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Transforming Front-Line Child Welfare Practice: The Impacts of Institutional Settings on Services, Employment Environments, Children, and Families WORKING REPORT #5: Child Welfare Jobs (Service Provider Perspectives)

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PROJECT:

Transforming Front-Line Child Welfare Practice: The Impacts of Institutional Settings on Services, Employment Environments, Children, and Families

WORKING REPORT 5:

**Child Welfare Jobs
(Service Provider Perspectives)**

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PREFACE

This report serves as a working document to inform the main *synthesis report* which summarizes overall research results from the **Transforming Front Line Child Welfare Practice Project**. The focus of this and other working reports is on the inclusion of all information relevant to the specific topic of investigation. The intent of working reports is to inform the synthesis report and include more information than what appears in the synthesis report. Less emphasis, however, is placed in the working reports on style and efficiency of presentation than on inclusion of information. The main *synthesis report* and other working reports are available through the Partnerships for Children & Families Project web site (www.wlu.ca/pcfproject).

Executive Summary

This report looks at whether front-line child protection service providers experience their jobs differently across service delivery settings. More specifically, we begin to answer the following questions: Are front line child protection service providers more satisfied with their jobs within some service delivery models than others? Do the sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction differ across these service delivery models? Do service providers believe that they are able to do their jobs better within some models than others? Are service providers more likely to want to continue their child protection employment within certain approaches?

This discussion is based on information from service providers about their jobs. It is supplemented with information from an employment survey of front line service providers at each of the research sites. Two contrasting general narratives about employment realities emerged. In agency based settings, many expressed beliefs that the work they were doing was important and necessary. A pride in “having what it takes” to carry out this work and being able to endure were common themes. In accessible settings, there was an enthusiasm and a belief in the value of these service delivery models as well as a belief that these service delivery models allowed for flexibility in work with families. Service providers from all models, however, described employment realities that they thought too often compromised their ability to do good work with families. Employment survey results revealed that between 54% and 75% of front line child protection service providers scored in the medium and high range on a measure of depersonalization towards clients. Over 40% of all employees surveyed scored in the high range on a measure of emotional exhaustion in one’s work with service recipients. At the same time, 75% or more of front line service providers derived a moderate or high sense of personal accomplishment from their work.

Overall, there was a duality in how front line child protection service providers in this research experienced their employment. This distinction reflected the difference in how they felt about their local service delivery settings and how they saw formal child welfare system expectations shaping their everyday work environments. Core employment realities for front

line child protection service providers seem to have been only marginally affected by recent child welfare reforms.

Introduction to the Transforming Front-Line Child Welfare Practice Project

In 2006, the Ontario government launched an ambitious and multi-faceted Transformation Agenda for child welfare services. Among this Agenda's objectives was the development of more cooperative helping relationships in child welfare, reducing the system's reliance on legal authority to engage families, creating community and service partnerships and increasing child welfare capacity to respond differentially to families. Within this shifting child welfare context, the *Transforming Front-line Child Welfare Practice Project* research's main purpose was to understand how centrally located service delivery settings and service delivery settings that were more accessible to families affected front-line child protection practice. A second encompassing objective was to examine how partnerships with other service organizations and neighbourhood associations affected front line child welfare practice. This Transforming Front-line Child Welfare Practice research examined eleven separate accessible and central child welfare service delivery sites at six child welfare agencies in Ontario. These sites were selected to vary on these two dimensions of accessibility and partnerships. These two dimensions have also been identified in the literature as contributing to child welfare capacity to respond differentially or flexibly to families (Cameron, Freymond, & Roy, 2003; Schene, 2001, 2005).

With one exception, accessible service delivery models in this research embedded front-line child protection service providers in neighbourhoods or schools so that service providers would be more familiar and accessible to families.¹ The philosophies of accessible programs emphasized collaboration with other community service providers, local community building and prevention. Central models located child protection service providers in agency premises that generally were not physically close to most of the families served. This was the more common service delivery setting for child protection services in the participating agencies and in other Children's Aid Societies in Ontario.

Earlier exploratory research through the Partnerships for Children and Families program of research (Frensch, Cameron, & Hazineh, 2005) at Wilfrid Laurier University found that different child protection service delivery settings had notable impacts on child protection service delivery including:

¹ At one accessible site, the child welfare agency supplied community development workers to support neighbourhood development associations and, while front line child protection service providers' offices were not located in these neighbourhoods, they cooperated with the community development workers and were familiar with the neighbourhood association's resources.

(1) service provider accessibility to children and families, (2) the development of cooperative helping relationships with children and families, (3) the development of partnerships with other service organizations, (4) the development of partnerships with neighbourhood associations, (5) the levels and types of assistance provided to children and families, and (6) client and community image the child welfare agency.

This more extensive research built upon this earlier exploratory research. More specifically, this multi-faceted longitudinal research incorporated:

- An assessment of the impacts of accessible and central service delivery models on family functioning indicators and child protection system indicators (e.g. formal court applications, out-of-home placements of children, etc.).
- An exploration of how these different child welfare service delivery settings affected front-line child protection service providers' satisfaction with their work with children and families.
- An exploration of how these different child welfare service delivery settings affected parents' satisfaction with their child welfare service involvements.
- An examination of how these different child welfare service delivery settings influenced the services and supports available to families.
- An assessment of the impacts of accessible and central service delivery settings on front-line helping relationships in child welfare.
- An exploration of how accessible and central service delivery settings affected employment satisfaction and sustainability.

This research also discusses the development requirements of the accessible service delivery models and what practical lessons can be gleaned from these experiences. Finally, it looks at broader implications for how we understand and organize our efforts to keep children safe and help families.

Study Design

This research utilized a multiple qualitative and quantitative methods and a quasi-experimental outcome design. Design elements included the following:

- 261 parents were surveyed using a set of standardized outcome measures to assess parent, child, and family functioning at the time their case was opened to ongoing services
- 188 parents participated in a follow up interview occurring approximately 8-10 months after the initial survey
- 73 parents participated in a semi-structured qualitative interview about their service experiences and satisfaction with either accessible or central service delivery settings
- 115 front-line service providers completed a survey of employee experiences in child welfare including job satisfaction and burnout
- 18 focus groups involving approximately 150 participants were conducted with teams of front-line service providers about their experiences as employees in either accessible or central service delivery settings
- 17 individual interviews were completed with child welfare supervisors and administrators about their experiences of differing service delivery settings
- 201 agency files were reviewed to gather data on selected system indicators including frequency of child placement and use of legal authority

All research participants were recruited through the partnering organizations. Parents who received ongoing child protection services from either the accessible program sites or central sites during the recruitment year of 2007 were invited to participate in the study. Parents were contacted via telephone by an agency employee working in a support position (non-direct service work) using a standardized telephone script and asked for permission to release their name to researchers. Researchers then placed a follow up telephone call to parents who expressed an initial interest in participating in the study to arrange an interview. Interviews were conducted primarily in people's homes, although some participants chose to be interviewed elsewhere (such as the local library or at the university). All participants gave their written informed consent. Interviews were approximately 1 ½ hours in duration and all parents received \$25 for their participation. At the interview, parents were asked for their consent to allow researchers to view their child welfare agency file. Additionally, parents

were asked to indicate if they were interested in participating in a follow up interview approximately 8 months later.

Researchers maintained contact with parents by mailing letters twice over the 8 months. Parents were then contacted via telephone by researchers to arrange a follow up interview. At the follow up interview, parents could choose to participate in an additional 30 minute qualitative interview about their perceptions of child welfare services. These qualitative interviews were recorded and transcribed. All parents who participated in a follow up interview received \$25 and parents who participated in the qualitative interview component received an additional \$15 stipend. All participants gave their written informed consent.

