred to services by the agency through an investigation, or are receiving services as part of a voluntary or court ordered case plan.

Engagement Strategies

The engagement strategy used in this study was to utilize an already established relationship between the county agency and the partnering agencies and key stakeholders at each research site. This was made possible because the researcher is already a current employee at the county social

services agency and has been personally working with these partners for about three years.

The researcher first engaged the key administrator at the county agency, the director, through formal letter of request for support. Next the researcher engaged another critical administrator at the county, the program manager, in a face-to-face discussion to explain the constructivist approach to the research topic. This administrator assisted the researcher in identifying more key players and gatekeepers at partnering agencies who will provide constructive inputs on the research topic.

This researcher utilized emails and phone calls to key participants and gatekeepers to introduce the purpose of the study and discuss the process of information gathering to allow for participants to decide if they will participate. Engagement strategies with key informants was critical to gain the support of gatekeepers. Part of this strategy was to explain the potential mutual benefits of the research project to all agencies and ensure that data will be in group form and participants will remain confidential. The constructivist process was explained in that there will be an initial interview followed up by a group meeting in which individual and joint constructs developed, analyzed, and discussed.

Self-Preparation

In order to prepare for a constructivist study, one must acknowledge that data is likely to change and evolve throughout the study, therefore flexibility is critical. A significant amount of time for planning in this constructionist study was done as there are many lengthy interviews and multiple paths the study could take. As a constructivist researcher, going into the study with a preconceived notion on the subject was an important part of the overall construct, however it was critical to be receptive to other opinions as it is likely the research would reveal various views of the issue that the researcher did not know prior.

As part of proper preparation, the researcher became as well educated on the topic at hand as possible by reviewing current literature and reflecting on personal experiences as a county agency employee. The researcher became better prepared to sufficiently explain the constructivist process to key players in a way that is easy to understand and empowers them to use their opinion and experiences for the study as equal players. The researcher prepared to explain that collaboration between all players is critical, that each construct is unique, and each participant is encouraged to approach the topic with an opinion, but an open mind at the same time.

The researcher studied the relevancy of various agencies who partner with the county agency to help decide which key players and services will be incorporated in the study. The researcher ensured he was well versed in the

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services being studied, knowledgeable about the experience of the key players involved, and particularly sensitive to the experiences and confidentiality of participants and discussed clients in the study.

Lastly, but possibly the most important area of self-preparation for engagement was the researcher prepared himself on the manner in which he approached key players. There was an overall level of respect and appreciation to all players for the services they offer to the community and for the time and effort they were asked to put into the study.

Diversity Issues

The consideration of the diversity of key participants and gatekeepers was taken into consideration with this study. Participants ranged from various educational backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, and ages to allow for a diverse range of demographic representation.

Limitations to consider with diversity issues in this study is that certain groups served may not be fully represented in the pool of participants chosen. The community served has two federally recognized Native American tribes and also serves a large population of immigrants. For this study, it was ensured that key participants have had experience serving these groups in order to at least get a small perspective of these groups experiences.

The researcher was aware to be cautious of his own biases and viewpoints of the topic when interviewing key players and analyzing data as he has significant involvement with all providers and child welfare rural services. .

Ethical Issues

Child welfare client information is highly confidential and that was respected throughout this study. Whenever client information was discussed in the study the researcher ensured there were no identifiers in the information included. Service provider personally identifiable information in this study is also respected in that the researcher ensured their information remained confidential. Participants were provided informed consents prior to the start of the study which explained that their identity and their agency will remain anonymous and data will be presented in group form only (See Appendix C). Additionally, participants were given an alternative means of participation instead of attending the member check meeting to further respect their confidentiality.

Political Issues

Politically speaking in regards to the county agency and other agencies, it was ensured that each person has an equal level of power in regard to their construct in this study, including the researcher and the clients, meaning that

the hierarchy of power within and between agencies does not have an impact on the importance of data (Morris, 2013).

It was important for the county agency and community agencies to give an accurate depiction of the challenges in delivering their services. There was a possibility to be considered that they may not want to show themselves as having any deficits in their services provided, therefore it was explained to the agencies that the point of this study is to help fill in any gaps in lack of services, not to negatively portray agencies.

