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How a Professional Describes Reasons for Working in and Ultimately Leaving the Foster Care Field in the State of Missouri: A Case Study

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HOW A PROFESSIONAL DESCRIBES REASONS FOR WORKING IN AND

ULTIMATELY LEAVING THE FOSTER CARE FIELD IN THE STATE OF

MISSOURI: A CASE STUDY

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Early Childhood and Family Development

By

Lauren M. Williams

August 2023

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Childhood Education and Family Studies

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ABSTRACT

The foster care field continues to have a high turnover rate of the professionals working in the field. While support and work balance are available for some professionals, many face the challenges of heavy workloads, unrealistic expectations, and health sacrifices that lead to many professionals leaving the field. This case study of one former foster care professional's description of reasons they worked in the field, and reasons they ultimately left the field provides insight of the challenges and support as a foster care professional. The findings of this study are organized into three major themes including "Challenges for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Leaving the Field," "Supports for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Staying in the Field," and "Changes and Actions Needed to Promote Retention and Returning for Foster Care Professionals." Each major theme has three to five subthemes with thirteen between them. These subthemes include: *No Additional Funds and Contracts, Workload, Unrealistic Expectations, Poor Work-Family Balance, Personal Health Sacrifices Due to Work Demands, More Positive Experience Working for Private Agency Versus State Agency, Coworkers and Supervisor Support, Job Flexibility, Adequate Workload and Pay, Communication Among All Relevant and Responsible Parties/Groups, Improve Efficiency, Facilitation, and Flexibility, Additional Education and Awareness for All Parties,* and *Structural Changes Are Needed.* The study provides policymakers, practitioners, and foster care personnel the framework for the actions needed to retain and recruit foster care professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

The turnover rate of the United States foster care system is up to 20-40% for professionals in the first year and up to 30-50% for foster care parents in the first year (Astvik et al., 2020; De Guzman et al., 2020; Hanlon et al., 2021; Haskins et al., 2019). Professionals in the foster care field range from social workers/foster care caseworkers, also called associate social worker specialists (MO Careers, 2022), to therapists, interventionists, and many other professionals whose primary job responsibilities are to work with children and families impacted by the foster care system (Geisler et al. 2019; Rolock et al., 2018). Foster care professionals provide support, resources, and guidance for children, birth families, foster families, and adoptive families navigating the United States foster care system (Geisler et al., 2019).

Research shows there is a struggle in retaining both professionals and foster care parents in the United States foster care system; often leading to both leaving in the first year (Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; Geisler et al., 2019). As organizations search for better retention strategies, research finds burnout, insufficient pay, and lack of support create difficulties for professionals and discourage them to stay in the field (Astvik et al., 2020; Geisler et al., 2019; Gouveia et al., 2021; Hanlon et al., 2021).

Burnout is the response to interpersonal stressors, exhaustion, feeling depleted, feeling detached, a sense of ineffectiveness, or a lack of accomplishment that occurs gradually over a prolonged period of time (Branson, 2019; Leung et al., 2022). The average social worker in the United States makes $55,790 a year (Indeed, 2021) and $36,788 in the state of Missouri, regardless of location in state (MO Careers, 2022). Research shows support for foster care professionals can come from employers, community, organizations, and friends and family.

Support looks different for each individual and is often situational. Many times, the support offered by employers, community, and organizations provides temporary relief, but does not show long term success (De Guzman et al., 2020; Onions, 2018). The research indicates areas and ways friends and family can offer support but is limited in the actual support foster care professionals receive; however, research does show having support through emotional availability, reduces stress, increases positive mental health, and increases self-esteem (Action for Children, 2021; The Global Orphan Project, 2022; Tucker et al., 2020).

Recent research of foster care professionals' reasons for leaving or staying the field focuses on organizations and employers attempt to retain foster care professionals (Branson, 2019; Caringi et al., 2017; De Guzman et al., 2020; Killian et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2022; Pirelli et al., 2020; Sutton et al., 2022). There are gaps in the research for specific reasons each person leaves and their perceptions, reoccurring patterns for leaving, effective retainment strategies, and foster care professionals' intentions of returning to the field.

In order to address the aforementioned gaps, the current qualitative case study examines the reasons that one professional describes for staying in the field as long as they did, but ultimately why they left the field. This study also explores, from the participants' perspective, the type of support offered, needed, and the perceptions of those needs for professionals. This case study utilized interviewing, follow-up questions through email, and member-checking with participant to review results for accuracy of interpretation to ensure research validity of the study.

With an increasing struggle to retain foster care professionals, the current study uncovers important insights about the experiences of one professional, and provides essential guidelines for policymakers, practitioners, and foster care personnel, which may help them to conduct

appropriate actions for supporting professionals to decrease their challenges and address their

needs. This may help to retain the current and future professionals in the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Foster Care in the United States

The laws regarding the treatment and care of children have changed in the United States since the first welfare policies and practices developed in the United States during the nineteenth century. It started with the first private U.S. children's charity called The New York Orphan Asylum Society ("NY Society") in 1806, which then grew to 62 organizations by 1850. Both informal and private legislation adoptions were made during this time. In 1851, the state of Massachusetts passed the first modern adoption statute. With the First Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society made in 1854, it was found over 30,000 children were in need of foster parents. More charities were created from the 1850s to 1860s. With the needs growing larger, the ideas of an orphan train movement grew (Trammell, 2009).

The orphan train was first used in 1854 to transport children to neighboring states. It is estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 children were placed in 48 states during the 75 years the orphan train existed. There were concerns that families were separated, placements were made hastily, and little to no follow-ups were made after placing children with charities and families. There were also concerns that not every child was truly an orphan and that children were being placed in other states to breakup biological families (Trammell, 2009).

In 1909, the first White House Conference was held on the care of children. The creation of the Children's Bureau Bill took place and allowed investigation regarding children's issues. By 1920, there were more standards for child labor, health care, aid for children with special needs, and age limits set for school attendance. In 1963, early talk of mandated reporting of child maltreatment began and by 1967 mandatory reporting was in every state and 32 states had

government child welfare programs. The National Center on Child Abuse/Neglect (NCCAN) was founded in 1976 giving states grants to do research on abuse and neglect to identify treatment. The Child Welfare Reform Act in 1980 brought regulations to avoid unnecessary removals by Child Protective Services, case plans, reviewing cases every six months, and family preservation. The Family Preservation and Support Services Acts in 1993 brought more support to families by increasing funding for case workers to do check-ins and funding for prevention services (Trammell, 2009).

In order to increase family reunification, the Adoption and Safe Families Act was established in 1997 for judges to give biological families/parents a list of requirements for reunification with children and putting a time limit on completing these (15-22 months). In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act was created for children aging out of foster care by creating homes specifically for aging out children. The Family 1st Prevention Services Act of 2018 was established to help keep families together who are at risk for child removal, ensuring children in foster care have a safe family to live with, and improve residential treatment (Trammell, 2009).

The Contemporary Foster Care System in the United States

Children enter into the United States foster care system, also called Out of Home Care, to protect them from unsafe environments by legally removing children from their homes and placing them in with relatives or kin (kinship placement), a licensed foster parent, or a licensed residential facility (Aslamazova et al., 2019; Hansen, 2008; Lewis, 2011; Rolock et al., 2018). Safety concerns in the homes, drugs or alcohol usage, neglect, abuse, and sometimes voluntary placement from birth parent are many of the reasons children end up in foster care (Fergeus et al., 2019; Hansen, 2008; Lewis, 2011). Mandated reporters (teachers, childcare workers,

counselors, health care providers, and anyone working with children) are required to report reasonable suspicion of child maltreatment to a child welfare department or the local law enforcement (Lewis, 2011; Rolock et al., 2018; Sankaran et al., 2019). When the safety concern is investigated, and removal is needed, a foster care agency (there are both private and state agencies) assist in finding foster home placements for the children (Lewis, 2011). The agencies typically try to place a child with relatives first before going to foster families or group homes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

In the past 30 years, the number of children in the United States foster care system at some point during the year has increased (Hansen, 2008; Rhodes et al., 2003; Rolock et al., 2018). In the 1990s, the number of children in foster care increased to an all-time high of 550,000 children (Hansen, 2008; Rolock et al., 2018). In 2019, there were well over 690,000 child victims of abuse and neglect leading to over 420,000 children being in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Children's Defense Fund: Leave No Child Behind, n.d.); this number dropped to 405,000 in 2020 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Kelly, 2020). The drop in children in the United States foster care system in 2020 is seen due to difficulties with COVID-19 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).

The average age of a child in foster care in 2005 was 9.8 years old and spent 41.6 months in care (Hansen, 2008). The average age went down in 2017 to 7.7 years old. In 2017, most children spent 12-23 months in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021), and in 2019 the average was 20 months (Children's Defense Fund: Leave No Child Behind, n.d.). The data is broken down by number of months spend in foster care as followed: 9% spent less than 1 month, 34% spent 1-11 months, 30% spent 12-23 months, 15% spent 24-35 months, and 13% spent 3 or more years (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). According to the Adoption and Safe

Families Act, children must have a permanency plan after being in care for 12 months or less (Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition, 2022). 49% of children who left the foster care system in 2017 were reunified with their birth parent(s) or primary caregiver, 24% were adopted, and the remaining either went to other relatives, guardians, or had other outcomes (aging out being one of the highest) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). 47% of children who left the foster care system in 2019 were reunified with birth parent(s) or primary caregiver, 26% were adopted, and the remaining were waiting for adoption or aged out (Children's Defense Fund: Leave No Child Behind, n.d.).

The demographic of children in the United States foster care system has had a shift in the last decade; about 59% of children in care identified as white in 2010 according to federal data. This increased to 67% of children in care identifying as white in 2019. While most states increased in the last decade, 11 states saw a trend of less white, and 4 saw no change (Kelly, 2020).