A survey questionnaire was sent to all direct service providers working in the agency programs of interest. Service providers who chose to participate returned their completed surveys through the mail directly to researchers at the university. All service providers who were sent a survey were eligible to enter their name into a random draw for a prize consisting of a \$100 gift certificate to a spa in their city.

Focus groups with direct service providers and individual interviews with supervisors and managers were arranged with researchers directly. Each focus group was comprised of members of a service delivery team. In several cases two teams were combined for an interview. Teams were coworkers who shared the same supervisor and worked together in delivering child welfare services. These focus groups and interviews occurred at each of the participating organization's offices. All participants gave their written informed consent. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Research Sites

Data were collected from parents, service providers, and agency files at 11 accessible and central service delivery settings at six child welfare agencies in Ontario. For purposes of analyses, research sites were broadly organized into two groups, accessible and central models. Descriptions of the research sites at the time of data collection are included below.

Children's Aid Society of Brant

Central Site

The Children's Aid Society of Brant is a medium sized child protection agency in southwestern Ontario serving Brant County which includes the City of Brantford, the town of Paris, and the surrounding rural area including the Six Nations and Credit reserves. The main agency building is located in downtown Brantford. Eight teams of protection workers, including three aboriginal units are housed at this location. At the time of data collection, agency based teams were divided into intake and ongoing services. Protection workers were assigned to certain geographic areas or special populations.

Accessible Community Sites

The *Stepping Stones Resource Centre* is located in a 50-unit geared-to-income townhouse complex. The community based protection program and child development program worker serve families within the complex and work cooperatively with various service providers close to the townhouse complex, in particular with personnel at two elementary schools.

Slovak Village is a 150 unit geared to income apartment complex that also provides work space for a community based protection team and a part-time nurse practitioner. Service providers work with families in the apartment building, as well as families in a nearby geared-to-income housing complex and three local schools.

Grey Street is a storefront office in a densely populated downtown core community. Community based program workers serve families in the neighbourhood. There are several large housing complexes

in the vicinity and most service recipients are within walking distance.

Paris Willet Hospital is a small community hospital in the town of Paris, population 11,000. Community based program workers serve the town and nearby rural residents.

Accessible School Sites

Four *School based programs* were operational at the time of data collection. One school has a specialized program for children with behavioural challenges and the worker is heavily involved in the classroom. At the other three schools, workers have a mix of child protection responsibilities and school social work responsibilities such as being involved in group work with students. The school based workers have offices in the schools but are supervised in mixed teams with community based program workers.

Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington

Central Site

Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington County's main office is located in the downtown of the city of Guelph. Teams serving the east half of Guelph work from the main office. Family service workers carry both intake (investigative) and ongoing cases. The agency also employs family support staff to provide additional support to families receiving ongoing services.

Accessible Community Sites

The *Shelldale Centre* is a collaborative, integrated service center situated in the Onward Willow neighbourhood, a 1km square area of Guelph that has a high rate of poverty and families facing a variety of challenges. The Shelldale Centre houses two child protection teams responsible for cases from both Onward Willow and the rest of West Guelph. At the time of data collection 13 social service agencies and community organizations were partners at Shelldale.

The *Neighbourhood Group* model is part of a continuum of services that address community

prevention and support, early intervention as well as provide ongoing support for families. The four community development workers serving six selected neighbourhoods have an informal working relationship with child protection workers and they may refer families as protection cases or provide support to families who already have open cases.

Children's Aid Society of Halton

Central Site

Halton Children's Aid Society's serves the Halton Region which includes the urban centres of Oakville, Burlington, Halton Hills, Acton and Georgetown. The Society's main office is located in Burlington, Ontario and there is a smaller North office located in Milton. Central teams are divided into intake and ongoing protection teams.

Accessible School Sites

At the time of data collection, there were 9 established *school based sites* and 4 service hubs located next to schools that were in the process of opening. Only one hub was operational at the time of data collection. There were two teams of school based protection workers either located in the school or in a building attached to the school where other community services were also co-located (part of Our Kids Network). Child welfare workers accept service referrals from school personnel and work with these students and their families to improve general well being and school performance.

The Children's Aid Society of Hamilton

Central Site

The Children's Aid Society of Hamilton serves the primarily urban Hamilton-Wentworth Region. The main agency building is located in east Hamilton. All protection workers are housed at this location. There are separate intake and ongoing services departments with 6 intake teams and 9 family service teams. The agency has a number of specialized departments including a pediatric/medical team.

Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton

Accessible School Site

The *School based team* is comprised of four child welfare workers based in 12 elementary schools throughout Hamilton. Each worker is responsible for three schools and divides their time between locations. School based workers complete initial investigations and provide ongoing services. This community based program was designed to foster a stronger working relationship between schools and the Society, to allow for the early identification of at-risk children, and to provide immediate support to school personnel in response to child protection concerns.

Chatham-Kent Integrated Services

Central Integrated Site

Chatham-Kent Children’s Services is a multi-service agency providing child protection, children’s mental health, and children’s developmental services to families in a mainly rural municipality in southern Ontario with 23 different communities including the First Nation Reserve of Moraviantown. There are 4 family service teams and 2 intake teams that provide child protection services mainly from a central agency site in Chatham.

Research Products and Reports

Research results from The Transforming Front-line Child Welfare Practice Project offer information relevant to parents, service providers, child welfare management, and policy makers. A series of reports are available covering issues central to understanding the impacts of institutional setting on the delivery of child welfare services, child and family outcomes, and the experiences of service providers working in the child welfare system. Appendix A contains a list of research reports available and provides a brief overview for each report.

Child Welfare Jobs

In earlier discussions, it was clear that there were significant differences in service providers' perceptions of their relationships with families, partner organizations and communities between the accessible (school and community based) and centralized service delivery models investigated. In this chapter, we investigate whether front-line child protection service providers experience their jobs differently in these service delivery models. More specifically, we begin to answer the following questions:

- Are front line child protection service providers more satisfied with their jobs within some service delivery models than others?
- Do the sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction differ across these service delivery models?
- Do service providers believe that they are able to do their jobs better within some models than others?
- Are service providers more likely to want to continue their child protection employment within certain approaches?

There are some cautions to keep in mind when reading these analyses of child welfare employment. Most important is that research sites using the same model (for example, the school-based service delivery models) did not present identical employment profiles. For example, expressions of employment dissatisfaction were more prevalent at some sites representing particular models than at others. Also, within particular sites, there were, of course, differences in how individual service providers experienced their jobs. Finally, there also were commonalities as well as differences in employment experiences across the various service delivery models investigated.

It would be erroneous to present either an image of employment homogeneity among similar service delivery models or an image of black and white differences in front line

employment realities across the different models. Front line service providers' perceptions of employment were more nuanced. Notwithstanding these caveats, there were meaningful differences across the various service delivery models investigated. Describing these variations is relevant to understanding the nature of front line child protection employment and to reflecting about improving these experiences.

Before a pattern was considered to represent a difference in perceptions of employment among service delivery models, two conditions had to be satisfied: (1) The pattern had to be substantially more prevalent in service providers' discussions of their work within particular models than others; and, (2) When more than one service delivery model was present at a child welfare agency (e.g. community as well as agency based approaches), the differential pattern had to be evident in the service delivery models at that agency. These conditions ensured that the differences were robust and represented service delivery model rather than agency differences. Finally, in presenting these results, care is taken to clarify whether the patterns were shared across all or some of the sites representing particular service delivery approaches.

This discussion is based on information from service providers about their jobs. It represents the first component of a multiple component investigation. It is supplemented with information from an employment survey of front line service providers at each of the research sites.