While the researcher used his capacity as a current county agency employee to help identify and engage key participants and develop his own construct of the issue, he made it clear that this project is not done under any capacity for the government, but rather is a research project for his Master of Social Work program.

The Role of Technology in Engagement

Technology played a key role in engagement within this research project by utilizing the ease of communication with email and phone calls for most initial contacts.

While face to face interviews were essential in this study as it allowed to hear each key player's opinion firsthand to take into account individuals tones, facial expressions, and body language, all things that are more difficult to be captured electronically, technology was still heavily utilized. Interviews were

audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the use of technology. The member check meeting was also done via web conference on Zoom.

Summary

Engagement is arguably the most critical piece of information gathering in this constructivist study. Proper preparation on behalf of the researcher was necessary in order to identify the initial stakeholders to engage and explain the research topic and process. Ethical considerations took precedence in regard to planning for this study because child welfare is a highly confidential topic and clients' privacy must be respected. Diversity issues were either addressed or pointed out along with careful consideration of the political concerns that were recognized for this research.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

This chapter outlines the implementation of this research project by reviewing the selection of study participants, sampling methods, data gathering techniques, and evaluation of data.

Study Participants

The pool of key players for this study were chosen from a variety of agencies that provide services to child welfare clients. Key stakeholders in the county agency included the Department Heads and Program Managers, and supervisors. Key stakeholders in outside agencies were directors, managers, and direct service providers.

It was important to include direct service providers in the study as they are be able to provide clear accurate opinions on the challenges they face with service delivery out in the field. These participants included childhood education interventionists, a public health foster care nurse, and mental health and substance abuse providers. All of these stakeholders gave a unique perspective about their services for clients as some are typically for the children and others are typically for the parents, however all of them are critical for the success of a child welfare intervention.

Administrators in this study included the director of a domestic violence advocacy program, the director of a childhood developmental education agency, a program manager in the childcare licensing and funding program, and the program manager of the county social services agency. Their perspective was also critical to this study as it allowed for a view from a more macro lens that deals with funding streams, staff recruitment and management, and ongoing coordination of programs between agencies.

Selection of Participants

Within a constructivist paradigm it is important to allow for a more naturalistic discovery of participants, therefore purposive sampling was utilized in the selection of participants in this study. Purposive sampling is a nonrandom technique typically used in qualitative research in which the researcher deliberately chooses participants who have knowledge and experience related to the chosen phenomenon of interest (Etikan et al., 2016). The researcher used his common knowledge of working as a child welfare social worker in the community to identify service providers who would share the same phenomenon of experiencing challenges when delivering services in the rural community.

Maximum variation sampling was used in this study as it allowed the ability to identify diverse experiences within a social phenomenon and gave in-depth accounts of cases with important commonalities found amongst the

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sample chosen (Morris, 2006). Maximum variation sampling was used to identify additional participants after consulting with the county agency program manager. The researcher ensured that his participants ranged from a variety of diverse services, including but not limited to, mental health, early childhood education, and domestic violence advocacy.

Data Gathering

Qualitative data was initially gathered through individual face-to-face interviews with key players chosen from identified agencies. During the initial engagement phase the researcher made it clear to participants that one individual face-to-face interview will be needed along with a member check meeting. The researcher reviewed informed consents and participants signed and agreed upon them prior to data gathering.

Specific types of open-ended questions in this study helped reveal patterns throughout the data. The three main categories of questions used for this type of constructivist study are descriptive, structural, and contrast (Morris, 2013). Questions were open ended and explored an overall description of services providing, any difficulties providers have had in delivering rural services, challenges in obtaining funding, any improvements they think could be made, and how they feel their services compare to urban counterparts.

These questions were critical to allowing for participants to be open about their experiences and opinions about the common phenomenon being

studied. Follow up questions were asked as each conversation evolved and had unique aspects. This also allowed for the discussion of any potential strengths, not just challenges, each provider felt there was in providing services in a rural community.

