



The perceived effects of volunteer use by public child welfare agencies

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ABSTRACT

Public Child Welfare Agencies (PCWAs) may use volunteers in a number of capacities to support improved youth outcomes while addressing resource shortages and promoting positive community relationships. However, no prior research has examined volunteer use in various capacities by PCWAs and the potential outcomes of this use. This qualitative study explores how PCWAs in one state utilize volunteers and the perceived effects of this volunteer use. Qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with representatives from PCWAs in twelve metropolitan counties. Using grounded theory analysis, interview data were thematically coded and organized into a conceptual model depicting the potential effects of volunteer use on agency and child outcomes. Most ($n = 9$) agencies used volunteers, but only four used volunteers in roles where they had direct contact with youth (e.g., as mentors). Respondents described volunteer programs as promoting outcomes in three major areas: community engagement, agency access to supports and resources, and positive youth development. Moreover, respondents described potential connections among these outcome areas, with community engagement leading to more supports and resources, which in turn, promoted positive youth development. Findings suggest that the use of volunteers may help PCWAs to achieve their goals of advancing child permanency, safety, and well-being.

1. Introduction

Youths involved in the child welfare system experience high rates of trauma and emotional and behavioral problems and are at risk for low educational attainment, unemployment, criminal justice involvement, early parenthood, system reinvolvement, and substance use in adulthood (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Massinga & Pecora, 2003). Public Child Welfare Agencies (PCWAs) are tasked with promoting the safety, well-being, and permanency of these children. However, in confronting this mandate, PCWAs must grapple with organizational difficulties, including shortages in financial resources, staff training and development needs, high levels of vacancies and staff turnover, secondary trauma, high workloads and stress levels, and unpredictable funding streams (McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015). Volunteers offer a potential avenue through which PCWAs can expand their capacity and potentially advance strong community relations and foster positive outcomes for children in their care. At the same time, engaging community members in volunteer roles can entail risk for agencies and the youth in their care, and may be impeded by the same capacity concerns that invoke their use (Martinez, 2003). However, the extent to which PCWAs use volunteers across a range of potential capacities and how this use may relate to agency and child outcomes remains largely unknown. Based on qualitative telephone interviews conducted with

PCWA staff, this study applied grounded theory analysis to describe the use of volunteers and to develop a conceptual framework illustrating the potential effects of volunteer use by PCWAs on agency and child outcomes.

1.1. Volunteer use in the public sector

Volunteerism is freely given, nonmandated, and unpaid work done in an organized setting to help or benefit another party (Brudney, 1999; Wilson, 2000; Young, 2004). Public volunteerism has been noted for its potential to improve agency cost-effectiveness, supplement paid workforces, and expand the capacity and scope of services offered (Sundeen, 1990; Young, 2004). In addition, public volunteerism has been noted as a potential avenue for improving civic participation in government and enhancing a shared sense of ownership of social problems through *coproduction*, the active involvement of citizens in the creation and delivery of public services (Brudney & Kellough, 2000; Fung, 2015; Mech & Leonard, 1988; Sundeen, 1990; Wilson, 2000; Young, 2004). A nationally representative U.S. survey of volunteer use in 189 diverse state agencies, including PCWAs, found that enhanced capacity, cost savings, and improved community relationships were among the most frequently reported perceived benefits (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). Survey respondents (personnel managers) of agencies

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with more developed programs employing higher numbers of volunteers reported higher perceived benefits (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). Of note, personnel managers also reported various challenges surrounding volunteer use that may impede benefits, such as difficulties in volunteer recruitment, lack of agency capacity to supervise and administer volunteer programs, lack of leadership support of volunteers, strained relationships between volunteers and paid staff, liability concerns, and concerns regarding the reliability and quality of volunteer work (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). However, because a wide variety of state agencies were surveyed, perceptions about the benefits and challenges of volunteer use by PCWAs specifically were not clear from the study.

1.2. Volunteer use by public child welfare agencies

Little research has examined volunteer use by PCWAs specifically and, to our knowledge, no study has investigated how PCWAs engage volunteers across a range of potential capacities. Past studies have described volunteer programs serving child welfare populations in specific areas such as community-based abuse prevention (Haski-Leventhal, Ben-Arieh, & Melton, 2008), independent living (Mech & Leonard, 1988), and mentoring (Gilligan, 1999; Johnson & Price, 2010; Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999; Taussig & Culhane, 2010). One survey found that 70% of publicly and privately administered independent living programs ($n = 100$) used volunteers in seven distinct roles (Mech & Leonard, 1988). Fitting with a pattern of underutilization and disinvestment found in public volunteer studies (Brudney, 1999; Brudney & Kellough, 2000; Choudry, 2010; Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009), programs tended to be recently established and small with minimal organizational infrastructure; for instance, less than 20% had a designated volunteer coordinator or manager (Mech & Leonard, 1988).