It will be augmented at a later date with data from interviews about parent child protection service involvement perceptions, data about family functioning indicators over a one year period from child protection case opening, and system performance indicators (such as use of courts, out-of-home child placements, case reopening, etc.) over the same time period. This multiple component research is designed to provide broader and more conclusive evidence about the relative strengths and challenges of these different service delivery models.

Job Sustaining Narratives

It is normal for colleagues sharing a work place to elaborate a shared story about what makes their work worthwhile and what is hard to accept. There were some very clear differences in the shared employment stories across research sites, in particular between agency-based service delivery models and the more accessible school and community models.

This section presents two contrasting general narratives about employment realities in the agency based and accessible service delivery settings in this research that we have entitled: (1) Pride and endurance and (2) Belief and integration. Elaborating these two general narratives demonstrates that central and accessible service delivery settings can lead to meaningful differences in how front line child protection service providers understand and experience their work.

How readers assess these different perceptions of employment realities will depend on their values and experiences. Nonetheless, these narratives provide additional evidence that there are feasible service delivery model choices with meaningful consequences, *even within existing legislative and regulatory constraints*.

There were also substantial areas of overlap in perceptions of job satisfaction and stress *across all research sites*. Additional evidence about these shared employment contexts was provided by the front line child protection employment survey. These commonalities are discussed later in this chapter. They provide a context for assessing the significance of the differences among service delivery models. They are also highlight core tensions in front line child protection employment.

The research presented here suggests that it is possible to substantially alter child protection service providers' perceptions of their jobs and of the services they believe that they can provide to children and families. On the other hand, service providers from all of the approaches studied described employment realities that they thought too often made their jobs unsustainable and greatly circumscribed their abilities to do good work with children and families. This is not a new observation about child protection employment. However, it was

also evident that service providers did not think that the core elements of these contextual constraints on job sustainability and good helping were shifting because of the changes of the Transformation Agenda.

Pride and Endurance

There was narrative present at several agency based sites and not at all at the school or community based sites. This narrative reflected a pride in being able to do a very difficult and important job that many others could not do. Related to this were feelings that this difficult work was not understood or appreciated by families and outsiders. In an earlier chapter, evidence was presented showing that agency based workers were much more likely to talk about adversarial relations with parents and to feel misunderstood by service providers and others in their community. The following quotes illustrate these patterns:

P1: I think, for me, it's a very, very difficult job that I don't think a lot of people could do. I don't know certainly not every social worker could do it. ... I find it rewarding to do a job that a lot of people couldn't do... I mean, if you're in it for the right reasons, in the sense of you know, you're a caring individual, and you have that natural ability to juggle the authority piece with the clinical piece and you can do those things and you've lasted more than two years, then maybe you have what it takes to do the job.

P4: You know, one of the most rewarding things that happens to me is the times when I am out in the community, just as Trish, and someone says, 'so what do you do?' and I say, 'well, I'm a child protection worker' and they're like 'whoa, I could not do that job, oh my goodness, you guys should get a medal', that is kind of rewarding when that happens.

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P3: ... that's what we signed up for and we're here doing this job for a reason because there isn't a whole lot of satisfaction sometimes, so there's a reason why we make these sacrifices and I guess that's what kind of keeps me going.

...

P1: See, I haven't had that experience – and probably yet because I've only been in this agency for about the last eight months, and that, yeah, I can totally see where that would be something that would be – there are days when I wake up and think, or I go

home and say, 'I like my job, I like my job' all the way home and I have an hour drive and I will say that all the way home, 'I like my job, I like my job'.

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

P2: They say it's a calling.

P6: Yes, well I would rather get called to the nunnery right now, because I'd get a rest.
(laughter)

...

I: It's incredibly important and hard work.

P6: Yes, yes. Some days it fun too.

P3: Some days it's just, you know, doing what you feel are stupid, mindless tasks. It's a whole variety of things. You know, some days when you walk away going, 'I had a really good meeting, you know, like I really feel like I did something with that family'

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P6: Humour works well. (laughter) I mean, I think if you look at just around this table, the experience that is here alone, there's a reason why we're in child welfare, I mean, I do like I call myself cranky-happy, but I do love the work. I took six months off because I didn't want to do it anymore and I came back to it, you know, so I do love it and it's diverse enough that you get a piece of everything - criminal law, I love the law too, so I get everything in this setting that I need.

(Agency based site 3: front line worker)

P: Oh my god. How did I get into this job? We ask ourselves that a lot. (laughs) ... this is not an easy job either, because some of the kids we have in care are pretty difficult and a lot of hard work and travel all over the province and whatnot kind of stuff. (Right) ... people find out fairly quickly, child welfare generally is not a good job for me (right) or they gravitate to intake or children's services and depending on how that migration is working, it'll then move to different areas.

...

(Agency based site 4: front line worker)

This theme of pride in enduring or "having what it takes" under very challenging work circumstances was voiced at all of the agency based sites² in these interviews. It certainly

² The integrated services site was considered an agency based sited in these analyses. This was both because of their centralized service delivery and the similarity of their employment narrative with the other agency based sites.

should not be assumed that all front line service providers at these four sites viewed their employment this way. However, what was striking was that this ethos was not present at all in the school and community based interviews. This difference was particularly surprising since front line service providers at these more accessible sites talked about similar levels of job stress as agency based service providers. However, there was much less of an “us-and-others” theme in their characterization of their employment at these more accessible sites.

In earlier chapters, agency based child protection service providers described a more insular or disconnected world of work than their more accessible model counterparts. They talked about less frequent contacts with families and service partners. They portrayed adversarial rather than cooperative relationships with families more frequently. They were more likely to talk about a lack of cooperation from community service partners (with the exception of the integrated services site). As shown below, agency based service providers focused more within their own teams for support and a sense of employment identity than did school or community based service providers. This distinction between perceptions of relatively insular and connected worlds of work is one of the most important distinctions between agency based and accessible service delivery models emanating from this research.

While service providers at all research sites expressed concern about inordinate work demands, front line child protection service providers at agency based sites were more likely to focus on the obstacles to connecting with families and to perceive their work as misunderstood and unappreciated by others. Overall, while seeing their work as important and not without its rewards, agency based service providers were more problem focused in their narratives about their employment conditions:

P1: ... we work really hard to do that but we can only do what we can do and sometimes it's just not possible, but it seems like the common misconception is that we're just trying to tear families apart, but we work extremely hard to try to do the opposite, but sometimes it can't be done. ...

P3: See, I never get to that, to say that I'm a child protection worker. I would say I'm a social worker that works with children and families.

P2: I know, it's easier than to go there.

P3: Yeah, because I've had incidents where people, like I was getting my hair cut one time and he went 'you're a what?' and he started yanking because he said, 'yeah, I've had involvement with the CAS' and I didn't know whether I was going to come out of there alive, like he was just he clipped my ear a couple of times (shared laughter) I didn't go back to him again.

P4: Well, my hairdresser's totally supportive of the work that I do. (shared laughter)

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P5: But you get a couple of cases where you get countless different people calling you from the community, you know, from different realms and just sort of 'you guys aren't doing anything or ...' and it's just – it's very frustrating because then you're the one who's got to go back and talk to the family and you're trying to build a relationship with them and, you know, not think about all the other stuff that's coming in in a negative way and at the same time you're like, 'why did you mess up your kid so much?' and it can be really, really difficult sometimes to just answer your phone because you look, you see the name and you go 'oh no, not him again' or 'not that principal again'

(Agency based site 5: front line worker)

P2: ... the time - time is always ticking, right, and you know, so (inaudible) the time you spend with your families, right, even, you know, just at the investigation stage, right, you need to – you don't know what you're going into, right, it can be an investigation with two kids and two adults, it could be an investigation with a blended family with, you know, eight kids and 12 adults (laughter), you just never know and – but, now you have even less time to plan for that kind of thing. So it's a struggle, I find it to be a real, real struggle.