The second phase of data gathering was done at the member check meeting at the end of the study where the hermeneutic dialectic circle was completed with joint constructs coming together and potential action plans being discussed. The participants were given alternative methods to provide input to the member check meeting if they could not attend, but attendance was strongly encouraged. Interviews took place at the location of the participants choosing, typically their workplace. The member check meeting took place via web conferencing online and took approximately 35 minutes.

Phases of Data Collection

Data was gathered through a collection of individual interviews and a group discussions. The initial engagement took place with the key stakeholders at the county agency then with partnering agencies. Phases of data collection began with the key players in which face-to-face interviews took place. Individual interviews were scheduled and structured in a comfortable setting for the participant and they were told about the expectations and dynamics of a constructionist study beforehand. It is within this explanation of the paradigm that participants were provided constructs

from the literature and other participants. This allowed for the participants to take into account other opinions and experiences when they formed their construction. Participants provided informed consent prior to each interview and they were audio recorded interviews which took anywhere from 20-45 minutes. It was in the initial interviews that in-depth conversations allowed for the participants to reflect on their knowledge, experiences, and opinions of the studied issue.

The transition between individual interviews and the member check meeting took place as the researcher ensured he had each construct accurate from all participants before the member check meeting. This ensured that during the meeting there were no significant disagreements between the researcher's perception of their constructs and their actual constructs.

During phase two a draft joint construction was brought to the meeting by the researcher after all constructs from the individual interview are completed, recorded, accurately transcribed, openly coded, and analyzed. The joint construction became finalized during the member check meeting in which all participants came together and discussed the findings. If individuals could not attend this meeting, their input was gathered beforehand and brought to the meeting. It is at the member check meeting in which disagreements and agreements were further brought to the surface and participants had the opportunity to hear all constructs and adapt theirs based on the new

information at their disposal. It is through this member check meeting and the final construction that action steps to address the issue were created.

Data Recording

Data from interviews and meetings was audio recorded with written permission from participants. The audio recording allowed for a more natural conversation in which participants and the researchers could speak freely without interruptions. Written notes were used as a supplement for follow up questions.

As recommended by Morris (2006), two separate journals were used throughout the study to assist with the data recording and research process, A reflective journal included notes from all aspects of the day-to-day process of the study. This journal outlined the reasoning behind choosing paradigms, data collection procedures, and rationales for any changes that were made to the study. A narrative journal account contained narratives of interviews and observational data throughout the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

The audio data collected was transcribed by a program called Otter.ai and was checked for accuracy by the researcher. The transcriptions were then qualitatively analyzed through open coded in a program called Atlas.ti. The transcripts were broken down into "units" of information which were

placed into categories. It is through these categories and units of information that similarities were observed between emerging constructs and joint constructions were created into a theoretical orientation. These constructs were reviewed with participants prior to and at the member check meeting to ensure their accuracy.

Summary

Implementing this research called for the data gatherer to carefully choose participants who have all had shared challenges with the studied phenomenon. It was instrumental in gathering all participant opinions openly and being flexible to changing ideas as constructs developed. The qualitative constructions and hermeneutic dialectic circle formed captures the complexity and challenges of rural child welfare as a whole. Qualitative data was gathered, transcribed, and affirmed in the first phases of data gathering and was then discussed in the member check meeting.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis and evaluation of data gathered from seven interviews, presents the findings of the research, and makes connections between this research and the current literature. Themes which emerged from the open coding, action plans formulated from the member check meeting, and implications for micro and macro practice are all reviewed.

Data Analysis

Several themes were apparent in the data from individual interviews and from the member check meeting. Data was transcribed via open and axial coding. The main categories revealed in open coding are the themes of challenges, strengths, and actions. The topics within these themes are the result of axial coding and narrowing down commonalities between participant data.

Challenges

Common themes around challenges emerged amongst participants including having specific difficulties with the more isolated clients in the community, difficulties with outreach, struggles with the vast amount of geographical travel demanded, and issues with staffing recruitment and retention.

North County and Outlier Communities. Every participant agreed that serving communities outside of the main hub town of 8,000 people was a distinct challenge. Most of the communities are north of this location, with two other small outlier communities southeast of this location as well.