A body of past research has focused on the use of volunteers in capacities such as foster care review boards, court-appointed special advocates, and citizen review panels (Collins-Camargo, Jones, & Krusich, 2009). The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272) mandated child welfare agencies to create case review panels for children in foster care. The review boards assess the child welfare agency's permanency goals and provide the court with recommendations on behalf of foster children. The 1996 amendment of Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) enacted citizen review panels (P.L. 104-235) to evaluate state and local child welfare agencies. As it currently stands, CAPTA calls for states to have at least three citizen review panels. The review panels are charged with evaluating how the state and local child welfare agencies function in many capacities including, but not limited to, handling child fatalities, and making sure agencies are properly coordinating with Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs.

Few studies have explored the potential outcomes associated with PCWA-administered volunteer programs. Positive effects of mentoring programs, which may be staffed by volunteers, on positive child development have been demonstrated. Identified outcomes of mentoring among child welfare youth have included decreased mental health symptoms (Johnson & Price, 2010; Taussig & Culhane, 2010), improved interpersonal skills (Osterling & Hines, 2006), and increased peer social support (Rhodes et al., 1999). However, such programs are sometimes staffed by paid mentors as opposed to volunteers (Johnson & Price, 2010) or are administered by private subcontracting agencies as opposed to PCWAs (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008; Johnson & Price, 2010; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Rhodes et al., 1999). Therefore, the potential benefits of PCWA-administered volunteer mentoring programs remain unclear.

The potential effects of publicly administered volunteer programs, including civic engagement and other community- and agency-level outcomes, warrant further investigation. Volunteer programs, particularly those engaging citizen volunteers in capacities such as foster care

review boards, court appointed special advocates, and citizen review panels, have the potential of improving community engagement with PCWAs (i.e., coproduction), as well as advancing positive development in children. A few researchers have focused on the effectiveness of citizen review panels, focusing on how citizen review panels operate within agency systems and interpret their relationships to PCWAs, as well as how well members feel heard by agencies and view their ability to influence child welfare policies, practices, and outcomes (Bryan, Collins-Camargo, & Jones, 2011; Bryan, Jones, Allen, & Collins-Camargo, 2007; Jones, 2004; Jones, Litzelfelner, & Ford, 2003; Miller, Collins-Camargo, Jones, & Niu, 2017). In general, the research has shown a lack in communication and trust between citizen review panel members and child welfare agencies, and a lack of clear roles and expectations of the citizen review panels as barriers to effectiveness (Bryan et al., 2011; Jones, 2004; Jones & Royse, 2008; Vadapalli, 2017). Much less research has been conducted on how volunteer engagement in citizen review panels may influence child outcomes such as maltreatment fatalities and permanency placements, and child welfare policies. Research that has examined the effectiveness of citizen review panels in influencing child welfare policies and child outcomes fails to provide a clear link to support a strong claim that the citizen review panels effected the change in outcomes (Palusci, Yager, & Covington, 2010). In addition, there has been a lack of attention to other pathways through which citizen review panels may influence child outcomes, for example by enhancing coproduction or by connecting PCWAs to resources.

2. The present study

Drawing from qualitative interviews with PCWA directors and staff managing volunteer programs, the current study addressed gaps in knowledge regarding the use of volunteers by PCWAs and the potential effects of this use. It builds upon past research and a prior descriptive report of the same data (Schubert Center for Child Studies, 2013) by first, describing the various capacities in which PCWAs use volunteers. Second, it used grounded theory analysis to develop a conceptual model depicting how volunteer use may influence outcomes of children in care.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

This qualitative study was guided by a grounded theory design, a systematic approach to theory development that explains process, action, or interaction of a specific phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The perspective allows researchers to provide a description of a particular phenomenon but also to construct a midrange theory that is "grounded" in the data to explain contexts and processes that occur within the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this analysis, grounded theory was used to develop a conceptual model identifying how the use of volunteers by PCWAs may influence outcomes among youth in the child welfare system.

3.2. Study procedures and sample

Representatives from PCWAs in a single Midwestern state were invited to participate in qualitative telephone interviews. Only the twelve counties containing metropolitan areas were included. The counties represented had populations ranging from 213,350 to 1,296,287 ($M = 545,508$). PCWA agencies within those counties had anywhere from 60 to 1666 children in placement at the time of the study ($M = 687$) and responded to 1718 to 16,055 abuse allegations a year ($M = 5806$). The state's less populated, nonmetropolitan counties were excluded because volunteer programs would be very unlikely to exist in

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