(Agency based site 3: front line worker)

P2: ... I mean, you're never caught up, you're always dealing with something, some crisis and that other stuff gets left behind or is on the back burner and stuff that we would like to do on a more regular basis, the therapeutic piece, the counselling piece as much as possible, we can't do it on a regular basis, we can't spend any more time with our families because it's impossible.

(Agency based site 4: front line workers)

While concerns with heavy documentation demands were voiced at every research site, and service providers everywhere were cognoscente of personal liability risks in their work, agency based service providers did talk more explicitly about their liability fears in their work:

I: How concerned are you about liability?

P4: Terrified.

P3: Yeah.

P4: Terrified.

...

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P4: It's always big because you're liable no matter what, you know, and it goes back again, you know, when you can't find – when you've got your teen who's – like I keep going back to the 14 year old who you suspect is at risk, and you suspect is going to end up hurt or dead, right, and you've done everything you can possibly do, but she's still out there and it weighs on you all the time because you know that you can't seem to get any services or to get her the treatment that she needs.

(Agency based site 5: front line worker)

P6: Yes, the liability is huge. I don't worry about that as much as I worry about other things, but it's always in the back of your head. ...

P3: It's with you every day. You can never turn it off. You just have to learn how to live with it.

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

There was agreement among service providers across the agency based sites that access to the support of other child welfare service providers in their service team was very important to being able to cope with the pressures of their job. Closely connected was the importance placed on having accessible support from a supervisor. Overall, having access to this support was an aspect of their employment that agency based workers in their interviews found more satisfactory than front line service providers at the more accessible sites. Agency based service providers sometimes presented loss of team support as well as personal safety concerns as their main objections to the more accessible service delivery models. This valuation of team also was connected to a sentiment that only others facing similar challenges could understand what they were going through. This perhaps reflects a more insular conception of child protection employment than in more accessible settings.

P2: It's very team based; like we work together and we work very closely together, I guess. I mean, we certainly rely on each other and spell each other off always, day to day.

...

P3: I think that's something that's always kept me out of community, because I like to have the support of people around me. It scares me to be out in the school kind of on my own, you know, without people around to just bounce ideas off of, you know, say 'hey, have you had a similar experience?', 'what would you do in this case', you know, it's nice to have people right around.

...

P1: ... I think I would die on the vine you know, being a board of ed social worker. I couldn't imagine myself thriving somewhere or in a hospital you know, it's almost like we're the misfits, in a good way.

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P2: I think one of the enjoyments, not to sound corny, is my co-workers. Knowing that we're all in the same boat, well especially in protection, like in family service, we're all in the same boat and we all understand the stress that somebody is going through so we may make off-colour jokes that only we get, because it's a sense of humour that you probably develop that helps you through it.

...

P6: ... if someone pipes up and says, 'I'm apprehending today', somebody's going to resources to find a foster placement and someone's doing a placement profile and someone's coming with you to do an assist, someone's helping start Affidavits for court and the team unity, everyone really comes together and gels and that's when you feel really good about it.

...

P3: Our supervisor ... is always open to our ideas and open to discussion and things and – you know, especially when we get into verifications of things if, you know, because she really values our assessment skills and things like that

(Agency based site 5: front line service providers)

P: I like the sense of team that we have. Having been alone out there in (accessible model site) I like this camaraderie of being able to pick somebody else's brain and, you know, I think that's – I think among workers that's really strong.

...

P: If you don't feel comfortable your supervisory relationship makes or breaks your ability to manage this job.

...

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P3: And I think just speaking specifically about [this office], we've had great management in terms of being able to manage and feel open going to around if you are feeling overwhelmed ... cases supervisors are very, kind of, aware of what's going on for individual workers and ensuring that, for the most part, that people are doing okay with caseloads and that. ...

...

P1: ... although I have to say that an extra piece of that is working with the people that you work with, knowing that you can talk to people who understand what your job is ... staff here are very supportive of one another and help each other out and it's no question, you ask for help and you find it, so I think the support is huge and I can't say that I've had that so much in previous jobs that I've been in.

...

P6: I like the colleagues because you do have to be of a unique personality to do this long term and I think the people you meet in child welfare are great and they keep you going.

(Agency based site 3: front line workers)

P1: I've found personally, management is very family oriented and very supportive of, you know, workers with kids who need – who, you know, have emergencies or ...

...

P4: There's never any questions ...

...

P1: And also knowing that, you know, in this field everyone is going through the same thing, and being able to talk with co-workers and share your ...

...

P3: Yeah, you develop a close relationship with your team members as well, which is nice.

...

P2: Especially when you're stressed out. (shared laughter) They tell you, 'It's okay'.

...

P1: I think on our unit, out of the entire agency, ours is probably about the best team that there is.

(Agency based site 4: front line workers)

Agency based service providers also expressed belief in the value of their work or did talked about aspects of their service involvements that they found rewarding. There were strong expressions of commitment and appreciation of their child welfare jobs at several agency based sites. The work was considered interesting and challenging. Service providers appreciated being able establishing good helping relationships with children and parents and for being part of facilitating positive changes in families. One caveat is that agency based service providers generally described greater barriers to establishing cooperative helping relationships with parents than service providers at school or community based service delivery sites:

P6: It is interesting. You don't know what to expect so that kind of keeps me going. You wonder what's going to happen today. I think the most satisfying part is when you get clients who may have been difficult initially, but then over the months they're workable they start to work with you and they have some realization that maybe you are trying to help.

...

P5: I love my job. I love coming to work, I have fun, I think it's I love meeting the people, I love the challenge of getting through the door, I like it's changed, like I said, but I love my job, I think it's great.

...

P2: Building relationships with kids and seeing kids' lives improve.

...

P3: For me, sometimes it's just as simple as closing a case and knowing I don't need to be involved any more and that the family can carry on without me, without CAS; that they've made enough changes in their lives to do that.

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P4: I think, for myself, I see it as a privilege; like I really see it as a privilege for me – or an honour to be just so intimately involved in people's lives ... but I'm there to help them to develop their parenting skills or to enhance them or to

have their children returned or to prevent the child from coming in ... but deep down they all want to be good parents and it's really neat for me to go in their homes and be with them and be that much – that closely involved with their families.

...

P2: My job's great. (shared laughter) It is, working with the team, working with the parents...– And even like the children, I guess, the teens or the kids I work with, you know, like you walk through schools and they'll say, 'oh hi', you're not even there to see them, 'oh that's my CAS worker' ... there's nothing I really don't like about my job.

...

P5: When you get feedback from families that they've gotten past the label that is mandated protection worker and they've gotten past all the stigma that comes with being involved with us and they say, 'wow, thank you for being a real person', that makes it – for me.

...

P1: I think for some of us too it's those feelings where something good happens and you're proud. It's nice to be proud.

...

P3: I find it satisfying when I close a file and six months later, a year later, I'll get a phone call from a client and we'll get into a discussion and they'll tell me how much they've changed and how much their family's grown. I guess those calls are few and far between ... so I think that something's that gives me the gift to keep going.

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

P1: I find it rewarding that I participate in crisis intervention on a daily basis and that I help families transition from crisis to, you know, that there is a bright side and that there is a future and that they can become better parents.

...

P4: I think, for me, is those families that you were able to work with and get through to and get hooked up with the services and make those types of changes to protect their children and better their lives, is extremely rewarding

...

P1: I think another satisfying piece for me is looking at trying to assist the upcoming generation to, you know, if you're able to help the parents to raise their children, those children are going to grow up to be more well adjusted and hopefully, through the future, there will be less CAS involvement because you'd have more adjusted families, that's rewarding.