Participant #1 acknowledged that serving the north community is a challenge, particularly because of how far away it is for service providers already being stretched thin by serving communities across two counties and travelling up to 300 miles in both directions. When discussing northern counties Participant #1 claimed "I think everyone is underserving them" and outreach events up north are "not regularly scheduled things." There may also be a correlated negative result of underserving this community as well as Participant #2 explained "a couple years ago we found that the rates of recurrent maltreatment were slightly higher in rural areas of the community." Participant #6 stated "I think there's a tendency to see more poverty in those areas. People are more isolated out there and lack social support opportunities."

One provider expressed difficulty in utilizing alternative locations to provide her services to a client in North County because the services could not be provided in the child's foster home or the mother's home due to dynamics around the case and visitation requirements. Her services are typically more appropriately provided in her classroom at the main town in this community or in a client's home, therefore she expressed that services up north in this situation were "a lot more difficult than our classroom here, which is a bit more toddler

friendly. I don't have as many toys or big equipment in that room for that age group" (Participant #3).

Not only does providing direct services present itself as a challenge in this area, also referring clients to accessible related services that will improve their utilization of your services is also very difficult. In the same case Provider #3 also expressed a challenge in having her client be able to access physical therapy in their local region only because of bureaucratic barriers between state's medical insurance. This client had to drive the minor hundreds of miles to receive therapy, as opposed to utilizing identical services available only 30 minutes because it was over state lines.

Outreach. Outreach has been an identified challenge in this rural community. Participant #4 explained that she has difficulty with maintaining her services with clients who her agency feels would benefit from continued services after child welfare steps away,

> If you guys think they're okay and close the case then they're most likely going to be exiting our services. Sometimes the highest needs families only participate with that extra layer of accountability. Just having somebody to be there to check in makes a difference and we just worry about that.

Participant #1's agency only has one staff member for outreach and prevention, and this member serves two different counties. They explained that

more staff for outreach would allow for improved "connections to be a resource for teachers and parents to use for things like regularly scheduled."

Travel. Travel is a unique challenge for this rural community not just because of the vast geographical landscape that the county spreads across, but also when having to deal with unsafe driving conditions in harsh winter mountain conditions.

Participant #7 states "the trouble is if roads are closed the families cannot access the main services offered in the southern county and sometimes they cannot go 20 minutes away to Nevada based on insurance." This again ties into the struggles that northern county residents face. With an 8,100' pass between these residents and the main hospital, child welfare office, and many other services, the road is often closed in harsh winter storms.

Not only is travel difficult for clients, but service providers as well. There are times when service providers are willing and able, or are even mandated to provide services in a client's local community. Participant #6 explained they have had to implement an open-door policy for some clients as opposed to always going to their homes because some clients are very unreliable in making themselves available, "we send a provider for a 90-minute drive and have someone not show up."

Participant #2 gives a very clear view on how much travel time can be a challenge for a case in which you are mandated to provide reasonable or even active services in a case, "one case can end up being half of your time for a

whole week if you're really committed to delivering the same level of care that you would for a kid here in town." This puts into perspective how different services are in this community compared to a larger urban area, because it is very unlikely a social worker would be driving a four-hour round trip to deliver services as there would be another office with workers to be assigned those clients closer.

Recruitment/Retention. Recruitment and retention are known issues with child welfare social work as a whole, however the unique challenges that the participants shared this community faces with recruitment and retention in nearly all related services are significant.

Not being able to entice employees with potential promotions can be a barrier to retaining employees in a rural area such as this. Participant #2 explains,

> There's just not a ton of growth opportunity right, if you were a worker here your only option of moving up if you want to stay in the same line of work would be to promote to be a supervisor, well if you only have two supervisors and they're not going anywhere, anytime soon it, it just limits the growth opportunity.

Recruiting qualified applicants for specialized positions is also a heightened challenge in this rural community. Participant #1 said it took six months to hire their recent coordinator, "it was very hard because the position requires experience working with families, it requires business development

experience, it requires the knowledge of the juvenile dependency court system. And there just isn't a huge applicant pool over here for that type of job. We interviewed 30 people for that job the vast majority were not qualified."

Lack of Diverse Specialized Services. Specialized services in this area are definitely lacking, and this creates a challenge for clients and providers in that either the services are simply not available and clients must travel long distances elsewhere to get them, or providers must be very creative to develop more informal types of services, which may not be as ideal as formal counterparts.

