

# Professional Development and Certification for Child Protective Services Supervisors: A Follow-up Study of the Texas Initiative

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## Introduction

Child welfare, particularly child protective services, is in a crisis. Child abuse and neglect reporting continues to escalate (CDF, 1997) as does the out-of-home placement of children. Additionally, there are new laws, such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) that have added even more stress on a system that is already quite tenuous.

The Adoption and Safe Family Act has toughened the time limits for making decisions concerning a permanent plan for children. Under the new law, time limits have been changed from 18 months to 12 months of placement for a child out of her/his home. Case decision-making will be even more demanding, requiring specialized expertise. The supervisor is often the person with the most consistent contact with a particular child and family, considering the continuing high rate of turnover for child protection workers. Having supervisors participate in ongoing professional development that certifies them in the required competencies will strengthen the community's trust in the child protection agency and will inevitably have a positive impact on the well being of children.

In 1993, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, through collaboration with the Children's Protective Services Training Institute (CPSTI), began a voluntary certification process for Child Protective Services Supervisors. As of March 1999, four years after the first group of Child Protective Services Supervisors became certified, 73 percent of the currently eligible supervisors statewide have voluntarily and successfully completed the certification process. At the height of the campaign to get supervisors certified, over 90 percent of all eligible were certified. This report on part of the program evaluation for this statewide effort contains a discussion of the lessons learned in initiating such an effort. Additionally, a follow-

up study reports on how certified supervisors in the state of Texas have perceived their certification and how others have perceived it. Additional components of the program evaluation not reported concern testing and its effectiveness.

## Overview of the Texas Initiative

In 1991, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (TDPRS), then called the Texas Department of Human Services, created the Children's Protective Services Training Institute (CPSTI). In 1999, the state of Texas expanded the role of the Institute to include all programs, Adult Protection, Child Care Licensing, and Community Projects. As a result of this initiative, the Institute changed its name to the Protective Services Training Institute (PSTI). The Institute is a consortium of the four graduate schools of social work in Texas and is funded through Title IV-E funds and matching funds from the Department and the schools of social work (Birmingham, et al., 1996). One of the initial projects of the Institute was certification of Child Protective Services (CPS) staff. Texas decided to certify supervisors first, and then consider certification of direct service staff. Pennsylvania, like some other states, certified direct service staff first and is now in the process of certifying supervisors (Breitenstein, Rycus, Sites, Jones Kelley, 1997).

## Certification Process

### *Background*

The first certification plan for CPS supervisors in Texas was developed in 1993, and implemented in 1994 and 1995. Shaped as an alternative to grandparenting in contemporary supervisors, it was termed the "modified period" for supervisor certification and posed fewer requirements than the "regular" certification process. Applicants did not have to submit performance evaluations or take the

multi-media skills based exam, and, while they did have to submit documentation of training, the number of hours required was much less than that necessary for the regular certification plan. The modified period was considered a success, as the vast majority of eligible supervisors at the time sought and achieved certification.

Although PSTI planned for the regular certification program to begin in late 1995, it was determined that the certification exam, specifically the multimedia skills-based section, required further validation efforts. Therefore, the "transitional period" for supervisor certification was conceptualized and implemented in early 1996. Supervisors and the Institute benefited as a result of the interim process. Although they had to meet all other certification requirements, the transitional period allowed supervisors who were ready to become certified to complete the process with a passing score on only the written exam, rather than on both the written and multimedia exams. The plan helped the certification effort, in that the exam taken by supervisors was designed to assist in the validation process for written items, as well as the multimedia exam as a whole. Even though only the validated items on the written exam were scored, non-validated questions were also included on the exam for statistical analysis. Supervisors took the multimedia exam exclusively for validation purposes. The transitional period, which lasted through 1996, was a success in reaching its purpose, as many supervisors were certified and the exam was validated.

#### ***Eligibility for Supervisor Certification***

The CPS Supervisor Certification Program in Texas was fully implemented in January of 1997. Supervisors seeking certification are now required to meet all eligibility requirements, and receive passing scores on both the written knowledge-based exam and the multimedia skills-based exam. To be eligible to take the certification exam, applicants must be at the Supervisor II level, which is

generally an automatic promotion after serving two years as a Supervisor I. In addition, as set forth in The Supervisor's Guide to CPS Supervisor Certification (CPSTI, 1997), applicants must submit, prior to taking the exam, documentation of the following:

#### ***Education and Experience***

- A bachelor's degree and two years of Texas CPS supervisory experience, or a master's degree in social work and 16 months of Texas CPS supervisory experience.
- An exception to the two-year experience requirement may be requested if the applicant holds a master's degree in a human services related field and has 16 months Texas CPS supervisory experience.