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P3: ... personally rewarding for me ... was making the connections with the kids and seeing and being able to, you know, have that relationship with them and see the relationship grow and the appreciation for you being there ...

...

P1: ... if you do get the family involved with an agency or service and they're appreciative of that and whether or not they say it or not I think you get to know a little bit about whether or not you've helped and whether or not they're appreciative of that, I think that's a great part of the job as well

...

P5: ... I've been an ongoing worker for [several] years and for me the most meaningful part is connecting with the families and providing meaningful help to them

...

P2: It would have to be working with the kids, especially some of the older ones, making that connection, helping them, assisting them in making some decisions that can change where they're going to end up for the future...

...

P4: Sometimes it's just meeting a nice, neat family, some nice, neat kids. Like I walk away from some interviews going, 'that's a cool kid', that I enjoy.

(Agency based site 3: front line workers)

P1: Sometimes it just takes a little ... a thank you ...

...

P2: ... it's the small things, or even having a client who says 'I just completed this parenting program', and they've been waiting for six months and you've been waiting and you've been thinking 'Okay, okay, keep going, keep going and they finally give you a copy of their certificate and say 'Look what I did', and that's, that's nice. ... we do get to send our kids to, or we get [hockey] tickets donated so, sending a kid, you know, with bus tickets and tickets to a hockey game that he may never get to see, and he enjoys it and the next day he's able to tell you about it, and that's nice too...

...

P4: I've had families five years that I've been involved with the same family for a long, long time. When you get that opportunity to know people that well then you can build a really good rapport with the family, like a very – a really good relationship and it's from that kind of relationship that you can start making really good changes...

...

P3: I think knowing that we're here to better children. As a whole, I think, the agency is, we are keeping a lot of children in the community safe that would be struggling a lot more if the agency wasn't around. So I think that's personally rewarding.

(Agency based site 4: front line workers)

Another common positive theme was that the work “is not boring.” Agency based service providers at three sites expressed appreciation for the challenges and diversity in their everyday work:

P3: But it’s the challenge of being creative and coming up with plans each one different for each family, regardless it could be the same situation, but each family is different and that’s it’s challenging to come up with something for them.

...

P1: And you’re constantly learning. Always, always, always learning. I don’t you’re always learning about something new and a different way of doing things and I think Joan said it correctly, it’s the clients for the most part that I love ... even the most difficult ones, you enjoy the challenge

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P5: It can be interesting.

...

P4: Never dull.

...

P6: It does, because you can’t believe what people actually do, I mean, for the long term that we’re in it, it never gets boring, I’m never bored and I’m always I don’t know if excited is the word, but intrigued the case that keeps me up at night intrigues me the most too and trying to figure it out, you know, so you never get bored, I’m never bored, you can never say that. ...

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

... what keeps those workers in this kind of a job over a long period of time. One of the things I’ve found they often say is, the variety of work, in family services. People seem to also really like the court involvement... Variety of having different types of cases, in fact you touch all situations, all social problem areas, and there’s the opportunity to learn and grow with the different experiences they can gain over that period of time, and specialize as well.

(Agency based site 4: supervisor)

A service satisfaction theme that was expressed by a few service providers at some of the agency based sites, but not mentioned at all at the school or community based sites, was

valuing the use of legal authority to successfully remove children from their homes and place them in more appropriate living circumstances. This was only mentioned as a positive aspect of their service work by a minority of front line agency based service providers. However, it is noteworthy that rescuing children by removing them from their existing homes was not a highlighted by any of the accessible model service providers.

P1: The happy endings. I have this one case that I love just thinking about; where (child) where, you know that all of the hard work and all of the struggles and all of the dreams that you have at night about families, it makes it worth it in the end knowing that if the child had stayed in the home she would have no chance in hell, but getting the Final Order on a kid and having them adopted makes it all worthwhile ... so it's those moments, that you know you when you really made a difference.

(Agency based site 1: front line worker)

P3: I like when I bring kids into care and I place them into a foster home and they attach and bond to a foster home, like the foster parents, who – whatever, for whatever reason, meet their needs, love them pay attention to them – the kids respond to that and when you see that growth in the child, you know. ... in the seven years that I've been here, of all the children I've apprehended not one child has been returned home ...

...

P1: ...Yeah, when they come into care and they come in the office I find – and you see them in a different light, I don't know it's just grounds you.

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

There were several dominant themes in these agency based front line child protection service providers' narrative about their employment. There was a belief that the work they were doing was important and necessary. And for some, there was a commitment to continuing to do this type of work. There was a pride expressed in "having what it takes" to carry out this stressful and personally demanding work. There was a sense of being able to endure in these jobs rather an enthusiasm for how they were required to go about their jobs. They talked about the personal costs for themselves and their families.

Access to team, colleague and supervisor support were seen as an integral and much appreciated aspects of doing their jobs. They also portrayed a fairly insular everyday world of work with the main referents being within the formal child protection system. There was a sense that others would not understand their challenges or be necessarily supportive.

Service providers described their work as fast paced with lots of variety, exposing them to a broad range of family situations and work responsibilities. They said the work was “never boring.” While they talked a good deal about obstacles to establishing cooperative relationships with families, they also drew satisfaction from instances when they were able to establish good helping relationships with parents or children and when they were able to perceive positive benefits for kids or families from their efforts.

This narrative is about how the front line service providers interviewed perceived their everyday work within their local agency based service teams. There were significant differences in employment narratives across these teams. Nonetheless, the above themes are considered to represent common perceptions of front line child protection work in these agency based settings. Most important for this discussion, the narrative provides a useful contrast with the quite different employment narrative provided by service providers in the more accessible settings.

There was another important employment narrative provided by these service providers. It was a narrative about the consequences of the employment expectations of the formal child protection system – represented by the prescribed policies, regulations, and procedures of the Government and implemented by local child protection agencies. This was a narrative about mistrust. It also portrayed excessive expectations that too often made their jobs unsustainable. It was about demands that made it feel impossible to “do their jobs well with kids or parents”. A similar broader system’s narrative was shared by service providers at the more accessible sites. We’ll return to this topic later in this discussion.

Belief and Integration

There was an enthusiasm among front line workers and their supervisors about the school and community based approaches to service delivery that was not evident in the agency based employment narratives. There was not only satisfaction expressed with specific aspects of these approaches but also belief in the value of the accessible service delivery model.

These expressions of enthusiasm and conviction for the service delivery model were clearly present in the narratives at four of the five accessible sites in this research. Not every service provider at these sites reflected these sentiments. There were also differences in the intensity of these convictions across accessible sites. Nonetheless, these positive statements and belief in value of the service delivery approach were broadly shared at these sites. The contrasts with the agency based employment narratives was striking, especially since the accessible model service providers described comparable struggles with workload expectations.

P1: It's nice when you run into clients that maybe you're not working with, or that you are working with, and you know, they just stop and say 'hello'. They're not intimidated to come up to you in public and speak with you; that it's more than just a relationship with an authoritative figure.

...

P2: I like it better, I like the pace better. The community based is much more family oriented than ... At the main office you're dealing with, you know, putting out fires, so ...

...

I: Would you rather be in a head office thing?

...

P3: No I actually like community.

...

P4: Absolutely not.

...

P6: I like community.

(Community based site 1: front line workers)

P : I guess the other strength is I love having schools. I think it's probably the best thing anyone could ever do is to open up a school for CAS social workers. I think it makes a huge difference and I hope we never lose that. I think it's – I think every school, anywhere, not in just this community or any community, every school should have a social worker in it because that's where a lot of our

problems are identified and I just don't understand schools that wouldn't want to have a social worker in it.