With over 400,000 children and youth in the United States foster care system in 2019, there is a great need for licensed foster care parents and relatives to care for these children. In 2019, there were 218,927 licensed foster care homes in the United States; however, in 2020, due to the world COVID-19 pandemic, it dropped to 214,421. Of the 50 states, twenty states had a decrease in the number of foster care homes of 5% or more. While 10 of the 50 states saw an increase of 5% (Kelly, 2020).

In the last 60 years, the requirements for obtaining a foster care license in the United States has changed significantly; in 1958, only heterosexual, same-race, non-working wife and working husband families would be considered for obtaining a foster care licenses and as adoptive parents. Advocates for children with special needs found that unmarried adult were able

to provide care for children in waiting around 10 years later in the late 1960s. Eventually, marital status, homeownership, gender, race, religion, age, and income were no longer restrictions for obtaining a foster care license and adopting children in the United States (Hansen, 2008).

Each state has different laws and requirements for becoming foster care parents. These range from age, income, passing background check, passing home inspections, participation in free training, obtaining certain certifications, willingness to partner with children's families, health, number of children in home, and pets in home (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.). There are also areas that can disqualify families or an individual from obtaining a foster care license, these vary from not meeting the training requirements, not having a sustainable income, unstable mental or physical health that would interfere with caring for a child, unsafe home, giving false or misleading information, household member has a criminal record, lack of time to care for child, lack of spare bedroom, and unsafe pets are many of the reasons a foster care licenses is denied (Foster VA, n.d.).

In addition to the individual state requirements, there are several types of foster care licenses. These licenses range from traditional, to respite, medical, specialized, therapeutic, emergency, and relative/kinship care (informal, formal, voluntary). There are various levels of traditional foster care licenses based on care needed to support a child, age of child, and sibling group. The traditional licenses require individuals or couples to complete all training and the amount of time a child spends in the home is based on the placement and is usually undetermined at the start of the placement. Respite care is short-term care, usually an evening, weekend, or a little longer where a foster care family is given a time to rest and recharge. A medical, specialized, or therapeutic foster care licenses are for children with specific medical needs, experienced more severe abuse, neglect, and traumatic stress, and sometimes have

intellectual or developmental delays. These licenses require specialized training to give the best care. An emergency foster care placement is intended as a temporary, around 72 hours, placement as a foster family or relative is found when a child is first removed from home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; KVC Health System, 2018).

There are three types of relative/kinship care placements that include informal, formal, and voluntary. An informal kinship care placement does not involve a legal custody change or the child welfare system; it is when a parent has a family member care for a child for a period of time due to health, long-term travel, or other reasons. The second is a formal kinship care placement where a child is in legal custody of the state and the child welfare system places the child with a relative instead of a foster family. A voluntary kinship placement is where the child's parents keep legal custody, but the Child Welfare System is involved in moving the child to live with a relative while the parent receives services to be able to have reunification with children (KVC Health System, 2018).

For relatives being a caregiver for children in care, those who actively had a formal or voluntary kinship care placement in 2020 were 87,287; this was from forty-one states and the District of Columbia who answered a poll (Kelly, 2020; KVC Health System, 2018). About 30% of youth in foster care live with relatives rather than with licensed non-relative foster care parents (Kelly, 2020). In 2018, there were around 2.7 million children being raised by their grandparents in the United States (KVC Health System, 2018).

Another aspect of being a foster parent in the United States is receiving a monthly stipend given by the state to assist with the cost of caring for a child. These monthly stipends are determined by the state, level of care the child needs, and number of children in foster home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Hansen, 2008; Missouri Department of Social

Services, n.d.). Wyoming, Missouri, and Texas are the lowest monthly average for a foster care stipend at $300-$400 a month. Nebraska and Washington D.C. are the highest at $800-$1,000 a month. Multiple states are determined by county including Colorado, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (Peeples, 2022). Many states offer Medicaid for children in foster care and foster families often qualify for food stamps like SNAP or TANF (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.).

In the United States, 30-50% of foster care parents close their licenses in the first year; the percentage depends on the state (Hanlon et al., 2021; Haskins et al., 2019). The retainment of high quality foster care parents is a major challenge in the United States and in other countries as well; intense emotional impact, exposure to traumatized children, burnout, challenges in placements, problems with child protective systems and professionals, personal, family, and foster child characteristics are many of the reasons individuals close their foster care license (Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; Gouveia et al., 2021; Hanlon et al., 2021; Onions, 2018).

While children are in foster care and even after reunification or adoption, they interact not only with the families (foster, adoptive, kinship), but also with many professionals. These professionals range from social workers, case workers, counselors, therapists, behavioral interventionist, specialist, clinicians, and anyone whose primary work responsibilities are with the foster care system (Geisler et al., 2019; Lewis, 2011; Rolock et al., 2018; Sankaran et al., 2019).

The tasks vary for social workers and case workers, they manage a caseload (number of children whose case they are overseeing) (Geisler et al., 2019) and keep in contact with foster care parents, birth parents, courts, and anything related to the child (Rolock et al., 2018); social

workers make between $37,574 and $83,969, with an average of $55,709 according to Indeed (2021) and case workers make between $34,490 and $77,848 in the United States. Counselors and therapists focus on providing support and healing from trauma (Lewis, 2011); counselors make between $16,950 and $65,007 and therapists make between $42,253 to $136,604 (Indeed, 2021). Therapists range from occupational therapy to physical therapy, to behavioral therapy (Lewis, 2011). Behavioral Interventionists and specialists work either in the home, in schools, or anywhere else the family/child needs additional support (Foster Adopt Connect, 2022); the incomes for Behavioral Interventionists and school-based specialists ranges from $30,908 to $60,974. Clinicians oversee mental health diagnosis; the income is between $42,105 to $81,109 (Indeed, 2021).

The support foster care parents receive from professionals and their community can impact how long an individual and family choose to foster children. This varies from having an in-home therapist, specialist, or interventionist who can listen to concerns and offer suggestions and resources for struggles to having a 24-hour on-call number (Missouri Department of Social Services, 2011; Williams-Mbengue, 2019). Most foster families receive less than one face-to-face visit with a social worker per month (Van Holen et al., 2015). Often foster families are left trying to navigate support from outside of social works due to the large caseloads social workers are managing (Egbert, 2015). Specific communities that have larger amounts of children in foster care tend to have more community resources and support for foster families; these include support groups and events (Foster Adopt Connect, 2022; Missouri Department of Social Services, 2011; Williams-Mbengue, 2019). Foster care professionals offer various support for foster care parents, thus the focus of the current study is a detailed perspective of one foster care professional.

The Foster Care System in the State of Missouri

According to the Missouri Department of Social Services, there are over 14,000 children in the Missouri foster care system as of May 2022 (Dolce, 2022). The foster care system in the State of Missouri began releasing a public annual report from the Missouri Children's Division in 2002. Each year these report the previous year starting on July 1st through June 30th of the year being reported (for 2002, it is July 1st, 2001, through June 30th, 2002). The reports inform of the services being provided in the state including areas of child abuse and neglect, family-centered services, out-of-home placements, and intensive in-home services (Missouri Department of Social Services Division of Family Services, 2002).

Missouri is divided into six regions including Northwest, Northeast, Kansas City, St. Louis, Southwest, and Southeast. Each region has its own reports of child abuse and neglect, family-centered services, out-of-home placements, and intensive in-home services in the annual report from the Missouri Children's Division as well as a statewide report total. In the 2021 fiscal year report covering July 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021, the Northwestern region had 7,834 abuse or neglect reports made with 10,982 children involved in these incident reports. The Northeastern region had 8,956 abuse or neglect reports made with 12,511 children involved in these reports. The Southeastern region had 8,916 abuse or neglect reports made with 12,990 children involved in the incident reports. The Southwestern region had 13,444 abuse or neglect reports with 18,895 children involved in the incident reports. The Kansas City region had 6,352 abuse or neglect reports made with 9,176 children involved in the incident reports. The St. Louis region has a total of 7,305 abuse or neglect reports made with 10,150 children involved. In addition to these reports, an additional 1,708 abuse or neglect reports were made involving 2,404 children from either out of state or out of home investigations. In total, there were 54,515 abuse

and neglect reports made in the State of Missouri in fiscal year 2021 including 77,108 children

(Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021).

Of the 77,108 children, 4,688 of the cases involving children the parents were

substantiated, meaning there was evidence of abuse and neglect. 2,168 were unsubstantiated

preventive services indicated (PSI), while 18,997 were unsubstantiated, meaning there was not

enough evidence of abuse or neglect. 47,613 were assessments, meaning a case is opened, but no

concerns were found, concerns were addressed, or services are provided to family. 3,642 were

classified as other; these include unable to locate, inappropriate report, located out of the state,

home schooling, already investigated, or a school investigation. The state also reported 3.40 of

every 1,000 children are substantiated, while 55.90 of 1,000 of children reported are

substantiated (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021).

There are several types of family-centered services in the state of Missouri including

substantiated, preventive services, court order, newborn crisis assessment, family assessment,

and alternative care (AC) closed/family-centered services (FCS) reopened. 5,527 active family-

centered cases in fiscal year 2021 (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos,

2021). Adoptive home, foster home, relative home, residential home/residential care, and other

are the types of out-of-home placements in the state of Missouri. In fiscal year 2021, there were

6,680 entries into the foster care system (not counting children already in care from previous

years) with the average age being 7.1 years old. There were 9 placed in adoptive homes, 1,908

children placed in foster homes, 4,056 placed in relative's homes, 487 placed in residential

homes/residential care, and 220 placed in other. Of the 6,680 entries in fiscal year 2021, 5,637

were first time entry and 1,043 were reentry (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals

and Memos, 2021).