#### ***Performance***

- An overall rating of at least "meets requirements" on the employee's most recent performance evaluation.
- The applicant must have no violations of standards of conduct and must not be on probation.

#### ***Professional Development***

- Attendance in all of the professional development training required by Texas DPRS for the first two years as a supervisor: Supervisor Survival Skills and mentoring activities, two weeks of agency-provided supervision and management training, PSTI Year One Supervisor Training and PSTI Year Two Supervisor Training. These requirements are further detailed in the Comprehensive Professional Development Plan for CPS Supervisors (TDPRS, 1995).

#### ***Testing***

- A score of at least 70% on the written knowledge-based exam and a score of at least 70% on the multimedia skills-based exam. Applicants may take each exam up to three times if necessary to obtain a passing score. If one is unsuccessful after three

attempts, a waiting period of one year is required to begin the testing process again.

### ***Maintaining Certification***

Supervisor certification in Texas must be renewed every two years. The certification renewal date, like social work licensure in Texas, is based on birthdates, rather than original certification dates. The first renewal is due on the first birthdate after 24 months have elapsed from the original certification date. Applicants must verify that they have met TDPRS annual continuing education requirements. Over the two-year period, each supervisor must complete at least 40 contact hours of professional development training, including 3.0 continuing education credits. The re-certification form also requires a signature affirming that the applicant received at least a "meets requirements" rating on her/his most recent employee performance evaluation.

In order to verify that requirements are being met, PSTI requests the training records and performance evaluations of individual certified supervisors on a random basis. Certification will lapse if no renewal form is filed, if minimum training and/or performance requirements cannot be verified, or in cases of serious professional misconduct. Any supervisor whose certification has lapsed and who wishes to be re-certified must meet all certification requirements applicable at the date of re-application, including taking the certification exam.

### **Supervisor Certification Study**

#### ***Purpose***

The CPS Supervisor Certification Program has been in place in Texas since 1994. Texas is the first state to certify Child Protective Services Supervisors (Birmingham, et al., 1996). To date, there has not been any research done on the impact of supervisor certification, its impact on assuring quality of service, supervisors' perceptions of certification, or how supervisors use their certification. This article explores how supervisors perceive cer-

tification, how others perceive supervisor certification, and how supervisors use certification.

#### ***Method***

Each certified supervisor in the state of Texas were mailed a questionnaire with a self-addressed stamped envelope. One hundred and fifty one were returned, yielding a response rate of 62%, which is viewed as a good rate for mailed surveys (Rubin & Babbie, 1993). The survey was designed to be completed in less than 10 minutes. The questionnaire focused on items concerning how supervisors value their own certification, how their workers view supervisor certification, what impact program directors had on their choice to become certified, and how they utilize their certification in practice.

#### ***Results***

***Demographics.*** The majority of the supervisors are women (83%) and Caucasian (64%). The range in ages of supervisors is from 30 to 61 years. Supervisors' mean age is 44 years.

Respondents' average length of time working in Child Protective Services is 15 years, with 7.4 years as a supervisor. The majority of the supervisors have been certified since certification became available in the State of Texas, 3.3 years ago.

Most of the certified supervisors have a bachelor's degree (58%); 19% of these have a Bachelor in Social Work. Of the respondents, 32% have a Master of Social Work.

Texas is a diverse state with large urban areas, rural areas, and outlying areas (defined as suburban areas by cities). The sample represents that diversity. The majority of CPS supervisors and workers reside in urban areas. In this study, supervisors are distributed similarly. Seventy-three percent supervise units located in urban areas, 17% in rural, and 10% in outlying areas.