(School based site 2: supervisor)

I2: And just one other quick question, if you were choosing being in this location or a more traditional agency based location, which would you choose?

P2: This location for sure.

P1: This location for sure.

P3: I'm undecided right now.

P4: I'm undecided.

P5: And I don't know any different, so I'm a good

...

P6: I would choose here because I believe this is the right way to do it. I'm just talking about how it feels.

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

P1: Like they're there, they pop by, their little eyes are like glued to my window in my door right so I think they would have an easier time because they know me, I'm like you know somebody they see you know every day, to knock on the door and say hi, you know, maybe they'd come in themselves you know and they wouldn't have had that opportunity if there hadn't have been somebody there.

...

P2: I think it's enhanced me as a person too because I've met such wonderful people in the community, whether it's partnerships or community members. And um, they all bring something to the table, they all bring something to us so it's been a... I'm just really quite thrilled to be part of the community. I love that whole aspect so that's really rewarding.

...

P3: ... what I see is the biggest benefit to the community idea is that we actually can see, start to finish, you know what you've done or what you've helped the family accomplish or you know and it's been, for the most part not always, on a good note...

...

P4: ... you're a part of that whole family and the teachers like to know who they're dealing with as well. ... it's a huge piece. It's wonderful I think.

...

P5: ... it is rewarding but also what kind of drives us to be here is that constant challenge and change, right? ... And to be able to have that challenge, to be faced with it and make decisions and make a plan and just...and be able to

prioritize and make sure that plan is actually carried through ... To see all of that transform is that rewarding process...

(School based 3: front line workers)

I hope eventually that everyone is out there doing the same thing as us because really to me it's the only way to do child welfare. But... we're not quite there yet. Even agencies that are all across the board and are doing child welfare like that, not everyone has bought in. they're having to do it, like but they haven't bought in.

(School based site 3: supervisors)

The image front line school and community based service providers painted of their everyday work was remarkably different from the agency based front line employment narrative. While accessible model service providers did stress the limitations broader system expectations placed on their work, their talk about their immediate service models emphasized the positive things they believed that they could do.

The overall sense in these employment narratives is that these accessible model service providers generally found a good fit between the kind of service involvements they enjoyed and these service delivery models. They talked about frequent and flexible engagements with many children and parents. They felt that they were parts of a school or neighbourhood community and described advantages in access to information as well as a capacity to respond to protection concerns. Despite the commonly recognized shortage of specialized resources for children and families, and long wait times for access, they illustrated situations where they had quick contact with other types of service professionals to gather information and to obtain assistance for families.

From our perspective, compared to agency based service providers, these front line service providers provided a relatively integrated conception of their service jobs. They talked about protection and prevention responsibilities with little focus on irresolvable tensions between these undertakings. There was no sense of an excessive distance or mistrust with families. Partnerships with other types of service providers were normal parts of everyday work. They talked positively of "doing more than child protection." The sense in these

narratives was that all of the above, for the most part, were experienced as rewarding aspects of their jobs.

This seems particularly noteworthy since these school and community based service providers encountered the same systemic pressures as agency based service providers. They were also confronting the same types of family situations and bore the same responsibilities for making difficult decisions. Yet there was a enthusiasm for their approaches to protecting children and engaging with families and partners that was not nearly as evident in the agency based interviews. We have provided extensive examples to illustrate the nature of this broadly shared accessible services narrative:

I think being visible within the school is also a good thing. I know that we've all struggled with an area... to spend time in, in each of our schools and having a specific area that we can be seen in all the time makes it easier for everyone to approach and to know how to get a hold of you. If you're somewhere else every time you're there they don't know where you are and a lot of times they don't come looking for you, right?

(School based site 1: front line worker)

I still see the benefits ... in having the workers do something beyond just child protection because their own knowledge base and their own experience of different kinds of engagement strategies they can consider ... and also you learn more about really what the issues are and how things feel for people out – because when you're out facilitating the group it's not about needing to impress you or needing to – you're not about the CAS, you're about being there to help them ... not so focused on what you're doing with the children, do you know what I mean? I'm really over simplifying the process, but ...

(Community based site 1: supervisor)

P1: ... If I walk out the door and we're going to go get a coffee and somebody—there's a baby left in the car and you can't find the parents around, it's completely different. You're not going back and doing the screening, collecting all the information and doing your 5 steps. You'd stand there, quite literally, we have, I've stood there with (colleague) and looked down the row and said, so... who do you think this baby belongs to? ... then she'll stay with the baby and I've literally knocked and I've got lucky, but knocked on the first door, happened to be that house ... then you're... you're intervening. You are confronting ... I've also left the office and heard screaming and shouting and swearing and so,

y'know, you stand there, where's it coming from and what do you do and then do you know the family and what's the situation with that kid and you're doing all that with your bag over there and your water bottle, your laptop on your other shoulder and then you're knocking on the door, saying, hey, y'know, what's going on? Do you need some help with something? ... You're in the moment ...

...

P2: And sometimes you can actually intervene with the client and actually do some social work, front-line social work. ... Some as simple as bus passes or food vouchers or you know inaudible for heat and hydro and helping people out so they don't lose you know their apartment. So there's been, for me anyway there's a really big transition here coming here and being able to offer people some help aside from me just going in and being a child protection worker ... Um, it's nice because sometimes it is a foot in the door, it is a helping point that they do appreciate.

...

P3: ... And I've noticed here, because the philosophy is more in line to my own, it's almost like I have just grown ten IQ points and "oh yah, I really do know what I'm doing". So that's been easier. Way less stressful so there's more energy to do things.

(Community based site 1: front line workers)

... I wonder sometimes if the autonomy and being able to be out and in the community so you're not sort of surrounded by some of the dominant discourse [of head office] ... maybe that's something that's been one of the benefits of being out in the community and a little bit more autonomous, just to have an opportunity to not be swayed or directed. It's complex I think.

(Community based site 1: supervisor)

P1: You start and you finish with the case. I really do like that approach and I like that ... because there's a blend, you're not just getting all of your critical, ongoing families, you're getting some intakes that you know you can close up and it gives you that – it just makes you see it differently.

...

P2: We're running groups, we are... we're supposed to be consultants, so we're supposed to handle any questions, any general Children's Aid question that may come to us, like would this or would this not be a giant protection issue? ... We're expected to see ongoing kids regularly for counselling in the schools. For doing the lice stuff.

...

P5: It's fun, because, y'know, I tell the kids, y'know, the principal's office and y'know, bring a book, bring some spelling sheets, I'm doing paperwork, so you could read to me, did you do spelling while I'm typing... I love it.

(School based site 2: front line workers)

P4: You have a better idea what's going on with your families because you get to know them on a day to day basis.

...

P2: You're a part of a community, which you get – then if you're a part of something you know things a lot more and relationships are better, as opposed to when you're not in that community – you're an outsider and communities don't like outsiders as much, so they're very guarded about things, so I think it's – we're a part of it and that's a lot – helpful, if that makes sense.

...

P6: I think you get to see a different side of the world. I live in [another community] and it's a different side here and it kind of keeps things real. [...] It just keeps things real

...

P: ...there was one client I couldn't see for a couple weeks, you know, I kept trying to get into her house, trying to get into her house and it was a serious child protection – I saw her here with her daughter, I stopped and we had a quick meeting and we set up a home visit, it worked great, whereas I would have probably been a couple more weeks trying to get in through her door, I was able to approach her here in the setting and she felt very comfortable to speak to me here.

...

P: It's the dropping in at the breakfast club on your way in to see if any of your kids are there and to say 'hi', it's taking a few minutes on the exit to the after school clubs or getting to know the youth worker or stuff like that that doesn't, I don't think, take that much away from what our workload is and I think the beauty of this is that this is conducive to that. If this is the type of work that you like to do, that's part of who you are, then you have that option to do it.