In fiscal year 2021, there were 2,328 referrals made for intensive in-home services for families. Of those referrals, 1,601 were accepted, 693 were not accepted, and 34 were accepted for screening. Of the families referred families 77.8% were intact, 19.5% of the families were not intact, and 2.7% were placed in other. Of the 19.5% of families not intact the reasons range from child moving out of home, child moving to live with relative or other guardian, moved to foster home, group home, or residential facility, Juvenile Justice, and in-patient psychiatric treatment. Of the 2.7% in the other, the reasons ranged from unable to locate family to no information available (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021).

The Missouri Southwestern region is made up of 29 counties including Barry, Barton, Bates, Benton, Camden, Cedar, Christian, Dade, Dallas, Douglas, Greene, Henry, Hickory, Jasper, Laclede, Lawrence, McDonald, Miller, Moniteau, Morgan, Newton, Ozark, Polk, St. Clair, Stone, Taney, Vernon, Webster, and Wright. In fiscal year 2021, there were 13,444 abuse and neglect incident reports made in the Southwestern region of Missouri and there were 18,895 children involved in the reports. Greene County was the highest at 3,739, Jasper County next at 1,610, and the three lowest were Ozark County at 98 reports, St. Clair County at 96, and Christian County at 54. There was a 0.3% increase in abuse and neglect reports in fiscal year 2021 from fiscal year 2019 (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021).

Of the 13,444 abuse and neglect incident reports made in Southwestern, Missouri involving 18,895 children, 904 of the children's cases parents were substantiated, 521 were unsubstantiated with preventive services indicated (PSI), while 4,536 were unsubstantiated. 12,461 were assessments, and 473 were classified as other. 3.48 of every 1,000 children cases the

parents are substantiated, while 72.81 of every 1,000 reports made are the parents are

substantiated (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021).

There were 1,466 active family-centered cases in fiscal year 2021 in the Southwestern

region of Missouri including all substantiated, preventive services, court order, newborn crisis

assessment, family assessment, and alternative care (AC) closed/family-centered services (FCS)

(Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021). There were 1,697 entries

into the foster care system (not counting children already in care from previous years) with the

average age being 7.2 years old. There were 4 placed in adoptive homes, 514 children placed in

foster homes, 983 placed in relative's homes, 139 placed in residential homes/residential care,

and 57 placed in other. Of the 1,697 entries in fiscal year 2021, 1,143 were first time entry and

254 were reentry (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and Memos, 2021).

In fiscal year 2021, there were 655 referrals made for intensive in-home services for

families. Of those referrals, 438 were accepted, 212 were not accepted, and 5 were accepted for

screening. Of the families referred families 75.3% were intact, 22.1%% of the families were not

intact, and 2.6% were placed in other (Missouri Department of Social Services Manuals and

Memos, 2021).

Birth Parents' Compared to Foster Care Parents' Rights

When a child is removed from a home, the concerns that led to the removal must be

addressed and solved before the child can return to the home (Aslamazova et al., 2019; Lewis,

2011; Sankaran et al., 2019). The process birth parents have to go through in being reunified

with their children typically includes all or most of the following: parenting classes, attending

therapy, anger management courses, supervised visitations with children, substance abuse

programs, any other programs the caseworker, courts, or legal system sees as needed (Hansen, 2008; Lewis, 2011). The courts will monitor the parent's progress in deciding if reunification is best for both the parent and child (Lewis, 2011).

When a child needs to be placed in foster care, the foster care parents have the right to ask questions about the placement and decline a placement of a child in their homes (Washington Foster Team, 2020). Children's division is required to provided written documentation of a child being placed in a foster family's home and the caseworker will provide all pertinent information available to the foster family (physical and mental health concerns, background). Foster care parents also have the right to having information kept confidential, right to receiving respite care, and right to support and trainings (Missouri Revision Status, 2020; Washington Foster Team, 2020). Foster care parents have the right to make daily living decisions for the children in their care. Foster care parents have the right to request a child be removed from their home by submitting a written request two weeks in advance with the exception of an emergency (Missouri Revision Status, 2020).

Foster care parents have the right to make daily living decisions for children and are caring for the children full time while the child's birth parents have the right to visitations as determined by the court (Missouri Revision Status, 2020). Birth parents are not allowed to visit with their children without a prearranged visit (Lewis, 2011). Birth parents have the right to be reunified with children if they completed the necessary steps and the court sees the reunification being in the best interest of both the parents and the children involved (Hansen, 2008; Lewis, 2011). If reunification is not an option and adoption for the child is the next step, after family, the foster family has the right to adopt the child (Missouri Revision Status, 2020).

Foster Care Influence on Children

Children who enter the foster care system often are not given explanations as to why they are being removed from their home, and the experience can be traumatic for them (Fergeus et al., 2019; Lewis, 2011; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). The change of environment can cause a range of emotions and reactions from children that their foster care parents may not know how to address (Lewis, 2011). Many foster care parents are trained to use a reward and punishment discipline with foster children in their care; however, these are not helpful for children who have experienced trauma (Lewis, 2011; Sankaran et al., 2019). The reward and punishment parenting strategy gives a child privilege for good behaviors and disciplines when there is bad behavior (Theunissen et al., 2015). This form of punishment for foster children is often not effective because the children are often recovering from being maltreated (Lewis, 2011). Being attuned to a child's needs is most effective in parenting a child recovering from maltreatment. Attunement is responding to someone's needs before it is expressed (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Many children in care have not experienced safe relationships with adults and have developmental delays due to the maltreatment experienced. It is found that children heal from this maltreatment through safe relationships that meet their needs. Attunement from a foster parent to a child whose experienced maltreatment may be received with confusing behaviors and mixed responses from the child as the child relearns healthy and loving relationships (Horton, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

Since many children in foster care have been neglected, abused, and often move homes multiple times, their ability to process the events is typically not developmentally on target and lower than peers (Lewis, 2011; Perry, 2004). A child who is not developmentally on target may struggle academically, have behaviors that are either more mature or immature for their age (an

older sibling taking on parenting role for a younger sibling), be small for age, early puberty due to the stresses of abuse, and lack the ability to form relationships (Hamarta et al., 2009; Horton, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). When a child in foster care has great psychological problems, general problems in the placement, and few improvements in behavior, the retention rates of the foster care parents are lower (Ahn et al., 2017; Conn et al., 2018; Gouveia et al., 2021).

Perry and Szalavitz's (2017) book *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* talks about how trauma and stress, especially in young children, can affect the brain and the body. In one of Dr. Perry's articles on maltreated children, he wrote about how fear or perceived threats can cause more reactive responses that are governed by emotions instead of thinking (2004). Children in foster care live with many uncertainties and healing from often traumatic situations that leads to being in the constant state of fear; therefore, the brain goes into survival mode to keep the child alive, and this can lead to the brain focusing on survival rather than growth, learning, and building relationships that can cause a child be not developmentally on target with peers (Fergeus et al., 2019; Horton, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

In helping children transition into foster care, the court will order that the case workers create goals for the children to achieve. The case workers often partner with the schools, foster care parents, and professionals like behavioral interventionists to create and implement these goals. Some of these goals are in relation to medical, educational, and emotional needs (Lewis, 2011). Medical goals are typically in relation to healing from the physical abuse experienced. Educational goals are usually getting a child caught up in their schooling or at least seeing improvement. Emotional goals may have to do with behaviors, forming healthy relationships with both peers and adults, and being able to self-regulate (Lewis, 2011; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Self-regulation is the ability to calm oneself down (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

One of the best things for a child transitioning into foster care is having loving, patient, and supportive adults in their lives (Lewis, 2011; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). In caring for a child who is experiencing stress from changing circumstances, Perry & Szalavitz (2017) wrote, "To calm a frightened child, you must first calm yourself" (p. 71). Children are some of the most vulnerable members in society because they often do not have control over their environments; therefore, it is the role of adults to protect children (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014).

Reunification and Adoption

As the foster care system has changed, more recent legislation gives birth parents a time period in which they are to complete the steps to reunification with their children, and throughout the case, the birth parents are evaluated to see the progress made. The most successful plans for parents are ones that clearly state what the expectations are. Unclear plans can happen between misinterpretation and different perspectives on expectations. During a parent and child visitation, the birth parent may not interact with her son doing homework, which from a professional's perspective, looks like the parent does not care. While in fact, the parent may not be helping her child because the parent is giving the child freedom and will help if asked. These different perspectives are what a family therapist and other professionals can help address (Lewis, 2011).

One issue Lewis (2011) found was when birth parents went through parenting classes that they did get to practice what they learned with their children. Lewis suggests that the boundaries between birth and foster care parents be readjusted and that the foster and birth parents meet, and everyone participates in the family therapy sessions. Having the birth parents meet the foster care parents would be in the case of reunification with the goal of doing what is best for the child (Hansen, 2008; Lewis, 2011). Reunification is when children in foster care return to their birth

parents or primary caregiver after temporary living with a foster family (Balsells et al., 2017). When children go back to their birth parents, it can be another traumatic event because the child often bonds to the foster family (Aslamazova et al., 2019).

Most court cases are long and drawn out, and at times the birth parent's rights are terminated (Aslamazova et al., 2019; Hansen, 2008; Lewis, 2011). When this is this case, first relatives of the child are sought out as possible adoptive parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). If the relatives are not able to take the child (sometimes for health reasons), the foster family is usually the next choice. Adoption is when the birth parent's rights are terminated, and the child is legally raised in another family as their own (Lewis, 2011). When adopting a child, the adoptive parents are encouraged to attend therapy to help with the transition (Hansen, 2008). The age of a child when entering into foster care, the amount of time spent in foster care, and the extent of the trauma experienced at certain ages all have a significant role in how a child transitions (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

Challenges for Foster Care Professionals

Professionals in the social work, child welfare, and foster care field typically leave the field within the first year or two, have low-pay, high burnout rates, and heavy workloads (De Guzman et al., 2020). In addition to the work environment and low pay leading to burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue (also called secondary traumatic stress) are among the reasons research shows individuals leaving jobs in the helping profession (De Guzman et al., 2020; Killian et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2022; Pirelli et al., 2020). These areas describe the effects of working with those who have experienced trauma (Sutton et al., 2022).

