



# CCWSC Alumni Study Report – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

September 2023

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For more information, please visit the CCWSC website at [www.msudenver.edu/ccwsc/](http://www.msudenver.edu/ccwsc/) or contact the consortium at [childwelfarescholars@msudenver.edu](mailto:childwelfarescholars@msudenver.edu).

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## Executive Summary

Established in 1995 as the Child Welfare Stipend Program, the CCWSC has awarded over 900 individual scholarships and stipends to both bachelors- and masters-level social work students over its almost 30-year history. In 2021, the Child Welfare Stipend Program was re-established as the Colorado Child Welfare Scholars Consortium (CCWSC), which aims to grow and support a well-educated and prepared child welfare workforce through social work education and post-graduation professional development and support. The program is a partnership between the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), county-based child welfare agencies and social work programs throughout Colorado, led by Metropolitan State University of Denver.

The Butler Institute at the University of Denver has consistently evaluated the CCWSC since 2015 and shared data to drive the program's growth and development with the CCWSC leadership team. Building on findings from a 2018 study, the current study was expanded to include all alumni, from 1997 to 2022. Email invitations were sent to 370 alumni, with anonymous survey links also posted in social media and list serves. More recent alumni, from 2017 to 2022, were invited to participate in focus groups. In total, the study's data sample included 190 survey responses and 20 focus group participants. The study explored CCWSC alumni's career pathways in child welfare, facilitators and barriers to career paths, and their organizational experiences in Colorado agencies. This report summarizes study findings and offers recommendations to promote CCWSC sustainability and future efforts for ongoing collaboration between Colorado universities and agencies to support the child welfare workforce.

### Career Paths to and in Child Welfare Work

- 41% of survey respondents reported they were currently working at a Colorado child welfare agency (county, state, or other).
- Survey respondents reported working in Colorado child welfare for an average of 4.8 years after graduating. In total, they worked in child welfare for an average of 7.3 years (43% had previous child welfare work experience when they started receiving their stipend/scholarship).
- Those currently working in child welfare reported significantly longer time in child welfare work post-graduation (6.0 years), and in total years in child welfare work (8.7 years), than did alumni that have since stopped working in child welfare (3.8 years and 6.2 years, respectively).

### Motivations for Pursuing Child Welfare Work

- Survey respondents reported a strong sense of their fit and self-efficacy with child welfare work, especially regarding their commitment to the well-being of

children and families, that they are motivated to find solutions when challenged in a case, and that their backgrounds make them a good fit.

- Themes around what brought alumni into child welfare work indicated that most alumni felt a connection through their lived experience, values, and passion/compassion for this work.

### Professional Development and Supports

- In focus groups alumni spoke of receiving mostly informal coaching and mentoring in their agencies, but in some counties, coaching was prioritized for the professional development of newer workers. Alumni invested in themselves by advocating for their own professional development and utilizing their agency connections when support was limited.
- Regarding supports to pursue professional development interests, alumni noted that supervisor encouragement and county investment contributed to feelings of being valued. Several alumni described the support from their supervisors to pursue professional interests as instrumental to their development.
- Support around professional licensure for clinical social work (LCSW) was mixed among counties, particularly support tended to be harder to obtain in urban counties compared to rural ones.

### Commitment to Child Welfare Work

- For respondents that had left child welfare work, themes related to their reasons for leaving included: high job stress and burnout due to high expectations regarding workload and hours, low salaries and lack of raises or promotion opportunities, and unsupportive organizational culture left alumni wanting a job change out of direct child welfare practice.
- Results of a regression analyses to understand variables that had the strongest relationships with *Intent to Stay* indicated that high sense of psychological safety within one's team and high satisfaction with one's job contributed greatly to alumni's sense of commitment to their current agency.
- Feeling supported was a central theme as an organizational factor to alumni's sense of commitment to the work, which included:
  - Positive peer, supervisor, and leadership experiences were key elements in alumni's feeling heard, trusted, and respected and for camaraderie.
  - Job security provided financial security but also feeling like work-life balance was supported and encouraged.
  - Job changes in child welfare work was key to feeling supported because they allowed for flexibility to address burnout or to find a better fit in different areas of the work.
  - Variety of child welfare work also offered career growth opportunities that supported several alumni's career interests.
- Strengths of commitment to work included the importance of having direct connection and finding meaning in the work; having personal values and lived

experiences that align with child welfare work; and feeling hopeful that they are part of a profession with a mission for positive change for families.

## Summary and Recommendations

This mixed methods study of CCWSC alumni has provided insight into the career experiences of social workers working in Colorado child welfare agencies. Social work education funding is an important resource for child welfare professionals to increase their skills for practice with children and families and their professionalization and leadership in the workforce. CCWSC alumni stay longer in child welfare work after receiving their stipend/scholarship (4.8 years after graduating) and continue to serve in various positions in Colorado's county agencies and state office. This shows the strength and effectiveness of the social work scholarship/stipend as a recruitment practice for child welfare workers committed to serving children and families.