This community struggles with having formal drug treatment services if a client needs a higher level of intervention. Participant # 6 explained that a significant challenge is,

Access, right? We don't have a bunch of inpatient treatment centers that we can send people to that you have in big urban areas. I mean the resources in California across the board are slim to none right, but our resources are very slim. Out here it's like we don't even have a sober living house, we don't have a lot of the formal services that people would want to get into if they did want to do a different type of treatment.

This captures the challenge of clients basically having a 'take it or leave it' option when it comes to some services, which is not always ideal if a client has heightened needs related to their child welfare case, such as battling a serious drug addiction that may benefit from inpatient intervention. Furthermore, if you do send a local client who grew up in a small rural community to a large inpatient

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treatment center in the city, they may experience "a totally shocking environment. You have people that are in there on parole from state prison and are more seasoned on the streets" (Participant #6).

Providers Wearing "Many Hats". This topic is related to the previous theme of not having specialized services, however it is more related to the challenges that specific providers face in having to play multiple roles in their job that would likely be played by many different people in an urban setting.

When you're in a more urban community, you're more likely to be doing a specialized task or having a specific kind of role in a family's life. And the upshot to that is, is you develop probably a high skill set and mastery, and that can be a great thing (Participant #2).

The lack of the ability for providers to master a specific skillset makes it so some skills are not exercised as often and it may impact how well providers serve their clients. For instance, if a social worker only does two forensic interviews with sexual assault victims they may not be as competent as an urban worker who does them on a weekly basis and important details in the interview may be missed.

Provider # 3 has had a similar experience with a very special high needs case recently in which the client needed specialized therapies multiple times per week. This provider is more of a generalist with early childhood education and found it challenging to provide optimal care for those requiring increased specialty services,

I'd say, I have to wear many hats, because we don't have occupational

therapists, we don't have a speech therapist. We have a physical therapist

who works with children at the clinic, but not out in the field as was needed

in this case (Participant #3).

The issue of having to wear multiple hats in service delivery is not just a

challenge in terms of not having a specialized skillset, it can also get providers

into difficult situations with playing multiple roles where there may be a conflict of

interest. Participant #6 has had difficulties in having to facilitate meetings with

families while also having another role or history with that family, whereas

big agencies have the luxury of saying 'you know what let's put in a

neutral facilitator because you are hitting a wall on this one.' So you bring

in this fresh person that's not attached to any of it. Then you suddenly

come up with a plan that everybody can agree on.

Funding and Administrative Challenges. Direct service delivery is a

challenge, but there is also a lot that goes on behind the scenes in a more macro

sense that makes rural service delivery to child welfare clients difficult.

Some participant's agencies utilize grants in order to fund their services.

Unfortunately, some grants are set up to be modeled for larger urban recipients.

Participant #1 gave an example, explaining that meeting the in-kind match for

government grants in a rural area is very difficult because expenses to write off

are not as drastically expensive, but that does not mean this agency doesn't

need some of that grant, "it's nearly impossible to reach. I think it's easier to meet that match if you're operating a big city."

Not just with grant-based agencies, but with directly funded county government entities it is also a challenge to take into consideration the additional expense of operating in a rural community.

> Doing work in a rural area, it's a bigger cost and you can't compare caseloads in the same way because it's totally different. Funding is usually distributed based on caseloads and population, but there's usually some acknowledgement that in a small county you need at least some base level funding to even get something off the ground, but that doesn't always happen (Participant #2).

It is important for macro decision makers not to just look at ratios and percentages in considerations of funding for rural counties because skewed numbers can create large percentage shifts that are not necessarily representative of reality or of what can shift significantly compared to in larger counties.

The largest town within this community also has a very high cost of living. Because of this, many families are working numerous jobs just to get by, however they are not considered low income and they do not qualify for services that would benefit them. For example, when parents are applying for childcare assistance,

some of them we have to disqualify because they make too much money,

which isn't very much. It's almost a catch 22 because these families can't

qualify because they make just slightly over even though they're working

two to three jobs at minimum wage (Participant #5).