Foster care professionals are among those who are in the helping profession where the primary job is interacting with people and caring for their needs (Geisler et al., 2019). Burnout is an individual's response to interpersonal stressors, exhaustion, feeling depleted, feeling detached, sense of ineffectiveness, or lack of accomplishment in the workplace that occurs gradually over a prolonged period of time and often a poor work environment contributes to employees' burnout (Branson, 2019; Leung et al., 2022). Vicarious trauma is the effect of the information and experiences someone has working with trauma victims (Leung et al., 2022; Sutton et al., 2022). Compassion fatigue/secondary traumatic stress is the emotional and behavioral impact of being exposed to traumatic events; it can look like a lack of connection to work, avoidance, feeling helplessness, overwhelmed the needs of others, and lack of empathy towards a client (Branson, 2019; Leung et al., 2022). From the research, it is found that those working in the social work and foster care field, are likely to experience levels of burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue/secondary traumatic stress, and the data suggests it is a larger problem that may have an impact on outcomes for those they are working with (Caringi et al., 2017).

With the turnover rate being up to 20-40% for most agencies, the cost of losing employees, and the impact the turnover has on the children and families being served, organizations have worked to have better employee retention strategies (Astvik et al., 2020; De Guzman et al., 2020). Some of the strategies used for employee retention include offering professional development and trainings, improving the culture, working with employees to set realistic goals and expectations, creating a safer environment, and training supervisors (Benton et al., 2017; De Guzman et al., 2020; Geisler et al., 2019).

Work engagement, global job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are the three areas retention likely depends on. Work engagement is high levels of satisfaction, dedication,

and strong identification with work that are particularly enhanced by social support from colleagues and supervisors. Global job satisfaction is the evaluation and attitude towards the job and aspects of the job (pay, tasks, values of organization) that motivates an individual. Organizational commitment is the involvement and association with the workplace by the employee. Personal values, role conflicts, and organizational support are predictors of retainment (De Guzman et al., 2020; Geisler et al., 2019). Even with the research and implementing strategies, organizations continue struggling with retaining employees (De Guzman et al., 2020).

For employees who stay in the social work, helping profession field for more than 1-2 years, research has shown that the reasons for leaving and staying in the field are situational for each individual. For some, training for dealing with secondary traumatic stress can help prevent burnout and having more organizational supports, does show to increase retention (De Guzman et al., 2020).

Support System for Foster Care Professionals

Employers of foster care professionals continue to struggle with employee retainment and have high turnover rates (Astvik et al., 2020; De Guzman et al., 2020). Support offered by employers to employees is similar to the retention strategies. In addition to supporting employees through work environment and professional development and trainings, some organizations promote self-care, and offer one-on-ones with supervisors (De Guzman et al., 2020; Foster Adopt Connect, 2022). The research does say that support looks different and is situational for each individual but does not indicate what type of support has shown long term success (De Guzman et al., 2020; Onions, 2018).

Many community events in the foster care system are gauged towards foster care parents, foster youth, and birth families. Often times these events are hosted by the organizations and professionals often are the runs running the event through the place they are employed rather than participating. There are occasional appreciation events held specifically for professionals, but often are through place of employment (The Community Partnership, 2020).

Social support from family and friends can have difference based on the specific individuals, gender, mental health/emotional availability, and childhood experiences/trauma (Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Uhing et al., 2021). Research is limited in the actual support foster care professionals receive from family and friends, the research on having support by family, friends, and spouses/partners are associated with positive outcomes (Tucker et al., 2020; Uhing et al., 2021). Research has found that if an individual had experienced childhood maltreatment or struggles with negative mental health, they are less supportive. Gender differences of offering support to friends and romantic partners are relatively the same, while women offered more emotional support than men (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Overall, it is found that support from friends and family reduces stress, increases mental health, and increases self-esteem (Tucker et al., 2020).

Foster Care Professionals Perceptions of Needs for Staying or Returning to the Field

The research on professionals in the foster care field focuses on the reasons professionals leave. Some studies have been done that measure the predicted retention and links to professionals' intention of staying (De Guzman et al., 2020). One study found that professionals with specific degrees stay in positions longer, specifically those with Title IV-E in this study (Barbee et al., 2018). Another study found that lower pay rate contributed to professionals

leaving (Auerbach et al., 2010). The research reports reasons professionals leave, but not specific reasons or needs for them to stay. It is worth mentioning that the current study does not include those foster care professionals who left the field with any intentions of returning. Only included in this study is the perspective of one foster care professional who left the foster care system and did not have any intentions or plans of returning to the field.

Gaps in the Research

Previous research mostly focuses on those in the foster care field intention of leaving and staying, how organizations and employers attempt to retain employees, factors that might contribute to foster care professionals leaving the field, and how the reasons for leaving vary by each person (Branson, 2019; Caringi et al., 2017; De Guzman et al., 2020; Killian et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2022; Pirelli et al., 2020; Sutton et al., 2022). There are gaps in the research of the specific reasons each person leaves, if there is a recurring pattern for leaving, how to effectively retain employees, and no research on foster care professionals' intentions of returning to the field.

Further investigation is needed to look at the working conditions and quality of work for professionals working in foster care field as a reason for retaining employees (Geisler et al., 2019). The current study examines the reasons, challenges, and support systems that determined one foster care professional's decision to either stay or leave the field. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does a former foster care professional describe their reasons for working in the field as long as they did, and their reasons for ultimately leaving the field?

2. From a former foster care professional's perspective, what challenges and support systems exist for foster care professionals in the field?

METHODS

Design

The current study explored what a former foster care professional describes as their reasons for working in the field as long as they did, their reasons for ultimately leaving the field, and the challenges and support for individuals in the foster care field. A case study research design was used to conduct the current study. The method of data collection included interviewing the participant and additional follow-up questions and discussions.

This research design of a case study focuses on the perspective of one participant, a former foster care professional, by investigating both the description of working in the field and description of ultimately leaving the field. The case study also explores the descriptions of the challenges and support in the foster care field. It also helped the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the selected case and discover important insights about multiple areas being investigated in the research questions.

Participant

The sample of the study included one former foster care professional. The individual was a former foster care professional chosen for the interview who had left the field at least 6 months prior to the interview but worked actively in the field for up to 5 years. The criteria were chosen to best represent the former foster care professionals who left the field in under five years. Individuals are most likely to leave the field in the first few years and the retention rates for staying in the field are lower for those first few years.

The type of professional chosen could have included a case worker/social worker, case

manager, counselor, therapist, behavioral interventionist, specialist, clinician, program director, or other worker whose main focus is working with kids and families in the foster care system or working with children adopted from the foster care system. The individual chosen was a former caseworker at a private agency for almost three years and then worked for a state agency for about a year. The case worker changed agencies when the contract and funding were not available for the private agency causing the former professional to switch to the state agency to continue in the field. It was about two years after the former professional left the field when the interview occurred. The individual chosen was never a foster care parent, in order to study former professionals in a comprehensive manner.

Procedure

Before beginning research, the researcher prepared an application to submit to the Institutional Review Board and received approval on February 28, 2023 (IRB-FY2023-339). A modification was made on April 25, 2023, and was approved with the same application number on June 4, 2023 (see Appendix A). The researcher had an up to date certificate of completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). The recruitment materials included two email scripts, one being sent to program directors of organizations and the second being sent to students and faculty in the Early Childhood and Family Development Graduate Program at Missouri State University. A consent form for the former foster care professional was included. Informed consent was obtained from participant through a document sent through DocuSign prior to interview date for review and signing. On the date of the interview, the researcher went over the informed consent form with the participant.

To recruit a participant for the current study, the researcher contacted program directors

of multiple foster care and adoption agencies in Southwestern, Missouri and students and faculty in the Early Childhood and Family Development Graduate Program at Missouri State University. The researcher introduced the study to program directors or agencies and students and faculty and ask for their assistance in identifying the potential respondents who meet the study selection criteria. The individuals who met the criteria contacted the researcher through email if interested in participating in the study.

The researcher contacted the chosen participant to confirm eligibility and contacted alternate participants as needed. The first participant to meet the requirements of being at least 18 years of age and living in the southwestern Missouri region was selected for the case study. The participant was compensated $10 for participating in the study following the informed consent procedures. The researcher set up the initial zoom interview with the participant that lasted 45 minutes and asked the list of questions to understand the participant's perspective on reasons for staying or leaving field. The researcher asked the participant for other forms of data including, but not limited to, photos, journal entries, or other forms offered by participant; however, the participant was unable to locate any additional sources. After the interview, the researcher followed up with the participant for additional information through email. The research asked about the number of calls, texts, and emails the participant received as a former case worker. The researcher also sent each theme developed from the data to the participant for member-checking for the participant to provide additional thoughts. Through this subsequent follow-up conversations with the participant occurred confirming the data was accurate and resonated with the participant.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was specifically developed to interview a former foster care professional (see Appendix B). Additional follow-up interviews and discussions were conducted with the participant which were informed or led by the information collected from the interview questions.

Analyses

For the purpose of data analysis, multiple steps were conducted to ensure a high quality and rigorous analysis of the data. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. After transcribing the data, the researcher read and reviewed the transcription for accuracy and clarity. An Excel codebook developed by Raza (2019) was used to manage and analyze qualitative data. Through this process, the researcher highlighted significant statements in the transcript through line-by-line coding (open coding) and developed initial codes based on themes. The researcher sent the highlighted transcript to be further co-developed into themes with another researcher. The open codes were then grouped into large groups, and three major themes were co-developed and reported. Each major theme was divided into three to five subthemes. There are thirteen subthemes between the three major themes.

For reliability and validity, the researcher wrote reflective journals after coding and creating the themes for analysis and interpretation phases. The researcher found that the reoccurring mentioning of heavy workload, low pay, changes in funding/contract, and personal sacrifices answered both research questions creating the first major theme of "Challenges for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Leaving the Field." The researcher reflected on these patterns being expected as previous research mentioned burnout from workload, low pay, and personal sacrifices.

