

Managing Public and Community Relations

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NASW Section Member Survey (2002)

Aspect	Percentage
Lack of training	1%
Safety	2%
Court appearances	3%
Working conditions	5%
Media portrayal	8%
Salary	10%
Paperwork	18%
Caseload	21%
Issues confronting families	28%

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Landsman (2001) study of Missouri child welfare workers:

- Community stress: degree to which the employee perceives the organization is consistently “under fire” by the community

Sample item: The community supports the work of my county agency.

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Landsman findings

- Significant negative relationship between the degree of “community stress” (i.e., worker’s perception that the agency is under fire) and the worker’s:
 - Job satisfaction
 - Affinity with the local agency
 - How likely they say they are to stay at the agency
 - How strongly they identify with and intend to remain in child welfare as a field of practice

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Public Relations

- Media relations
 - Crisis public relations versus
 - Developing a good relationship with media in “ordinary time”
 - Promoting the image of the agency’s work in the media

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The impact of “no comment”

“The vacuum caused by a failure to communicate is soon filled with rumour, misrepresentation . . . and poison”
 (Regester and Lathan)

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Crisis Public Relations

- Impact on staff, families, mission
- Difficult/impossible to control
- Mostly done by DHS spokespeople and upper management
- Tips for handling media inquiries at the local level:

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Crisis Public Relations Tips

- Legal concerns:
 - Preserve confidentiality
 - Never admit liability
 - Never speculate on cause
 - Expressing regret does NOT amount to admission of liability
 - Taking corrective action does NOT amount to an admission of liability

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Crisis Public Relations

- Media statements should address the impact and express concern for (in this order):
 - People
 - Environment
 - Property
 - Money

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Crisis Public Relations

- When you can't comment:
 - "I'm not the best person to respond to that but let me give you the name and number of the person who can. . . ."

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Establishing good relationships with media in "ordinary time"

- Making deposits into the "reputation bank"
- Conveying genuine openness, concern for community, concern for families, investment in the well-being of the community while
- Maintaining confidentiality of clients

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How to build up the "bank"

- Informal relationships with press (you and your staff)
- Prompt return of phone calls, offers to talk on "background", not about specific Iowa cases
- Courtesy and genuine expressions of concern during crisis public relations

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Working with local press to enhance the agency's image

- Make periodic decisions about what the image you'd like to convey, e.g.
 - DHS is concerned with mitigating the effects of poverty in our community
 - DHS caseworkers are contributing members of this community
 - child protection work is a difficult but rewarding job

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- Press releases regarding worker involvement in community affairs
- Events that highlight "feel good" DHS activities – e.g. adoption fairs, foster home recruitment
- Others?

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Community Relationships

- Perspective taking
 - What do our community partners feel we do well/less well?
- What are reasonable expectations of us?
- Constant adjustments being made on both sides about what is DHS's concern
 - Recognition that building "domain consensus" is a process

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Community Relations

- There is a fair amount of interest in communities about the work
- Create opportunities for the community to learn about the work
 - Brief presentations and handouts
 - Rewards/support for making presentations
 - Coaching for how to give a balanced perspective that supports reunification work

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Community Relations

- Create opportunities for community members to contribute to the well-being/support of the families we serve
 - "social distancing"
 - Ideas for bridging the distance
 - Foster home recruitment
 - Family team meeting support (Cedar Rapids Partnership for Safe Families)
 - Permanent Connections for Older Youth in Care

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Community Relations

- Workers are members of communities
- Supervisors are members of communities

Do you/they feel comfortable in identifying as child protection professionals in your community circles?

How could you help your staff get more comfortable?

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Community Relations

- Create opportunities for staff to contribute to community well being
 - eg. CPPC in Cedar Rapids – winterizing mobile homes

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