

“Aspiring Child Welfare Workers at NJ College Warned Job has Risks”

By Susan K. Livio

(Originally published in THE STAR LEDGER, 11/4/15)

TRENTON — Most parents fear the knock on the door from a child welfare caseworker. But in the wake of two parents attacking state caseworkers in the last year and a recent string of death threats, Montclair State University Assistant Professor Brad Forenza wove these events into his lecture on parental rights last week. He asked his Public Child Welfare students — many of whom will go on to work for the state Department of Children and Families — how they should manage these fragile and often volatile relationships.

Forenza warned his 20 students the path they are taking is fraught with conflict. He cited a national survey that found three-quarters of front-line social work professionals had reported property damage, verbal threats, or actual violence during the careers. Turnover is high, he added.

"Careers in public child welfare are assumed more vulnerable to workplace violence than other helping professions," Forenza said. "To what extent do you think there is an inherently conflictual relationship between parents and caseworkers?"

Mildred Kroung, 21, said she thought there was room for cooperation.

"Some parents actually want the assistance from the government, some are like, get away from me — you are invading my privacy. Not every parent feels the government is bad," Kroung said.

"In what scenarios might parents want the help?" Forenza asked.

"Maybe a mother as a single parent who didn't have a job. Help her find a way to get her GED.," Kroung said.

Kashea Beadle, 21, said she didn't see a way around the inherent conflict at the heart of the caseworker-parent relationship. "The relationship starts between caseworker and parents because there is an idea the parents aren't doing well or not well enough."

Allyson Keegan, an intern at the Middlesex County Juvenile Detention Center, said she sees similarities in the duties and risks between a caseworker's and police officer's job. "You're going into someone's home, removing their child if there is abuse going on, the parents are beside themselves," she said.

"It's important to have empathy. This is difficult for them to go through, as well. This is your job and at the same time, if someone were to come to your home and remove your child, it's something you have to understand," Keegan said.

The class discussed how substance abuse, mental illness and poverty are the most common characteristics of families that come to the attention of a child welfare agency, although Forenza stressed poverty alone is never a reason for an investigation. One student, a state intern who declined to be identified, agreed, saying she has seen caseworkers provide household items like furniture to help impoverished families.

State law gives the Division of Child Protection and Permanency the authority to remove a child from the home without a court order if the agency attests that the child is in "imminent risk of harm." A court hearing must be held within two days in order for a judge to decide whether to uphold the removal. Similar laws are found in other states.

But in national, precedent-setting cases, the courts have ruled against child welfare agencies for abusing their authority and violating parents' constitutional rights. One 1999 case in California that Forenza outlined ruled a caseworker and a police officer were wrong to demand entry without a warrant into a family's home based on two tips that children were crying for help.

"The government's interest in the welfare of children embraces not only protecting children from physical abuse but also protecting children's interests in the privacy and dignity of their homes and in the lawfully exercised authority of their parents," according to the ruling.

If the state removes a child from a home, Kroung, a senior at Montclair's McCormick Center for Child Advocacy and Policy, said she believes "if the parents want child back they will work with whoever to get the child back."

But recent although rare events in New Jersey and across the country show what is possible when unstable or violent parents clash with child welfare workers.

The class discussed the attack on caseworker Leah Coleman 11 months ago by a parent who had lost rights to her child and entered the Camden local office. They also talked about a father who in July assaulted two caseworkers in Salem County who had removed a child from his home.

Forenza noted that child welfare officials quickly assembled a mandatory public safety training course following the attack in July, to teach workers how to be aware of their surroundings and de-escalate tense situations.

He also showed a video clip of a Vermont news report about a mother who after losing custody of her 9-year-old daughter shot and killed the caseworker with a high-caliber hunting rifle.

One student who has interned in the field and declined to be identified admitted she has felt "terrified" by the lack of security. "I can just walk right in and go sit down wherever I please. They assume I am supposed to be there. But we should be checked."

Another intern said the office doors are always locked where she is.

Keegan said the two-hour safety training she received at the correctional center about de-escalating volatile situations was useful, but not enough. "Some jobs have week-long trainings before they have you on the job. We are getting the bare minimum."

The topic veered into the current public policy debate about whether police officers ought to be stationed at local child welfare offices, a practice that was discontinued just days before Coleman was attacked. Armed security guards have since been hired and state Human Services police officers may be requested to go out on a call. But a bill is pending in the legislature to make the police presence mandatory at all child welfare offices.

"Economically can we afford that?" Kroung said.

Another student asked whether having police around would intimidate parents and interfere with a caseworker's interactions with a family.

Beadle said safety should matter more. "You can get all the training in the world, but having someone there whose job is protection is a good investment."

Susan K. Livio, NJ Advance Media