The researcher found that the reoccurring mentioning of the differences between working for a private versus a state agency, working more than contracted hours without additional pay or support, answered both research questions and created the second major theme of "Supports for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Staying in the Field," from these reoccurring patterns. The researcher reflected on the differences between the work environment at the private agency versus the state agency for potential solutions for retaining foster care professionals as the case study found a more positive experience for the professional while working at the private agency.

The researcher found that the reoccurring mentioning of inconsistent support, structural changes needed, and what the professional shared for them to consider returning to the field answered both research questions and created the third major theme of, "Changes and Actions Needed to Promote Retention and Returning for Foster Care Professionals." The researcher reflected on how different individuals within the foster care field can make changes that would benefit foster care practitioners and personnel to promote retention. These changes would include ongoing investigation of the working environment, improvements within the current system, and is discussed further in implications. This analysis procedure provides a systematic way to analyze the data and find accurate answers to the research questions which are investigated in the current study.

Reliability procedures ensure good-quality research in the analysis process of coding the interview (Creswell, 2007). To establish reliability, the researcher kept detailed notes and reflections, recorded the interview, and transcribed the interview verbatim. The themes developed from the coding of the interview were determined by reading the entire interview and finding patterns within the data. Eight codes were developed to create five original subthemes. The five original subthemes were then divided into thirteen subthemes used for the current study.

Five major themes were originally developed but were then combined into the current studies three major themes with three to five of the thirteen subthemes under each. An extensive codebook was used to create these themes, and an additional researcher reviewed the codes for intercoder agreement.

In addition to reliability of the study, validity brings representation of the participant's descriptions of experiences in the foster care field. The researcher used five validation strategies of triangulation, peer review, member checking, rich, thick descriptions of interview, and clarifying research bias (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation is using multiple and different sources of data to shed light on the theme and perspective (2007). In the discussion of the results the researcher connects the findings of the current study to previous studies in the field. Peer review is an external check by another individual to ensure the researcher is interpreting the data and asking questions to keep researcher honest (2007).

Peer review included discussion of data with a faculty member to ensure validity of study. Member checking is having the participant check for creditability of the results and provide feedback for accuracy of interpretations (Creswell, 2007). The participant for this study was sent the themes and results to review and provide feedback. The participant shared that it looked accurate and resonated with them. Rich, thick descriptions of the interview give detail and depth of the interview for the reader (2007). This was done by using direct quotes from the participants interview and providing the story of the participants experience in the foster care field. Clarifying research bias is the researcher sharing their own experience and bias that may influence the interpretation of the data (2007), which occurred during reflective journaling and through a positionality statement.

Positionality Statement

A positionality statement provides a description of the researcher's views and background that potentially influences the research (e.g., their philosophical, personal, theoretical beliefs, age, political beliefs, social class, race) (Gary & Holmes, 2020). The researcher is a first-generation college student, white, middle-class female and acknowledges that her positionality is shaped by the factors of race, class, gender, education, and own experience in the field in this current study. The researcher is a former professional in the foster care field and worked as a behavioral interventionist for children in the foster care field for a year. The first-hand experience of working in the field gives the researcher a unique perspective on the struggles faced by professionals. The researcher's own experience may influence bias on data from resonating with the current study's findings. The researcher found that working more than contracted hours without additional pay or support, personal sacrifices, and seeing many needed changes in the foster care field and system all resonated with the researcher's own experience as a former professional in the field. The researcher having a deep passion for those impacted by the foster care field and having experience in the needs in the field, the researcher's current study is impacted by a desire to bring the best care and needed change for all impacted by the foster care field.

RESULTS

The current case study is one former foster care professional's description of their reasons for working in the field as long as they did, and their reasons for ultimately leaving the field. Professionals in the foster care field work to bring support, care, and clarity to children and families impacted by the foster care system. There are many types of professionals working in the field and covering a variety of tasks and responsibilities. This study examined the description a former foster care case worker gave for reasons for staying in the field as long as they did and reasons they ultimately left the field. Within the description, the former professional shared the challenges and support systems that exist in the field. The professional had left the field at least six months prior to the interview, worked no more than five years, is from the southwestern Missouri region, and was not a foster care parent. The former professional participated in an initial interview, was asked follow-up questions, and the participant reviewed the themes developed from the data for accuracy and resonation. The data collected was transcribed, coded, and organized into three major themes to answer both research questions. The three major themes developed include: "Challenges for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Leaving the Field," "Supports for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Staying in the Field," and "Changes and Actions Needed to Promote Retention and Returning for Foster Care Professionals." Each major theme is divided into three to five subthemes. There are thirteen subthemes between the three major themes.

Challenges for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Leaving the Field

Through the interview, follow-up questions, and subsequent follow-up conversation during member-checking, there are five subthemes created to describe the reasons and challenges

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that lead to the foster care professional leaving the field. These include *No Additional Funds and Contracts, Workload, Unrealistic Expectations, Poor Work-Family Balance,* and *Personal Health Sacrifices Due to Work Demands.*

No Additional Funds and Contracts. The former foster care professional worked as a case worker for both a private agency and a state agency in southwestern Missouri. The former professional worked at a private agency for about 29 months and then at a state agency for about 12 months. The former professional shared enjoying the position as a case manager at the private agency, having a more manageable workload, and better support; however, when the agency did not receive needed funding, those working there were transferred to a state agency in order to keep a job.

> So [the private agency] had a contract with the state for at least 15 years prior to me joining their team. And then there was, I guess, a situation every year [where] you had to bid for that contract and for some reason in that year, we didn't get awarded the contract and, it got awarded, it just got divided up differently between other agencies.

When working under a new contract with the state, the former professional shared that things changed, like doubling caseload, more red tape for funding, and less support. The former professional worked for the state for about a year before leaving the field:

> When I had to transfer over to the state is when things changed quite a bit. There was a lot more red tape that I had to go through to get access to services and there wasn't as much flexibility in the providers that I could utilize. Funding was a lot more difficult to access. My caseload doubled and never went down…So at that point in time, I was not actively working, I think, as hard as I felt like I should have been able to.

With the funding and contract no longer available at the private agency, the former foster care professional chose to go with the stage agency to continue in the field. When at the state agency, the former foster care professional began experiencing more challenges.

Workload. The former professional shared that the recommendation for a manageable caseload at both the private and state agencies was to have 15, but often the recommendation would be closer to 18 when siblings were involved in cases. When asked what the typical caseload consisted of, the professional shared the private agency "was anywhere between like 14 to 18… I didn't like when I had 18 kids on my caseload" and at the state agency "for the one year that I was there, I had almost 30." The responsibilities of managing a caseload included making contacts with each biological family, foster family, and other professionals involved in the case, and monthly visits to foster children in addition to paperwork, court hearings, and daily communication.

When describing the workload and daily communication as a case manager with everyone involved in the case, the professional shared while working in both agencies, but even more for the state agency, "I was getting texts and phone calls all hours of the day, all hours of the night. There was no cutoff." When asked a follow-up question in an email for further information on what daily communication consisted of, the former professional responded saying:

> As far as the texts or calls, I would say a low estimate would be 30 emails a day, but I honestly don't even know if I could conceptualize how many calls or texts I got in a day. Those never seemed to stop. Hundreds of texts were exchanged per day and if I have to guess, 20-30 calls per day. But like I said that's a rough low estimate I imagine.

The number of children on a caseload almost doubled after the switch to the state agency and the communication expectations increased as well for the former foster care professional managing the heavy workloads of overseeing more cases.

Unrealistic Expectations. Professionals in the foster care field are often expected to be available for constant communication, address situations as they occur, and manage large workloads all within the contracted 40-hour workweek. The former professional shared that it would likely take around 65 hours a week to do the bare minimum for a caseload of 15. When the caseload at the state agency continued growing over the recommended 15, the additional time needed to complete the expected tasks was not compensated in pay, overtime hours, cutting hours in other places, or addressing the issue; it was expected to get everything done and be available no matter how much time over 40 hours it took: "You still have to do everything in the same amount of time and the same number of hours and I don't care if you have to work till 10:00 o'clock at night." When asked how over hours were handled, the former professional responded saying:

> So, we were contracted the 40 hours [and] overtime was not approved. So, things were expected to get done in that 40 hours. So, it was constantly like playing a game of *Tetris*, like where can I fit everything.

Even with an increased caseload, everything was still expected in the same about of time, even if it cut into the professional's personal life.

Poor Work-Family Balance. The former professional shared while working for the state agency that often finishing additional paperwork, trying to find a placement for a child sleeping under the desk, or responding to endless messages that "it didn't seem feasible to continue

working in that manner while also maintaining my own mental health and my own family because I was responsible for them [children in caseload] all the time." In addition to it not being feasible to available all the time, the professional shared that while at the private agency there was support to take care of personal matters while the year at the state agency took an on taking care of personal matters:

> I struggled as a new mom and I didn't want to work every day until 7:00 PM, so instead of leaving me to figure that out by myself like I had a team of people there [at the private agency] that would help me figure it out I didn't have to do that.

The workload and expectations at the private agency allowed a more positive work-life balance for the former foster care professional, while the increase in workload and caseload at the state agency was cutting into personal life, little support was available, and many sacrifices were being made by the former professional.

Personal Health Sacrifices Due to Work Demands. Working in a field that requires documentation, communication with many individuals, and ultimately looking out for children in vulnerable situations, the professionals in the field often put in more hours than contracted to provide quality guidance and care for those on their caseload. The former professional shared being a huge advocate of reunification and doing anything to make it happen, "I'm a huge proponent like advocate of reunification, and I'll do any like creative weird solution you could have found, like I would have been the one trying to do it." In addition, the toll of working as a professional in the foster care field took on the former professionals' family, worry about kids who were possibly sleeping under the professional's desk, getting that kid dinner, and trying to find somewhere for them to sleep took a toll as well. The former professional also shared that

unpaid overtime and the expectation of being available all the time at the state agency caused

compassion to fade and a struggle to maintain a positive outlook led to this former professional

ultimately leaving the state agency after a year:

> There wasn't really any structured down time. I was just expected to be there all
> the time and so it made me less compassionate…I just didn't have that capability,
> and I felt like I was losing my like positive outlook on the whole thing working
> there [state agency].