<u>Strengths</u>

While this project aims to explore the challenges of this studied

phenomenon, it would be remiss not to discuss the strengths of offering services

to child welfare clients in a rural community. Participants were very open to

discussing the numerous benefits they see when delivering rural services.

Knowing this makes it more possible to harness these strengths while guiding

action plans to address the challenges.

   <u>Caseloads/workloads.</u> Larger caseloads in more urban counties likely

result in a number of negative impacts on how services are delivered. Providers

do not have the same level of attention they are able to give each case and

experience higher fatigue and burnout.

   Participants included helpful perspectives about rural caseloads as

opposed to urban such as, "I think one thing that's good is I have a relatively

small caseload. I have counterparts in some of the bigger counties that have

about 200 foster kids to manage" (Participant #7).

   Lower caseloads can also help with meeting timelines and not having

waitlists for clients. "We usually get everything done within the 45-day timeline.

Whereas in urban settings that's a challenge is meeting those timelines with so

many kids and I think there's a lot more waiting lists for services." (Participant #3);

It was also communicated that lower caseloads which are not always switching hands to other workers has the potentially to create better quality services delivered to clients.

I think it can create a strong sense of ownership and responsibility that hopefully translates into more safety and better-quality intervention, because if you know if you're the one out in the field doing that upfront interview. You know that whatever you do that day, you're going to have to live with that next month or three months from now (Participant #2).

Individualized Services. This is likely related to the caseload aspect we just discussed, but rural service providers have also expressed that they are able to provide more individualized services to clients.

I think we are really good at providing services in a way that is individualized and trauma informed. I think we go out of our way to make people feel safe and we take a lot of time on engagement. And that's something that's really valuable for people that are in the child welfare system (Participant #6).

This is important to note that the ability to spend extra time for engagement and individualization has the potential to overcome some of the deficits of rural social work, such as not being able to master skills in intervention as much.

There is also the belief that the lack of available services makes service providers have to create informal individualize services, which is a strength.

> There's a flip side and I think that the lack of those services, forces, those of us who are doing the work to be more creative and to be more individualized which is how we should be working in the first place with families so (Participant #2).

Increased collaboration. Working in a small community with other providers also has its benefits in being able to have a stronger rapport and collaboration with partners. "We work very closely with you guys. I chat with your director and program manager almost every day about all kinds of stuff. About cases, about outreach, whatever I mean you name it. So, there's a very close partnership" (Participant #1).

Participant #6 expressed that his agency's rural collaboration with child welfare is very encouraging,

> We have a very cohesive team and I absolutely like how we're doing it. I think the more we can come to the table and have these conversations about what we want our program to be like is great. We got a lot of smart people, yeah like very passionate people in our county.

Proposed Actions

All participants were able to provide helpful insight into what actions they would like to see either started or increased in the county in order to improve their rural service delivery.

Specialized Roles. Having the ability to create more specialized roles amongst agencies for things like outreach and prevention were repeated suggestions from a couple participants. "If we had the funding for someone in Mono County to focus specifically on outreach and Mono County outreach and prevention work and Mono County" (Participant #1). Another participant offered, "maybe a specific position that's called a prevention specialist for child welfare" (Participant #6).

One participant had an interesting perspective on not necessarily hiring workers who are the most qualified, but building some our workforce from the ground up so that they become a more integral part of the community.

Let's not just always focus on getting the person who has the license or who's graduated with their masters, let's build these people up from the community that want to go to school and let's support that, you know, the hopes that they're gonna stick around in the community (Participant #6).

Satellite Offices. Having satellite offices, particularly in the northern region of the county was a definite proposed action from three participants. While there is a social services office in north county, it is not child welfare specific and is not conducive to having a social worker stationed or to providing services such as child visitation. For example, participants expressed, "You know, it sure would be nice if social services could have a field office up there was that staffed whole time" (Participant #1). "Consider having a social worker to have office hours up in North County, once a week or something like that" (Participant #2). "Maybe

having collaborative community Wellness Center, where we can do outreach and prevention for the community and kind of have everybody bring some money to the table to fund it (Participant #7). This is a difficult challenge as it has been a known issue for the county, however it is hard to justify the expense of having a whole building built or one remodeled to meet these needs if it will not be used very often.

