

## Explanation of the work

Public child welfare agencies face many hardships to providing effective and productive services to their communities. Retaining employees has been one of the most long-standing issues with child welfare agencies losing employees at up to four times the rate of healthy organizations (Casey Family Programs, 2017). The cost of low retention includes increased spending on recruitment and training, stress on remaining employees, and a major impact on the families that have multiple social workers throughout their case. Each change in social worker is related to increased lengths of stay in foster care and a significant decrease in the likelihood of reunification (Ryan et al., 2006).

Secondary trauma is the “osmosis” of tragedy and suffering that become a part of the worker and ultimately change their view of the world (Lipsky & Burke, 2009). Due to exposure to trauma during the removal of children, family interviews, and reports of abuse, child welfare social workers experience abnormally high levels of secondary trauma with 29.6% scoring in the “severe” range (Rienks, 2020). The symptoms of secondary trauma include hyperarousal, avoidance, re-experiencing the events, fatigue, confusion, and hopelessness, which have been found to be predictors of turnover in child welfare workers (Casey Family Programs, 2017). Further, crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, introduce new stressors and disrupt previously used coping mechanisms. Successful copers utilize a clear self-care plan, participate in activities or hobbies, and have a work-to-home transition plan, all of which are disrupted during crises (Rienks, 2020). The effects of these events are likely to continue past the event itself, known as peritraumatic stress.

The current study utilizes the Comprehensive Organization Health Assessment (COHA) to analyze factors of the organization, unit/office, individual, and community. This detailed

analysis of an organization’s overall health provides actionable data on the strengths and areas of growth for the participating agency. Further, the COVID-19 Stressors Scale (CSS) will be used to measure the impact of the crisis related stressors. The current study hopes to collaborate with many northern California child welfare agencies to provide direct analysis of their agency and comparative quantitative analysis across the region, identifying factors which increase retention rates and reduce the impact of secondary trauma and pandemic stress. There are currently 6 agencies that have agreed to participate.

Retention is a multi-faceted issue which requires a comprehensive understanding of the agency to remedy. However, this also requires a significant time investment for the participants to complete such a comprehensive survey. It is my hope that this funding will allow me to provide the necessary incentives and debriefing/support materials to ensure the participants are well compensated for their time and well supported following their participation. With 6 Northern California agencies of differing sizes interested in participating, the budget is estimating 100 participants in total.

Item	Justification	Cost per Participant	Estimated Total
Secondary Trauma Book	“The Age of Overwhelm” provides a breadth of research on secondary trauma, resiliency, and support. Includes coping strategies and self-care.	\$11	\$1100
Gift Card Raffle	Incentive for participation in the survey to ensure greater participation from the busiest subset of participants, those likely to have the highest rates of secondary trauma and stress.	\$25 (per agency)	\$150
Mileage	During agency recruitment, agencies requested the researcher be present during the survey date and time to provide technical assistance if needed. This will also allow the researcher to provide an overview of available supportive resources and incentives to participants.	62.5 cents/mile (Federal mileage rate)	\$800
Graduate Student Funding	Granted by the Office of Graduate Studies	\$300 (total)	-\$300

## Student contribution to project design and execution

As a child welfare social worker for 18 months, I recognized the significant impact of pandemic stressors and secondary trauma on my colleagues and myself. Watching my peers complain constantly, cry in their cubicles, and ultimately leave the agency, I became curious how secondary trauma impacted retention rates as well as how agencies were mediating this impact. I also recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic added a unique and continuous source of stress which I hypothesized effectively increased vulnerability to secondary trauma and the resulting burn out. After extensive literature review, I created my research question, hypotheses, and identified evidence-based measurements. Research on secondary trauma has recently boomed, however, there was no study which accounted for the additional stress of COVID-19 or similar crisis situations. It is quite common for social work staff to have a greater burden during crises, such as COVID-19 or the Paradise fire, as they are tasked with helping those impacted by the crisis while often being impacted themselves.

Although I have an amazing team of faculty that support my reflection on the project and guide me through navigating the student research process, I am tasked with completing almost everything for this study. I developed the project design, survey, recruitment materials, and complete the funding applications. I contacted the creators of the measures to get their permissions for use and discussed best practices with their assessment tools. Professor Cornell connected me to UC Davis Northern Academy, where I presented my project multiple times to agency directors and managers successfully recruiting 6 county agencies and counting. I maintain contact with these agencies, schedule survey dates, discuss resources available to

their staff post-survey, and maintain the organization of all of this information in a shared drive with my faculty team.

## Broader impact of the work

If the proposed hypothesis is correct, results of the study will provide social work agencies valuable information on how to maintain retention of their staff, provide supports for secondary trauma, and provide further support for specific crisis stressors. This will also further the budding body of research on secondary trauma and pandemic stressors, both of which are timely and impactful areas of study.

## Expected benefits to student

As an aspiring professor with a passion for research, this project has truly been a dream come true. Through the development, proposal, and recruitment process, I have already learned a great deal about research strategies, ethics, and navigating academia. This project has already proven to be an invaluable experience and with further support I am certain it will continue to be. Further, this thesis project will allow me to graduate, strengthen my application for PhD programs in the near future, and present my project at upcoming events such as the CSU Chico Annual Student Research Competition. Although we have not identified other presentation options at this time, we hope to disseminate this project widely and attempt to publish the resulting article.

## References

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Rienks, S. L. (2020). An exploration of child welfare caseworkers' experience of secondary trauma and strategies for coping. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 110*(3), 104355–104355.

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California State University **Chico**  
Graduate Studies

### **Student Awards for Research & Creativity Faculty Sponsor Letter**

To the Selection Committee:

I am pleased to offer this strong letter of support for **Christopher Robinson** who is working on a thesis as his culminating activity for his master's degree in social work at Chico State. While I have not known Christopher very long, I have found him to be an ambitious, smart, and committed social worker and I am pleased to support him on his current research project.

Christopher is seeking funding to provide incentives for participants in his study entitled, **Child Welfare Social Worker Retention: The Relationship of Secondary Trauma and Pandemic Stressors**. He has designed an impressive and timely study that will capture both worker-level and organizational-level data to inform the work of Child Welfare agencies across the region. Child Welfare is undoubtedly one of the hardest fields of practice within social work. Using both his personal and professional experience, Chris has identified some of the key issues in terms of stress and retention which are critical phenomenon to understand if we are to appropriately support and retain a healthy workforce in child welfare.

With the help of our faculty colleague, Chelsea Cornell, Christopher already has 6 northern California counties signed on to participate in the study – this is already a significant win, as these agencies are not only understaffed and over-worked but they can also be resistant to outsiders looking-in. With this impressive access, Christopher's project has a high likelihood of success.

Chris has assembled a strong faculty committee – including Chelsea Cornell, Dr. Judy Vang, and me. We have been meeting biweekly. Chris has a clear timeline, a highly organized Google drive, and an impressive eye for details. He has an excellent plan for the research, and we are confident this will be a highly valuable and sought-after study to inform the work of Child Welfare across the North State and beyond. There is no doubt that this will be both a useful and publishable research project.

Christopher is a strong student. He is currently the Club President of Adelante. He is deeply committed to social work and graduate studies on our campus. He is just the kind of student we want to support with funds from the Student Awards for Research & Creativity. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Susan J. Roll*

Susan J. Roll, PhD

Associate Dean