With compassion fading and the effects the role as a case manager was taking on the

former foster care professional, the need for better support and better working conditions was

evident for the former professional.

Supports for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Staying in the Field

Through the interview, follow-up questions, and subsequent follow-up conversation

during member-checking, there are three subthemes created to describe the reasons and support

that lead to the foster care professional staying in the field for as long as they did. These include

More Positive Experience Working for Private Agency Versus State Agency, Coworkers and

Supervisor Support, and *Job Flexibility.*

More Positive Experience Working for Private Agency Versus State Agency.

Working for the private agency versus the state agency was quite different when it came to

support, workload, and job flexibility. The former foster care professional shared having a more

positive experience working for a private agency versus the state agency:

Comparing myself to previous caseloads where I had half of that, and I was able to put in a lot more time. At [the state agency] I felt like I was more putting out fires and just making things kind of able to get by rather than like actually being able to go hands on and work hand in hand with the families to make the progress that they needed to make in order to achieve their goal of having their kids come home. So, it felt more like, instead of me being a hand in hand guide with them, I was just like giving them tasks to accomplish and they had to go do it by themselves. Whereas at [the private agency] I was able to walk them through that like "okay is that meeting makes you nervous let me go with you." I couldn't do that [the state agency] I had 28 to go see…I didn't really have kids placed very far when I was at [the private agency]. When I was at [the state agency], I had three kids placed in Saint Louis.

The professional said once used to the job at the private agency, it was something that could have been done for the foreseeable future:

Working for the state and working for a contracted provider are not the same…I honestly could have stayed as a foster care case manager if I was at [the private agency]. That was kind of once I got there and I got used to doing the job, and I kind of knew what I was doing, it was something that I could have seen myself doing for the foreseeable future.

With the desire to continue working at the private agency for the foreseeable future and having a better experience, switching to the state agency when the funding and contract for the private agency was no longer available, changed the experience in the foster care field for the former professional.

Coworkers and Supervisor Support. While working for the private agency, the former foster care professional shared having great support and people on the team who had a lot of experience. Having a supervisor who would have a one on one to discuss struggles and a team offering support was available for the former professional while working at the private agency:

I was pretty lucky to have a team built from a lot of experience, so when I had issues or I felt like a disservice was happening, I literally just had to stand up and use them as my sounding board and you know, we would brainstorm together. I'd say, "Hey, look, I have this situation and I'm really struggling with it, so someone please help guide me through this?" and that was probably the most helpful thing that I ha[d] throughout my entire experience there [private agency].

The former professional also acknowledged that this was lucky to have this type of helpful support and coworkers and supervisors willing to listen, because many people did not always have that available to them.

I know for a fact other people didn't always have that and so having a supportive supervisor who was there literally just to sit and listen if I needed her to and a team that was willing to work together was incredibly helpful.

The experience of support from both supervisors and coworkers while working at the private agency was something the professional had that helped maintain motivation when things were tough.

Job Flexibility. The former foster care professional enjoyed working at the private agency because there was more flexibility to be creative in providing solutions for cases and there was more support in doing what was best for the individual children and families, "it was it was more easily like handled [having large caseloads at the private agency] because I had more flexibility and supports." While the state agency was more rigid, more requirements, and less time to spend on each child's case, "There was a lot more red tape that I had to go through to get access to services and there wasn't as much flexibility in the providers that I could utilize." The flexibility in coming up with solutions for individual cases was better at the private agency versus the state agency.

Changes and Actions Needed to Promote Retention and Returning for Foster Care Professionals

Through the interview, follow-up questions, and subsequent follow-up conversation during member-checking, there are five subthemes created to describe the changes and actions needed to promote retention and returning for foster care professionals. These areas include *Adequate Workload and Pay, Communication Among All Relevant and Responsible Parties/Groups, Improve Efficiency, Facilitation, and Flexibility, Additional Education and Awareness for All Parties,* and *Structural Changes Are Needed.*

Adequate Workload and Pay. Through the interview with the former foster care professional, after working for a private agency for about three years and having to transition to a state agency when the contract and funding for the private agency was unavailable, the professional made the decision after a year of working at the state agency the leave the field. When asked if returning would ever be considered and what it would take, the former professional shared about the workload and pay needing to change or at least be more like the private agency in terms of support, flexibility, and caseload sizes, "In order for me to go back to a situation, it would have to almost emulate like what I had there [private agency]." The former foster care professional shared that the caseloads while working for the private agency stayed between 14 and 18. While the former professional's caseload doubled when transferred to the state agency. In order for the former professional to consider returning, changes in the caseload and the workload that comes with large caseloads would need to change:

> If I was going to have an increased caseload there would [need to] be help along the way with that. I wouldn't, my expectations would change, like I would have to have something in place that would show me "Yeah, you're gonna have 25 kids, but this is what we're going to do to offset that." Not, "You still have to do everything in the same amount of time and the same number of hours, and I don't care if you have to work till 10:00 o'clock at night!"

The pay was not great at either the private or state agency, the workload was more manageable at the private agency. More adequate pay, while unsure of the exact number, would be least $10,000 more to start:

> So, in order for me to go back, I would have to, one get paid adequately, which I don't think is happening right now, and I'm not entirely sure what that number would be, but I know it's at least 10 grand more than what they're offering right now.

The workload would need to improve along with higher pay for the former foster care professional to consider returning to the foster care field.

Communication Among All Relevant and Responsible Parties/Groups. The former foster care professional shared about the struggle to communicate among all the parties would need resolution. The parties communicating often included the foster family, biological family, court system, and professionals (caseworkers, counselors, interventionists, schools, medical field, Juvenile Office):

> We also had to hold, actually, monthly team meetings where myself, the parent, the child, if it was age appropriate, [and] anyone else that they wanted to be involved. In addition to any legal representation, including the guardian of them and the parent attorneys, the Deputy Juvenile officer, and sometimes my supervisor, holding monthly meetings to track the progress and to make sure that we were on the right track for those.

The case worker often has to coordinate the meetings among all the different parties and groups. The former professional shared an improvement would be having more assistance to the caseworkers trying to coordinate meetings, visits, and appointments:

I think probably really just more hands on assistance in like coordinating things.
So maybe, not, I guess necessarily like changing requirements, but like figuring
out some kind of way to streamline some of those things like scheduling
meetings. I know counties do them a little bit differently, so maybe like analyzing
which ones the best, like who out there is doing has some kind of structure put in
place where things are streamlined in a way where I don't have to worry so much
about scheduling that meeting that everybody knows we have to have at 30 days.
Like, why can't that already be kind of set up and just ready to walk into that way.
I don't have to go and tell everyone or try to coordinate between 12 people, how
we're gonna get everybody on this phone call or how we're gonna get everybody
to. This meeting, like this office.

It was difficult to get all the different people to work together, getting the court system

and child welfare system to work together, and having adequate representation in the legal and

court system as a professional are all areas where improved communication is needed. In

addition to these communication areas, the former professional shared improving the respect for

the professionals working directly with the children and families would help as well:

I think probably having more adequate like representation in the court system. I
think I did a really good job of making my voice heard during those hearings just
because I refuse not to let it be heard during those hearings. But I don't think
every case worker was like that and I think it's very easy to be intimidated in
those situations.
And so I think if we had legal representation there, they'd be more likely to hear
what people had to say…And I think maybe that would help the families too feel
like what we were saying was being not regulated, but like oversaw it because a
lot of times I think families think we just make stuff up when we walk in there
and like, "no, I quoted you. You said this on that day, and I have this
documentation and now it's in this report. And this is what's happening.

The final part of improving the communication among the responsible parties would

include improving the relationship between the Juvenile Office and Children's Division:

I think too one of the biggest things that would have helped is improving the relationship the Juvenile Office has with Children's Division, and I know that's more kind of like a long term thing, because I think depending on what county you're in, that relationship has been tainted by one party or the other based on their previous actions. But that's necessary if we're going to be a state that continues to utilize the Juvenile Office, which, is it, blew my mind when I found out we're only like one of two or three states that still does that.

The former professional shared there were few occasions that each party and group involved would work together for the best interest of the child and respected each person's perspective, but most of the time it was a continued challenge:

There has to be way to make that relationship better because it's not working well right now. It's not. It's either the juvenile office in one county feel I feel like they're telling me, like, what I need to do. And I'm sorry, but like, you're there for a purpose and I'm there for a purpose. Why don't we respect each other for that? Or it's another county that just doesn't want to cooperate at all, and they want to do their own thing and they're not going to communicate with you. They're going to find out information about the family and not share it, well, that's also not helpful. And then there's some that just don't do anything at all and like, well, that's all of these different scenarios are equally awful. And there has to be like they try to as an individual like make that better with the individual people that I worked with, and I think it worked pretty well.
But I think overall, just as a team, like if you're going to have these components working together as a team, that's where I had the most success was when I had people that were there with the same intention, working for the same purpose, that have the same goals and believed in the families. So really, I think if that happened, then the rest of it would kind of work out.

In addition to improved communication with all groups and members outside of the agency, the professional shared while at the private agency, the supervisor would make time to list and offer support, "Having a supportive supervisor who was there literally just to sit and listen if I needed her to and a team that was willing to work together was incredibly helpful."