Increase Outreach and Informal Services. A universal action item identified is being able to increase outreach and being able to provide more informal services to clients with our rural challenges. Social media outreach was identified by Participant #1 to recruit volunteers for their program. Participant # 2 mentioned that we could increase our use of technology in interactions with clients, such as Zoom, while acknowledging there "isn't ever a substitute for being with someone in person." Participant #7 said that an increase in "using telemedicine maybe if the kids would only have to travel for appointments once a year and then they could see their doctors via telemedicine would be really helpful."

Preventative work is a form of outreach that participants expressed can be improved, "get CPS social workers and case managers or agents out there to do prevention in a way that kind of does more education on know how to prevent families from maltreatment and getting into the system" (Participant #6).

Informal services are tricky and must be done creatively in such a rural community. "You're not just going to be able to ship them off to a parenting class,

or some sort of specialty group, you're going to have to create the intervention yourself" (Participant #2). This shows that creating interventions is a skill in and of itself, which is something that providers absolutely need to do more often in this community.

Funding Improvements. This section ties in with the funding difficulties and administrative challenges expressed in the previous section. Improvements mentioned were to have adjustments made to programs that would either make it easier for them to deliver services or easier for clients to access services. Participant #1 explained that services from their agency would be improved if there was "a reduction in the in-kind match for the cost of grants." Accessibility to childcare services would also be improved for clients if "they raised the income guidelines maybe another $500" (Participant #5).

Participant #1 also made a valid point that "there needs to be more money and more resources for prevention and outreach. There is a lot of focus on reactionary services, like CPS is reactionary." The need for more outreach and prevention appeared to be a repetitive theme amongst participants, therefore this will be a strong action item that providers need to take into consideration.

Data Interpretation

The results from this research represent a comprehensive analysis and representation of the experiences and opinions of seven different service providers in this community who are all experiencing challenges in rural service

delivery. While this study could be done from the lens of their respective fields in terms of rural service delivery, this project is viewing the phenomenon specifically from a child welfare perspective.

Results from this study indicate a variety of findings which will be helpful for providers in this community and for similar providers in other rural communities. In terms of challenges, it was revealed that isolated communities in rural counties need special attention in terms of outreach and commitment from services providers. It was shown that recruitment and retention need to be carefully addressed by nearly all agencies, especially if there is a small applicant pool for an experienced position that needs filled. There are multiple layers of complexity with providers having to work in various roles that they would not have to otherwise in an urban setting, while at the same time reducing their ability to specialize in a specific skillset. Rural long-distance travel on a regular basis is a difficulty for both service providers and recipients, which could be partially addressed with the use of technology.

In terms of strengths, quite a few strengths were revealed from the data and the constructs created by the participants. Again, this study is designed to address the challenges of rural child welfare services, but knowing the strengths is a key factor in being able to utilize these strengths in correcting the deficits. One of the main strengths identified was participants being able to work with lower caseloads, which appeared to result in allowing them to provide more individualized and personalized services for their clients as they are able to

dedicate more time to each one. Another strength identified was being able to work more collaboratively with partnering agencies. Participants expressed that they are able to communicate with partners, including child welfare, sometimes on a daily basis, which is much easier in a rural community.

Action plans proposed for this issue were well thought out and have strong potential to be implemented for positive change. Some action plans included having more funding and positions available for outreach and prevention, having a satellite child welfare office or collaborative wellness center in the more rural northern community, ensuring that providers are able to create informal services as needed when a services is not available, as well as having some governmental policy changes around how funding is allocated or guidelines are created in rural communities.

Implications of Findings for Micro and Macro Practice

This research shows significant implications for both micro and macro social work practice. For micro practice difficulties, strengths, and improvements were discussed in regard to, but not limited to, intervention techniques with families, staffing considerations for service providers, adaptations to the unique difficulties around travelling in rural counties, and ways to increase collaboration and coordination amongst providers. Macro practice implications include policy improvement considerations, funding guideline suggestions, department hiring

strategies, and further laying a foundation for increased research on the topic of rural child welfare services.