...

P: ... New Years eve day I was working and saw a client that morning. Ah new born baby like a week old and the baby wasn't nursing well. Mom's milk hadn't come in or so she thought. Anyhow, I was worried you know, very vulnerable baby. So I come back here to the office and I just you know, zipped down to the next door, to Public Health. They sent a public health nurse over right away with a scale weighed the baby, did some nursing instruction. About an hour later the public health nurse comes to my office and says here's a prescription for Mom. I

just went to the community health clinic, “here’s a prescription for Mom can you fill it and get it to her.”³

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

P1: ... when you come in every day or many times a week and see your client volunteering at whatever ... it gives workers different views of people, so their clients then become more – there’s a more holistic picture of their client – so they’re not just their client with the addiction problem... it lessens the tendency, I think, to objectify clients

...

P2: I think the expectation is that you can’t stay as isolated here in your own little world, you know, just kind of – it’s not as much just a job, you’re expected to build relationships, you’re expected to greet people ... you’re expected to connect with colleagues; that’s different than, you know, staying in your office and calling people on the phone

(Community based site 2: supervisors)

... I think (community based site 2) is just a more welcoming place. It’s less... you know I think that our place is welcoming but it’s a... I mean it’s more of a sort of... you know it’s Children’s Aide whereas that’s not seen as Children’s Aide. It’s an office but it’s not seen as Children’s Aide. It’s one of many... its’ much flatter... it’s one of many service providers that people are using anyway. I think people have an ownership of (community based site 2) ... community members have an ownership of (community based site 2). People don’t have that here at all. So I think it’s more formal here, much more formal, and I think that that creates a barrier.

(Community based site 2: comments from agency based supervisor)

P1: I think it’s enhanced me as a person too because I’ve met such wonderful people in the community, whether it’s partnerships or community members. And um, they all bring something to the table ... I’m just really quite thrilled to be part of the community. I love that whole aspect so that’s really rewarding.

...

P2: Well and I think it helps you being based in the community, it helps you understand what the parents are going through as well because you get to see all the, yeah, all the culture in that community or the lack of it and you know

³ It was not possible on the tape to identify individual speakers at all times on this tape.

what some of the... internal struggles are and just... you become I guess a part of that community as well.

...

P3: Something we've always said and we've laughed about, even going down the hall to use the washroom, you can guarantee that you're stopped at least once or twice by a teacher, someone in the community so by the time that you get to the bathroom and get back you're... now you're not, you're late for your next appointment and you know and that's your day ... you want to be able to have time to do the small talk, to get to know them, that you're not just someone that's whipping in and out and throwing stuff at the table and saying this is what needs to be done, I've got to go, see you later. You know you want to be able to have that small talk with them as well, right?

...

P2: Your school becomes your family. Um, like when you're in the traditional model you have your team or you have your agency or the school becomes part of you, you become part of them and they like that continuity again

...

P1: So much of that is like the proactive stuff too right? Talking to that public health nurse, she might be able to that that back to the client so that that client actually doesn't become a client of ours um or, you know, whatever. So it's that... we're not, we're not always reactive workers.

...

P4: I guess I've always had that vision of being a community worker and being, as I said before, very proactive so my job satisfaction would be doing proactive community prevention work.

...

P1: Absolutely. That's much better than going in on the back end of it and removing the kids, right?

(School based site 3: front line workers)

One of the frustrations of being a front line service provider at one of the accessible service delivery sites was coping with periodic isolation from other child protection service providers. Because they were often dispersed across different school or community settings, a common lament was not having quick access to a colleague for support or assistance when making decisions in a school or neighbourhood setting. Creating a supportive team of child protection personnel was seen as more challenging at the accessible service sites.

Nonetheless, some sites seemed to be more successful than others at creating a sense of team among service providers working in different settings. Where the accessible service delivery team was physically located in one community setting, concerns with access to team

and collegial support were less prevalent. Coping with this relative isolation was seen as one of the major employment challenges with the accessible service models. In some instances, front line child protection service providers described outside school and community personnel as providing their everyday sense of support and belonging.

P4: Well you might come into the office and just sit there for an hour and talk to your co-workers and they might think you came in to do nothing, well it's because I've been in the school for the last four hours and just needed a break so you come here to do that.

...

P3: And so a lot of times you don't come in...

...

P1: ... I think people are good intentioned about being there and want to be there but the reality is, you know, we'll have group supervision and Jenny gets called into court and so and so gets called into this and that and so then there shows up two of us to be there or say when we all show up and then our supervisor gets called into a management meeting so he has to prioritize that over having us be there, so... that can play a part in it as well.

(School based site 1: front line workers)

... sometimes I'll find that a worker will come out here and it doesn't work for them, they need the more traditional approach and they need a larger amount of peer supports and out here you're a little bit isolated, but I think that it's actually something you kind of are drawn into, you're drawn to it and I do think that there's a community mindset.

...

P: The major challenges, I would think, out here would be the isolation for the workers – they don't have that connection to peers like you do over in the main building and we're out here but we're also scattered even within our community ... We have to get together, we have to make sure that we connect with each other and that we keep a team spirit going. ... So I think that's probably the most challenging.

Community based site 1: supervisors)

P1: I think that goes for, too, if we're really, really busy, I might not see (colleagues) for weeks on end because they're crazy busy with their cases ... So I find we're not always as supportive of a team ... whereas here, I wouldn't see

what they need because we're not there, not in an office with them, you don't see them on a day-to-day basis, y'know?

...

P2: I think the lack of feeling as cohesive team. Y'know, (colleague) and I came from another team where we were all around each other a lot and we were very much a group who was there for one another. ... well, our old team being in the same location together, I had an apprehension that I was getting stressed out, (colleague) would be there saying, okay, can I fill out this placement form, can I contact the police and we'd all pull together during times of crises, and here, you don't know when the other person's in crisis, you don't know whether or not, answering their call when you're wanting to help, what's going on...

(Community based site 1: front line workers team 1)

P4: I think that we've got a really good team that we work with. It's nice that we're all very supportive of each other, help each other out, we try to get together and all go for lunch ...

...

P3: ... whether it's every three weeks, every month, sometimes more time goes in between because the days go by, but we try to keep it on that schedule - or you're in more often, but to sit down and try to do that clinical supervision, we try to keep it scheduled.

(Community based site 1: front line workers team 2)

P3: And the people at the main don't know us, like we'll go through the main and people will be like oh, who's that new worker. I'll be like, well, I've been here for 5 years...

...

P2: I think when you're talking about getting support from child welfare, like your fellow workers or whoever it may be, you're very isolated because it's not often that we can all get together at the same time ... so it's really hard to kind of gain that support and hard to get those ongoing consults with workers that you're working on the same files on, those kinds of things when you're isolated makes it really difficult to be on top of your work. Supervision as well ... is really difficult – to kind of try and make time for that and where do you do it?

... On the flip side, it's like you are forced out in the community and when you don't have your support from your staff you build relationships and very good ones with the people in the community ...

...

P1: Not everybody can work in an isolated setting. There have been many workers that cannot accommodate and struggle and get chased out.

(School based site 2: front line workers)

P1: There was concern identified around burnout and emotional stress for the — and I was very concerned, I mean, I totally understood it, I was very concerned, so we took the (special) day, which is Wednesday and we pulled them right out of their schools and they are in the office on those days, that's their opportunity to do planning, we have our meetings those days, we go for lunch and that's the (special) day, they're only available by cell for crisis-only to their schools on those days. ... They're not so isolated. They're also taken out of the—division, so they can have a bit of a down day if needed, they can take half a day off, our meetings are in the mornings, they can take half a day if they want, like that kind of thing. That was an uphill battle with the schools, the schools are not happy about that, but I really felt for the program to sustain—keeping skilled and retaining skilled staff, that that's what they needed, so I've been quite... um... rigid. Not so rigid—strong, but I've been quite stubborn around that piece...