Improve Efficiency, Facilitation, and Flexibility. Not only would communication and relationship need improvements, the way documentation and needed meetings, visits, and appointments are scheduled need improvement. Often, the caseworkers are the main individuals coordinating between the other professionals, foster parents, and biological families. The former professional shared each time anything is scheduled then the meeting, visit, or appointment takes place, documentation was required. The former professional shared that system for documentation was redundant in the way the same information would be repeated multiple times within the same document, which added to the time needed to complete all the necessary documentation. The former professional shared a more efficient system would help:

> So, I think finding a way to make it more efficient, so that things aren't as redundant because in the system you had to document things, I think we entered like the same things in four or five different spots like. So, half of them I didn't do because I was more worried about the fire that was happening…Like I didn't really care about entering in a quarterly summary because I had a kid sleeping under my desk…I don't really care about the paperwork right now, so like a lot of that stuff, I don't think is realistic to like the day-to-day.

In addition to the need for more efficient documentation, the system for scheduling meetings, visits, and appointments could use improvement by having more set dates for meetings that each responsible party is aware of from the start of a new case to aid the caseworkers in setting these up. In addition to facilitating monthly meetings, quarterly reports, and additional day to day documentation and appointments, having more flexibility between other professionals would help move cases and get children in foster care the resources needed in a timelier manner. All of these areas are ways the foster care field could improve the efficiency, facilitation, and flexibility for retention and returning of professionals to the field.

Additional Education, and Awareness for All Parties. Another aspect of the foster care

field that needs improvement is the continued education and awareness of what goes into the

field for those working as foster care families, professionals, and the community. The former

professional shared that sometimes a family will complete all the necessary steps for a foster care

license but will not have a child placed in their care for over a year; therefore, a refresher on the

goals and strategies would help:

> The continued education piece, both on like the part of us as workers and the
> foster parents, could be improved quite a bit. I think when, especially when a
> foster parent gets their first case going through like some kind of recurring
> training to remind them of like why they're doing this. What the goal is like. What
> they have available to them. Sometimes… they don't get a call for a year and a
> half. So, like if they're getting their first call, they're not going to remember, you
> know, and the training stuff that they get are great, but they need to be reminded
> of, like, what the goal is, like, you're here to help this family have what you might
> already have or what you want or. Like you're here to be a support, not
> necessarily as a solution, so I think those things would probably be the most
> helpful.

In addition, educating foster care families that reunification is the goal for each case and

partnering with biological families by being support, even if they are not capable of giving the

same things as the foster family, gives a better chance of reunifying and restoring a family:

> I think the educational piece of my job was the most difficult because it was like,
> how do you really argue with a parent who has taken in this stranger's child and
> given them the love and the support that they would give their own children? How
> do you get them to understand that it's capable like, it's possible for this parent to
> do the same thing, even if it doesn't look the same, like even if they don't have,
> you know, the nice house, the new car, the money to do whatever. Like, how do
> you get them to understand that this is still better?

Structural Changes Are Needed. The former professional shared that many structural changes would need to be in place for consideration of returning as a professional to the field. The first structural change needed would be a change of expectations as a professional. As stated when sharing about the workload needing to change, the expectations of a state agency would need to emulate what the former professional had at the private agency (smaller caseloads, support from coworkers and supervisor, more flexibility, less red tape, and more time for each child), " [A] Place in order for me to go back to a situation, it would have to almost emulate like what I had there [private agency]."

The second structural change for the foster care field that would need change would be better prevention programs for biological families. The former professional shared that families who are at risk for having children placed in foster care would benefit from training, assistance, and education to prevent the child being removed in the first place:

> I think being able to better manage caseloads by prevention, I don't think that every kid that has come into care on my caseload necessarily warranted coming into care. In my case, though, it had a little digging, but a little more digging been done. But I think sometimes people have knee jerk reactions to certain situations, and understandably they make judgment calls in the moment. But I think sometimes if they were able to slow down a little bit more, we might be able to prevent some of that.

According to the former foster care professional, these are the areas of change needed for better retention and returning of professionals to the foster care field.

DISCUSSION

The current study on one former foster care professional's perspective on working in and leaving the field uncovers important insights about the experience for professionals that may help bring appropriate actions and support to decrease the challenges and retain current and future professionals in the field. The participant's responses are organized into three major themes with a combined thirteen subthemes. These major themes and subthemes answer the research questions on why professionals leave or stay in the field and give insight into the existing challenges and support for foster care professionals. From the description of a former foster care professional, retaining and recruiting professionals in the foster care field requires structural changes in funding, expectations, and procedures.

Challenges for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Leaving the Field

With 20-40% of foster care professionals leaving the field within the first five years due to low-pay, high burnout rates, and heavy workloads (Astvik et al., 2020; De Guzman et al., 2020), the current study developed five subthemes of *No Additional Funds and Contracts, Workload, Unrealistic Expectations, Poor Work-Family Balance,* and *Personal Health Sacrifices Due to Work Demands* as the main challenges the former foster care professional faced, and thus their reasons for leaving.

Research in the foster care field finds that professionals do leave because of the heavy workloads (De Guzman et al., 2020). The former foster care professional in the current study reported a heavy workload and unrealistic expectations of working more than the contracted 40-hour work week, often working 65 hours a week just to get the bare minimum completed. The

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workload and expectation of working in a job where the primary role is interacting and caring for the needs of others (Geisler et al., 2019) and needing to complete necessary documentation, visits, meetings, scheduling, and the many other tasks required by someone working as a foster care professional can become overwhelming. The workload can lead to forms of burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue (also called secondary traumatic stress) (Leung et al., 2022) for the professional.

Not only does the workload and unrealistic expectations lead to burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue, but also the poor work-family balance and personal health sacrifices due to work demands. Burnout is one of the top reasons research says professionals are leaving the field (Leung et al., 2022), and the sacrifices made by professionals in having a work-family balance and health to manage the heavy workload and unrealistic expectations are part of why foster care professionals are leaving the field. The former foster care professional shared that being compassionate became harder as the workload became heavier; this could be a type of burnout as the former professional was having interpersonal stressors, exhaustion, feeling depleted, feeling detached, a sense of ineffectiveness, or a lack of accomplishment in the workplace that occurs gradually over a prolonged period of time (Branson, 2019; Leung et al., 2022). In addition to burnout, the former professional also shared the fading of compassion and the feeling of "just putting out fires" could be a form of compassion fatigue/secondary traumatic stress; it can look like a lack of connection to work, avoidance, feeling helplessness, overwhelmed the needs of others, and lack of empathy towards a client (Branson, 2019; Leung et al., 2022).

As shared by the former foster care professional, the work environment working for a state agency is where most of the challenges and changes came in the career as foster care

professional. The current study finds that the state tends to have more children in foster care and the need for professionals to manage the higher number of cases leads to a heavier workload, unrealistic expectations, poor work-balance, and personal health sacrifices (burnout, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue). With the funding not available for the private agency, the new contract with the state was the option available for the former professional to continue in the field; however, after a year, the professional shared leaving was the best option for personal health, family health, and having a manageable job.

Supports for Foster Care Professionals and Reasons for Staying in the Field

Research shows the current strategies for retaining employees are still leading to organizations struggling with retention (De Guzman et al., 2020). The current study developed three subthemes *of More Positive Experience Working for Private Agency Versus State Agency, Coworkers and Supervisor Support,* and *Job Flexibility,* to describe why the former foster care professional stayed in the field as long as they did.

The former foster care professional shared that it was quite different working for a private agency versus the state agency and could have worked for the private agency for the foreseeable future. Research studies on work satisfaction report that work engagement, global job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are areas that help retain employees (De Guzman et al., 2020; Geisler et al., 2019). The former professional shared that the work environment at the private agency provided a place for support from coworkers and supervisors leading to job satisfaction. In addition, having an agency that was committed to keeping the workload manageable and having more flexibility in the job led to the satisfaction for the former professional to see the job as long term, even with low pay.

The reasons the former foster care professional stayed at the private agency was the positive experience in having support from coworkers and supervisors willing to listen when needing advice or struggling. The private agency provided manageable and flexible workload that offset the low pay and retained the professional until the agency did not have funding to continue.

Changes and Actions Needed to Promote Retention and Returning for Foster Care Professionals

The need for professionals in the foster care field continues to grow as many are leaving and the research shows the current retention strategies are not enough to prevent professionals leaving (De Guzman et al., 2020). Previous research suggested examining the working conditions and the quality of work for professionals in the field as a way to evaluate retainment (Geisler et al., 2019). The current study developed five subthemes of *Adequate Workload and Pay, Communication Among All Relevant and Responsible Parties/Groups, Improve Efficiency, Facilitation, and Flexibility, Additional Education and Awareness for All Parties,* and *Structural Changes Are Needed* to describe the participant's perspective on the changes needed to retain current professionals and promote returning for former professionals.

One of the challenging and time-consuming parts of the job of a foster care professional is communication among all the individuals involved in each child's case. When a caseload has 15 or more children, the amount of communication required is taxing. A resolution for improving the system of communication, whether positions within an organization designated to take that part of the job or decreasing the caseload, continuing to have the responsibility of communicating on behalf of 15 or children to foster parents, biological parents, courts, and other

professionals is not sustainable. Not only is the amount of communication (scheduling meetings, visits, appointments) required unsustainable for one person, the relationships and teamwork of each person involved needs improvement as well. Occasional cases where everyone works together for the best interest of the child are not enough to bring the needed changes, care, and quality needed for those impacted by the foster care system.

The next challenge needing change for retaining foster care professionals and promoting professionals returning to the field is improving the efficiency, facilitation, and flexibility within the job. Documentation requirements are needed for court hearings, consistent information on the child and case, and to protect all individuals involved; however, as the former foster care professional shared, having a more efficient, and less redundant system would open up time for the professional to focus on the emergencies, children on their case, and giving support to foster care parents. In addition to an efficient documentation system, a new or improved system for scheduling meetings, visits, and appointments would also free time for the foster care professional to work the contracted 40 hour week.