Table 1 includes examples of the questions that supervisors were asked about their opinions on the importance of supervisor certification and its impact on credibility. Supervisors were asked to

**Table 1**

Perception of Certification	N	M	SD
Certification is a necessary component to being a supervisor	149	3.0	1.2
Becoming certified has increased my personal sense of credibility	149	2.9	1.3
I am proud of achieving my Supervisor Certification	149	3.7	1.0
Being certified adds to my credibility in the community	148	2.9	1.2
My program director felt my becoming certified was important	148	3.4	1.2
Certification has been described as one way to validate skills with CPS Supervisors	150	3.5	1.1

rate the statements on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being completely agreed and 1 being completely disagree.

Table 2 shows examples of the questions supervisors were asked about the external use of their supervisory certification. Supervisors were asked on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being very often and 1 being never, to rate the statements.

Supervisors were also asked whether they record their certification status on their resumes. Of the 149 supervisors that responded, 75% indicated that they do include their certification information.

Additionally, supervisors were asked if certification should be renewed every two years. The majority of the respondents (93%) indicated that it should be renewed every two years, and that they planned to undergo the re-certification process.

**Discussion**

The respondents in this study are tenured child welfare professionals that have, on average, worked 15 years in Child Protective Services. Unlike the national profile of CPS staff (Lieberman et al.,

1988) that indicates only 28% of child welfare workers have a B.S.W. or M.S.W., 51% of the respondents in this study have a BSW or a MSW. Part of this may be explained by the ongoing effort underway in the State of Texas to re-professionalize the public child welfare sector through Title IV-E programs (Scannapieco, Bolen, & Connell, 1999) and because this is exclusively supervisory staff.

A major concern expressed about initiating a voluntary certification process was that without monetary incentives or policy mandates, individuals would not be motivated to go through such a rigorous process (Birmingham et al., 1996). This study indicates other motivations and rewards. Table 1 details a number of questions addressing the importance of supervisory certification. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being completely agreed, supervisors rated their level of pride concerning certification at 3.7. Further, most of the supervisors, a mean of 3.2, felt that becoming certified had increased their personal sense of credibility, as well as their credibility in the community.

Supervisors, on the same scale, agreed with a

**Table 2**

External Awareness of Supervisor Certification	N	M	SD
How often do you use your certification status in describing your position?	150	1.8	1.0
How often do people within the agency ask whether you are certified?	150	1.5	.7
How often has anyone outside the agency asked whether you were certified?	150	1.3	.6

mean of 3.5, that certification was a way of validating skills as a CPS supervisor. This, coupled with the feeling that it gives them more personal as well as community credibility, strengthens the need for statewide certification.

Table 2 presents questions that attempted to explore how knowledgeable the general community had become about supervisor certification. As is evident, supervisor certification in the state of Texas has not reached the point that the general public is aware of this program. Considering this is only the third year and that most of the effort has been placed on educating CPS staff about the process, this result is not surprising. Actually, even the fact that anyone in the court system, school system, etc., has asked whether a supervisor is certified is a positive outcome.

It does appear that supervisors are beginning to describe themselves as certified. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being very often, the mean was 1.8 for how often supervisors used their certification status in describing their position. Additionally, 75% reported that they describe themselves as certified supervisors on their resumes.

#### **Other Lessons Learned about Supervisor Certification in the State of Texas**

Supervisor certification is now established in the State of Texas. At the peak of the outreach effort to inform and test eligible CPS supervisors, over 90% of all those eligible throughout the state chose to become certified, completed the certification process, and passed the written certification exam. Considering this was based on voluntary participation and those supervisors received no monetary gain, it can be viewed as a successful outcome. Initially, there was concern that, without external incentives such as raises, supervisors would not be interested in becoming certified. This has not proven true in Texas. As further evidence of this, the vast majority of supervisors who come up for re-certification and are still eligible chose to go through the re-certification process.

One of the great challenges for the administra-

tion of the Supervisor Certification Program is the ongoing education that needs to take place throughout the state of Texas. Currently, CPS Supervisor Certification is not an integral part of personnel policies, and the need for marketing the advantages of certification is ongoing. Without monetary incentives, other driving forces have been realized as factors in the program's success. One of these is peer pressure. With so many supervisors being certified and openly proud of this achievement (i.e., placing their certificates on their office walls), others are encouraged to become certified. Also, over the three-year period many certified supervisors have been promoted to Program Directors, who in turn motivate supervisors in their areas to become certified. Additionally, the majority of those promoted to Program Director have chosen to keep their certification, which is evidence that certification is valued.

#### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

As this study supports, the supervisor certification program has had an impact on child welfare practice and policy in Texas, but not without a great deal of collaboration and ongoing effort by all of the major players. Since the planning year, 1993-94, the statewide PSTI Certification Committee has continued to meet quarterly to revisit policy and practice issues, as well as to review issues that continue to arise regarding the administration of such a large program.

One of the most time-consuming activities associated with the program has been marketing, including informing CPS staff of the certification requirements, recruiting supervisors to become certified, and making the certification process as user-friendly as possible. Further, effort in these areas is compounded by the fact that there is not, at this time, any monetary incentive for supervisors who achieve and maintain a certified status.

Letters including certification requirements were sent on three occasions to all uncertified supervisors encouraging them to complete the process during the modified and transitional periods of super-

visor certification. As the testing requirement was less restrictive during these preliminary certification periods, marketing proved to be fruitful and many supervisors responded. As mentioned earlier, at one point over 90% of all supervisors were certified. Once the certification program was fully implemented, however, recruiting supervisors to voluntarily complete all phases of the process became more of a challenge.

Although certification is reported by most who are certified to be a benefit, the fact remains that child welfare staff are kept extremely busy with their everyday workloads, and some supervisors are close to burnout. Programs such as this, which require time away from the workplace in order to meet training and testing requirements, may be perceived as a relatively low priority. Therefore, it continues to be the responsibility of the Certification Program to recognize these issues and make every effort to make the process time-efficient for those interested in becoming certified Child Protective Services Supervisors.

One way that program administrators in Texas have optimized proficiency is by having the certification process centralized at one location, the University of Texas at Arlington. Full-time staff handle all interaction with applicants for certification and re-certification. Their duties include maintaining the certification database and individual certification files for each supervisor; facilitating the certification exam; handling all certification correspondence, including dissemination of information and mailing re-certification reminders; and issuing certificates as appropriate.

Although during the validation period the certification exam was administered at various locations statewide, the permanent test site is in Arlington, where the computer that contains the multimedia exam is housed. Many hours have been spent discussing alternatives to this arrangement, however, as issues like travel time and expense must be taken seriously, especially in a state as large as Texas. Testing options such as the internet and contracting

with test-centers statewide have been suggested as ways to make the certification process more feasible with time constraints, as well as more cost-effective. Should the state elect to make CPS Supervisor Certification mandatory; this issue will have to be resolved. Additional time and effort on the part of the Certification Committee, as well as the PSTI Technology Committee, will be significant.

While this study shows that only 7% of certified supervisors do not plan to become re-certified, administrative effort has been great in encouraging and assisting completion of the re-certification process. Re-certification requirements are included in the Supervisor's Guide to CPS Supervisor Certification, are conveyed when one becomes certified the first time, and are included in a reminder letter sent 45 days prior to the re-certification date. This system has worked well, with few supervisors having their certification lapse.

At the same time, because certification is completely voluntary, however encouraged, the Institute has elected to be somewhat flexible, open to consideration for exceptions to policy and extensions in situations such as illness or other extenuating circumstances. For example, when the Department went through a significant reorganization, the Certification Committee developed a plan to place on "inactive status" all certified supervisors who were involuntarily displaced from their positions. As each was reinstated to the Supervisor II level, she/he submitted documentation of maintaining continuing education requirements and was returned to active certification status.

In addition, the Committee has had to revisit some of the more fundamental policies of the Certification Program, remaining open to the reality that decisions made in the planning stages in theory may not work in practice. For example, one of the basic policies set for the CPS Supervisor Certification Program was that only Supervisors II would be eligible for certification. Therefore, if one were to become certified then leave the Supervisor

If position, the certification status would be invalid. However, as supervisors were promoted, many requested that they be permitted to retain their certification status.

The Certification Committee immediately realized that these requests were a positive reflection on the certification effort. In rethinking the policy, it was decided that the original policy should be modified. Logically, if Program Directors value certification, they will encourage those with whom they come into contact to become certified. It also made sense that Program Directors, supervising certified supervisors, be able to retain their own certification, as this followed the premise of the original decision to certify supervisors before certifying workers.

In summary, this study shows that the CPS Supervisor Certification Program has had a positive impact, overall, on child welfare supervisors in the state of Texas. Should other states consider implementing a child welfare certification program, either for CPS supervisors or workers, the study should serve to support that the necessary time, effort, and expense are worthwhile.

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