Summary

This study has created productive and meaningful conversations amongst professionals in the community who are dedicated to providing the best services possible to their clients. The service providers who participated in this study felt that this project has potential to be helpful for our county, as well as other rural counties struggling with similar difficulties. Possibly the most important implication from this study is that it has created and encouraged these types of discussions to continue. It is important to note that this study also revealed a significant amount of strengths and benefits of delivering rural services. It is within these strengths that service providers can continue to grow and work together in order to improve the lives and well-being of children and families who they serve.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERMINATION AND FOLLOW UP

Introduction

This chapter outlines the termination process implemented by the researcher, how findings were communicated with participants and the study site, and discusses the ongoing relationship with participants.

Termination of Study

Termination began at the member check meeting in which participants were informed this was the final component of participation asked in this study. Participants were provided a debriefing statement which included the research advisor's contact information and the link to obtain group results of the study. Ongoing multidisciplinary team meetings between agencies were encouraged to discuss how the action plan is working and if there are any changes needed to further address the issue studied. Lastly, participants were thanked for their meaningful interactions and time dedicated to this study.

Communication of Findings to Study Site and Study Participants

A final report of the findings was created and given to the county agency participant and made available to other participants via a website link. The goal of the report is to assist the county, service agencies, and clients on strategies to

come up with new services for clients as well as how to utilize the services available to them more effectively.

Ongoing Relationship with Study Participants

Because the researcher is employed at the county agency in the small community working closely with other providers, a relationship will be maintained with the participants. This study is related to the everyday work of this researcher as well as participants, therefore the researcher explained that he is available anytime to discuss any questions or comments in relation to this study and provided his email and phone number for any follow up.

Dissemination Plan

This research project was shared with the study site and participants via electronic correspondence. The findings of this study were submitted to California State University, San Bernardino. The results of this study are intended to enhance the delivery and coordination of services within rural child welfare social work practice. The communication and dissemination of these findings are to encourage further discourse and research on the presented topic.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

- Would you please give me a general summary of the services you provide to clients in the community?

- What are some general challenges you face when delivering services to mutual child welfare clients?

- What are some challenges with funding for your services in this community?

- What are some ways that you feel policies could be improved from to help with the challenges of service delivery in this county?

- What actions do you feel need to be taken to improve access and delivery of your services?

- What are some strengths or benefits that you have experienced in delivering services to clients in this rural community?

- How do you feel that your services differ from our urban counterparts working with child welfare families?

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s): <u>Raymond Gaffney</u>

Proposal Title: Challenges to Rural Child Welfare Services

_SW1952_____

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the

Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

- -

Proposal is:

__X__   Approved

_____   To be resubmitted with revisions listed below

_____   To be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

_____   Investigators' and student's signature missing

_____   Missing informed consent _____ Debriefing statement

____   Revisions needed in informed consent _____ Debriefing

____   Data collection instruments revision

_____   Agency approval letter missing

_____   CITI missing

____   Revisions in design needed (specified below)

_____   6/24/2019

Committee Chair Signature   Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

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APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SAN BERNARDINO

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the challenges of service delivery to child welfare clients in this rural community. The study is being conducted by Raymond Gaffney, a MSW student under the supervision of Dr Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt, faculty supervisor in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the challenges of service delivery to child welfare clients in this rural community.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked several questions in an individual face to face interview regarding their experience in working with child welfare clients, any difficulties in delivering services, and what suggestions they may have for improvement.

At the end of the study participants will be asked to attend a member check meeting with all key players coming together to discuss the data from the study.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only. No identifying information will be distributed regarding yourself or your agency and all recorded data will be deleted after this study.

DURATION: It will take 30-45 minutes to complete the initial interview and the member check meeting will take approximately 45-60mintues.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt at Gretchen.Heidemann@csusb.edu.

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APPENDIX D

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

This study you have just completed was designed to examine the challenges of service delivery to child welfare clients in this rural community. This study is focused on assessing current interventions, resources, policies, and regulations that affect how services are accessible and deliverable to clients. This statement was written to inform you that no deception is used in this study.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt at Gretchen.Heidemann@csusb.edu. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the ScholarWorks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/) after December 2020.

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