One additional challenge noted was related to flexibility within the job to get resources for children in foster care. While the case worker worked alongside the foster families to get resources that are covered by the state, the foster care families are given monthly stipends from the state to help with getting needs met. Children in foster care and the foster families caring for the children often qualify for Medicaid, SNAP, or TANF (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; KVC Health System, 2018; Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.). Often foster families have to get approval from the case worker before taking children to doctors' appointments, getting haircut, or other routine tasks in caring for children. The foster care families have gone through the needed training to care for children who have experienced trauma

from maltreatment, are given the funding to help cover the cost of caring for the children; therefore, lessening the workload and communication from case workers giving approval to foster care families by allowing foster care families to handle the routine care and decisions may help elevate the tasks for professionals and possibly give foster care families more support in caring for children in foster care by showing trust in them (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; KVC Health System, 2018; Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.).

The next challenge is a need for additional education and awareness for all parties. Research has shown that supportive workplace and training on handling secondary traumatic stress can help prevent burnout for some individuals (De Guzman et al., 2020). The former foster care professional shared about having support while working for a private agency and a need for more training for professionals but did not mention specific additional training as a professional at either the private agency or state agency. Research also suggests having further trainings for supervisors on improving culture, collaborating with employees to set realistic goals and expectations, and creating a safer environment to help with employee retention (Benton et al., 2017; De Guzman et al., 2020; Geisler et al., 2019). Some agencies promote self-care and offer one-on-ones with supervisors (De Guzman et al., 2020; Foster Adopt Connect, 2022), the professional shared sometimes there were these types of meetings at the private agency where the supervisor was available to listen and offer support.

In addition to continued education for professionals and their supervisors for better work environment and retainment, research describes the type of training needed for foster care parents prior to getting licensed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; KVC Health System, 2018; Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.). The former foster care professional shared there are some continued trainings, but more regular refreshers would improve foster care

parents' skills helping them care for the children in their home. These trainings would provide foster care parents more knowledge of their role in promoting reunification and having them on board with the professionals in restoring families. While reunification is not always an option, having foster parents helping the mindset of the child and supporting the biological parents helps the professionals in their roles of caring and navigating what is best in each situation.

The final changes needed, from this former professional's perspective, are structural changes to the foster care system, aligning with research that shows that there are struggles with retaining employees and burnout is occurring for many professionals in the foster care field (De Guzman et al., 2020; Onions, 2018). The first change is the pay for professionals in the field. According to Indeed (2021), the average social worker in the United States makes $55,790 a year, and $36,788 in the state of Missouri (MO Careers, 2022). The research shows the low pay is a high on the list of reasons professionals leave the foster care field (Auerbach et al., 2010). The former foster care professional was unsure of the exact number, but at least $10,000 more to provide for a family, have savings, and compensated for the toughness of the job.

The next structural change they discussed would be a change in expectations where state agencies have more support, flexibility, and more time for each child on the caseload to make the job more manageable, enjoyable, and prevent burnout. The third structural change the former professional shared would be more prevention programs for biological families at risk of having children placed in foster care. The Family Preservation and Support Services Acts in 1993 provided additional funding to have case workers do check-ins and funding prevention services. In 2018, The Family 1st Prevention Services Act of 2018 was put in place to help keep families together, ensure foster care homes are safe, and improve residential treatment (Trammell, 2009). These provide the funding and legislation for prevention services, but further investigation on the

actual services provided is needed. The services would benefit biological families by giving them training, assistance, and education instead of placing children in foster care.

These five subthemes of *Adequate Workload and Pay, Communication Among All Relevant and Responsible Parties/Groups, Improve Efficiency, Facilitation, and Flexibility, Additional Education and Awareness for All Parties,* and *Structural Changes Are Needed* are some of the changes and actions needed to promote retention of current professionals and promote returning for foster care professionals.

Implications

The current study brings insight into the state of the professional in the foster care field, the reasons a professional stayed, left, and what it would take for returning to the field. Professionals are burnt out from the workload, expectations, and sacrifices; actions to make this field more manageable are needed. The study shows the working conditions for professionals in the foster care field can lead to burnout and leaving the field. The quality of work a professional is able to produce goes down as the workloads increase. This study also provides answers for the gaps in the literature of what it would take for a professional to return; according to this professional, the pay would need to increase by at least $10,000, the caseloads would need to stay below 15, there should be more communication and relationships between different parties and groups, working within the contracted 40 hours and no more should be the expectation, and continued support is needed for professionals from coworkers and supervisors.

The findings in this study provide a framework for policymakers, practitioners, and foster care personnel looking to make changes to improve both the retention rate of professionals in the field and promote professionals to return. Policymakers can specifically make an impact by

creating regulations for the number of hours worked by professionals to maintain the contracted 40 hours a week or give the option of working additional hours with the offset of additional pay. To assist with keeping hours within the contracted 40-hour weeks having a rotating on-call number or specific hours foster care parents can reach out to their caseworker may alleviate the constant communication. In addition, creating policies that keep caseloads under 15 will provide more adequate care for children in foster care and working conditions for professionals. A policy increasing the starting pay for professionals in the foster care field is another change policymakers can make to increase retention rates. Having a continual review of these areas by policymakers can show areas for further improvement and provide the best work environment for professionals in the foster care field.

Practitioners can specifically make an impact and changes by providing further training, support, and implementing policy changes within the agencies and employees they oversee. Further training would give professionals continued tools to provide the best care and further their knowledge of the field. In addition, providing further training for foster care parents may provide relief for professionals by giving foster care parents information and knowledge to work through situations independently. Support may include having set times to meet with each professional to check-in on mental health, work-life balance, and struggles within the field. Support may also include having systems in place for scheduling needed meetings, appointments, and visits. Implementing policy changes may look like ensuring each employee is working within the contracted 40 hours, keeping caseloads under 15 by hiring more professionals, and improving the work environment by having a rotating on-call and lessening hours in other places during on-call times.

Foster care personnel can specifically make an impact and changes by communicating

with supervisors the struggles they are experiencing in workload and communication among other professionals. Personnel can also advocate for work-life balance, higher pay, and making personal goals for working within the job.

Limitations

The current case study focused on one former foster care professional's description of their reasons for working in the field as long as they did, and their reasons for ultimately leaving the field. The themes and subthemes were developed from the interview and subsequent follow-up conversation during member-checking. The additional information was the participant's estimation of the number of calls, emails, and texts received per day while working in the field. One limitation is having an estimation of the amount of communication rather than examples of the communication being received. An additional limitation is having one professional's description and other individuals may have varied reasons for leaving and staying in the field. The case study of one individual's description may influence the results of what the challenges and support looked like.

Another limitation was that the researcher did not ask follow-up questions of the former professional regarding what specific additional training the professional was referring to for those working in the foster care field. In addition, this study is limited in its reporting on adequate continual training for foster care professionals because the researcher did not ask the professional about the contrast between the training provided at the private agency versus the state agency.

Future Directions and Conclusion

From the results of this current study, future research may examine multiple professionals' descriptions of the reasons for leaving or staying in the field and compare the answers to find patterns. While previous research examined some employee retainment strategies for the foster care field and found that many of them were unsuccessful (De Guzman et al., 2020; Onions, 2018), future research may examine the specific strategies to see which are most successful for working towards retention and regaining professionals in the field. In addition to former foster care professional descriptions for working in the field and ultimately leaving, future research may examine foster care parents' descriptions for working in the field as long as they did and why they ultimately left.

The previous research mostly focused on the intentions of leaving the field, the attempts of organizations and employers attempt to retain employees, factors that might contribute to foster care professionals leaving the field, and how the reasons for leaving vary by each person (Branson, 2019; Caringi et al., 2017; De Guzman et al., 2020; Killian et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2022; Pirelli et al., 2020; Sutton et al., 2022). This study shares insight into the gap in the research of what it would take for this professional, and possibly others, to return to the field.

The current study examined one former foster care professional's perspective on their reasons for working in the field as long as they did, their reasons for leaving the field, and the challenges and support they experienced. The challenges of heavy workloads, unrealistic expectations, sacrifices in personal life, low-pay, and burnout are among the reasons professionals choose to leave the field. Changes in the structure, communication, improvements in the efficiency of the job, education and awareness, and higher pay are among the action needed to improve the retainment of current professionals, recruitment of future professionals, and regaining former professionals.

The foster care field provides care for some of the most vulnerable members of society, children, in need of love, safety, and healing. By first taking care of those who provide the resources needed to bring the love, safety, and healing to children who have experienced maltreatment, the quality of care for these children can increase and more families can be restored and started. This study provides insight into how to improve the environment for professionals working in the foster care field, and how to facilitate a healthy and life-giving place for every former, current, and future professional.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Human Subjects IRB Approval

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member	Muhammad Raza	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	hassanraza@missouristate.edu
Member	Lauren Williams	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	lmr5355s@missouristate.edu

IRB #: IRB-FY2023-339
Title: How Professional and Foster Care Parents Describe Reasons for Leaving and Staying in the Field in the
State of Missouri
Creation Date: 12-18-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth King
Review Board: MSU
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
Submission Type	Modification	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member	Elizabeth King	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	eking@missouristate.edu
Member	Lauren Williams	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	lmr5355s@missouristate.edu

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Former Foster Care Professional

The former foster care professional was asked the following questions during the interview:

- What was your role as a foster care professional? How did you perform that role?
- How long did you work as a foster care professional? Please describe your tasks and duties.
- What were your major reasons to leave the foster care system/field? Please explain.
- Can you share the challenges you faced when you were working in the field?
- Can you describe the needs that were not met while you were working?
- What type of support or assistance was available to you when you were working?
- Was the support or assistance enough to address your challenges and needs? How?
- What could have been done differently to help you retroactively stay in the field? Please explain.
- What additional support systems did you need to adequately address your challenges and needs and help you stay in the field?
- What would it take for you to go back and rejoin the foster care system/field?
- What changes in the existing support systems do you suggest which may help to support?
- What else would you like to add? Any suggestions?