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Diversity Needed in Child Protection

Article by: NANCY CROTTI, Star Tribune Sales and Marketing Updated: March 24, 2011 - 3:48 PM

Growing up, Naomi Stock never dreamed she'd work in child protection. In her Native American community, there was too much fear that child protection workers would remove a child from the home.

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Growing up, Naomi Stock never dreamed she'd work in child protection. In her Native American community, there was too much fear that child protection workers would remove a child from the home.

Instead, Stock majored in law enforcement, became a guardian ad litem (a court-appointed child advocate) and eventually was convinced to apply for a job as a child protection investigator with the Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department (www.hennepin.us). She works in [Brooklyn Park](#), Brooklyn Center

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Diversity in demand

Despite 10 years of reform in Minnesota child welfare laws, the fear of child protection service workers remains, only to be compounded by cultural differences in child rearing. Stock and state experts say the system needs more child protection workers of diverse cultural backgrounds to better convey what child protection is all about.

The primary reasons for removing a child from the home are for the child's safety, medical or mental health treatment needs or for reasons of their own behavior, according to Erin Sullivan Sutton, assistant commissioner of Children and Family Services in the Minnesota Department of Human Services (www.dhs.state.mn.us).

"From 2000 to 2010, the number of children in placement has been reduced by about 40 percent," Sullivan-Sutton said.

How it works

When child protection workers investigate allegations of child abuse these days and find no imminent danger, they offer to help the family cope with whatever problems they're having, whether that means connecting with a cultural support group, attending parenting classes, or getting mental health or substance abuse treatment for parents and arranging for child care while parents receive help, Stock said.

A good child protection worker must be skilled in social work, able to identify families' strengths, refrain from judging families and be able to work with different cultures, Sullivan-Sutton said. They must also have strong oral and written communication skills.

"They are oftentimes the only keeper of the history of a child's life," she added. "They need to communicate with professionals from many fields including the medical profession, the law enforcement profession, the legal system."

Federal help

To combat high turnover among child protection workers, the federal government offers stipends of \$1,900 per semester to undergraduates at five colleges within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (www.mnscu.edu) for two or three semesters, while students with master's degrees at the University of Minnesota's

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Twin Cities and Duluth campuses may receive \$10,000 per academic year, according to Traci LaLiberte, director of the Center for the Advanced Studies in Child Welfare in the university's School of Social Work. These students must agree to work in the field after graduation. For information on the Title IV-E stipend program, visit www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw.

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