Key themes emerged in this study that showed the importance of personal values, connection through lived experiences, and passion/compassion for this work as key motivators to enter the profession and to give alumni hope, resilience, and strength to stay in the child welfare profession. Meanwhile, organizational supports were important to alumni's professional and career growth, which in turn strengthened their commitment to stay in the child welfare profession. Supervisors and mentors were important sources of encouragement for alumni to pursue professional development interests, which also let them feel valuable, in that their agency was invested in them. Alumni also identified ways that formalizing coaching and mentorship, as well as licensure support, could further contribute to supporting their career growth and commitment. Feeling heard, trusted, and respected, encouraged to have work-life balance, flexibility in the work to change jobs to address burnout, and having variety for career growth opportunities were all themes that alumni identified as important for strengthening their commitment to child welfare work.

Findings from this study along with the recommendations point to important pathways to retaining staff with the motivation, skills, and leadership for serving children and families in child welfare. The consortium itself is already a collaborative effort represented with Colorado's university social work programs, county agency staff, and CDHS staff. Each recommendation and strategy provided here are intended to increase opportunities for universities and child welfare agencies to strengthen retention and professional growth opportunities for the Colorado child welfare workforce.

## Recommendations for the CCWSC

1. Explore ways to support LCSW supervision in county agencies.
  - Form an exploratory workgroup with extensive county representation.
  - Provide group and individual supervision to staff pursuing licensing.
  - Provide compensation to LCSW supervisors.
  - Create a network of LCSW supervisors and supervision support across county agencies.
2. Create a campaign to promote the value of social work education (BSW and MSW degrees, social work coursework) to county and tribal agencies, and the need to incentivize bringing social work-education staff into the workforce.
  - Disseminate findings from the current study to Colorado county directors and tribal child welfare program directors.
  - Disseminate findings via presentations and other materials at Title IV-E conference and other conferences for child welfare practitioners.
  - Share findings with Colorado lawmakers via the Executive Summary, report, and other materials that will be developed from the study.
3. Collaborate with agencies to improve post-graduation supports to alumni.
  - Develop ongoing professional development opportunities, such as formal mentoring and coaching, to tenured child welfare staff.
  - Continue to provide the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to students and alumni and provide group coaching/mentoring sessions post-graduation.
  - Collaborate between CCWSC, county agencies, and CDHS to explore coaching training opportunities for alumni in supervision positions.
4. Build enhanced support for tenured child welfare staff to pursue Social Work degrees that will increase their practice and leadership skills while in their social work program.
  - Develop specialized field seminar courses at each University for currently working child welfare staff.
  - Provide opportunities for advanced specialization to attend conferences or virtual trainings in their interest areas.
5. Explore pathways to encourage CCWSC alumni connection to current social work scholars with fair compensation for alumni's time and efforts.
  - Provide professional development (speakers, preparation, training) to outgoing students and recent alumni to become internship supervisors.
  - Provide shadowing and mentoring opportunities for current students to be paired with alumni to learn professional development and career growth opportunities in the child welfare profession.

## Recommendations for Colorado Child Welfare Agencies

6. Develop recognition and acknowledgement of the professionalization of child welfare staff who pursue MSW degrees and LCSW licensure.
  - Form a workgroup to explore career advancement (promotions, job positions) and compensation options for those that invest in MSW degrees and LCSW licensures.
  - Incentivize engagement and leadership in agency practice and workforce efforts with workload/caseload reductions, change in job responsibilities, and other ways to protect staff time.
  - Provide coaching and/or mentorship supports to child welfare staff interested in honing their expertise beyond casework to encourage their professional development and commitment for the child welfare profession.
7. Explore and implement resilience efforts to support child welfare staff, particularly for those experiencing trauma and burnout.
  - Explore trainings and practices offered from the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) and the [California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare](#).
  - Dedicate staff with expertise areas around trauma-informed and healing-centered practice to implement support and resilience practices with staff experiencing trauma and burnout.
  - Support and provide opportunities for staff exploring temporary job changes to continue in child welfare work without direct practice responsibilities.
  - Continue to encourage and support staff's professional development by increasing protections of staff time to participate in training and other activities to enable full engagement in these opportunities.

## Recommendations for Future Study of CCWSC Alumni

8. Study career pathway differences in Colorado county agencies (e.g., what are opportunities for career pathway offered in urban counties and in rural counties?).
9. Develop a study further exploring sustainability practices unique to social work practitioners in child welfare (i.e., what keeps people hopeful in this work?).