...

P2: But isolation is quite significant but I think people get used to it... for good or for bad. We do a lot of isolation though, we do.

...

P1: Because I think isolation and because of our awareness of it we try to bring them in a little more often and talk more often and just... you know... because there is definitely isolation.

...

P2: Yeah, they're on their own a lot. There's only one place we have two workers.

...

P1: No manager, no team to just walk over and talk to.

(School based site 3: supervisors)

P1: Your school becomes your family. Um, like when you're in the traditional model you have your team ... I know my school, my principle ... you're a part of that whole family and the teachers like to know who they're dealing with as well. ... it's a huge piece.

...

P5: Team work is great.

...

P3: Yeah, I can't complain.

...

P2: I've always gotten assistance when I've needed it.

...

P1: It seems like the farther you get out in your community the closer you get to your team too right? Even though you're not with your team all the time we still have that good relationship with your team right? [...]

...

P3: We make it a priority to get together and to spend time doing fun things with each other and stuff like that.

...

P4: ... when it comes down to crisis, if I was in a crisis, I need to know who... you need to know that person to a certain extent if they're going to be there with you to do an apprehension you don't want a stranger assisting you.[...] as much as it's nice to connect with the other community people sometimes it's nice to connect with one of us so you can say, okay look this is what I went out on last night, I just need to tell you. It was absolute chaos. And then describe it, and they're like yeah, I know what you're talking about. I can't just tell the public health nurse or email or phone call.

...

P1: Or even some feedback or direction from another worker. You know what I mean like sometimes it's not something you're going to go to your supervisor on but you just want to throw it to another worker. Or hey do you know any services that would, you know or they're looking for a couch or a refrigerator, have you heard anyone that's, you know getting rid of... so things like that it's nice to have.

(School based site 3: front line workers)

Earlier, evidence was presented that front line service providers in accessible school and community settings valued their greater accessibility to service clientele and to service partners. It was described as enabling them to have more positive helping relationships and to be more flexible and proactive in their jobs. Nonetheless, this accessibility also contributed to their sense of working in "fish bowl environments." Service providers described frequent interruptions to their everyday work routines and feeling the need to respond constructively in these interactions. They talked about needing to work at home or elsewhere to be able to have the uninterrupted time needed to complete their documentation requirements. Overall, the sense was that most service providers enjoyed and believed in the merit of their accessible service models, but the price was some unique employment frustrations as well:

P1: But for me like, I could be in the office trying to do recordings and they see my car outside so that means, okay we're here, we're knocking on the door, (name) I need to talk to you about this, this, this, this, and it could be something, it could have waited until tomorrow at our appointment, but they just... come right there. It's a good and it's a bad.

...

P2: I think because you're so accessible, they stop in. They just don't think. Of course, now they see someone's car in the parking lot, they know you're in the office.

...

(School based site 1: front line workers)

P4: It's pretty much impossible to do paperwork in your office. If you plan your day to just do paperwork, you can't do it. People are at your door all day long, so you have days at home to do that.

...

P3: It can be difficult. I think it's a positive thing and it can be difficult at the same time, to try and fit everything in.

...

P1 : Our day, y'know, is constantly interrupted, people are coming in and you're engaging here, you'll have to—y'know, you're running outside, you're talking to people,

(School based site 2: front line workers)

They know that they have access to (service provider) and (service provider) and the ... supervisors that are on-site, but they also know that they can talk to any worker that's in this place. (okay) And so that sometimes makes it a little bit tricky, because sometimes you just want to go—if you're having a bad day, you just want to go in your office and y'know, make a few phone calls and do some of the things that are a little less stressful and sometimes that's just not possible, at least, here. People do drop into [main office] and it's the same kind of thing, but not the same level of intensity, simply because there are lots more people in that building and a different kind of reception and a different kind of structure.

(Community based site 2: manager)

P1: I would say that you tend to have more to do here, because ... in our setting you, you don't depend on scheduled appointments, people just walk in...

...

P2: Well, it can be quite disruptive to – and I hate to say this as a downside, because it's a plus side, but it can be quite disruptive to your day when you have these walk-ins all the time ... I have two clients who drop in all the time. They're not even clients any more, they're ex-clients, but they drop in all the time just to say hi and the kids want to give me a picture or invite me to their school play and just to say how they're doing. I love that, I think that is a great example that, you know, we made a good connection and that, you know, I like to hear that they're doing well, but at the same time – oh, there are times when the receptionist calls

me and says oh, you know, 'your favourite client's here' and I just go, 'not today', like I don't have 20 minutes to sit with her. I mean, that's a very minor downside, right?

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

They're on all the time, they don't—they're never—they can never come back and kick their feet up, they are visible all the time.

(School based site 3: supervisor)

Despite belief in their accessible models of child protection services, there was a perception at several sites that working in these "fish bowl environments" was not for everyone:

P3: But again, I think it's the type of worker you put in a community setting, is very much all the difference in the world. Some will not ever adjust properly and other ones have - just the type of approach you use is going to make the difference.

...

I2: So no amount of training or staff orientation will make a difference in that situation?

...

P1: No.

...

P3: I think to a degree, but I think it's the type of personality and what you go in and your manner ...

...

P6: And your manager also has to have that same – because there's some managers that wouldn't fit.

(Community based site 1: front line workers)

Well I believe that they, they come to us that way because they're... you know I've seen a few workers that have sort of landed themselves in a community position that hasn't been for them. It just hasn't been for them. And one in particular stands out for me and she ended up going back to... to a traditional team because it wasn't for her. She... she didn't like it, she liked the going in and getting things done and getting out. You know she was very much more that old way of doing things, old-school. You know? And that... and I shouldn't say that either because I think that was just part of her too. Part of her... just her overall personality, the way she... the way she is. Yeah.

(School based site 2: supervisor)

At one community based site, some front line service providers did comment about a lack of security in their work locations. For most, this did not cause them to question the overall value of their service delivery model:

P1: Because you are in a building that isn't necessarily secure. Our offices are not always locked. ... so the safety issue is a concern, where at the other buildings, y'know, you do have the locked doors, you do have that....

...

P2: But yeah, other things though, like I've flat tired and lucky for me they've been in the day time, but... (colleague) has flat tires, nails in the tires at our complex, (colleague) had her car sanded. I do not feel safe in my community at (neighbourhood office) after dark, I'm out of there.

...

P3: I had a client threaten to kill me, so that was very unnerving.

...

I2: So you feel quite unsafe now?

...

P: Sometimes I do, because I'm in a like, it's not like the school where they're a part of the school and they're a room to themselves. I'm in an (community building)

(Community site 1: front line workers)

... never did feel the safety factor as much as other people might, so other people might feel that because we have an open door here and we have an open door in the schools that there could be a safety issue. Those really could be the only downfalls I see. Otherwise, no, I don't – isolation would probably be number one though.

(Community based site 1: supervisor)

School based and community based service providers enjoyed when they were able to establish welcoming helping relationships with parents and children, as did agency based service providers. A difference was that service providers in the more accessible service delivery sites believed that they were able to establish cooperative relationships with a larger

proportion of families that they serviced than did agency based service providers. Both groups recounted with pride those instances when kids and parents appeared to benefit from their interventions:

P2: I like it when they can identify us as a positive, as being supportive and often they'll say 'Geez, when I started working with CAS I thought it was going to be awful, you hear all sorts of stories' and then when they tell you it was a positive experience for them, they find it beneficial...

...

P5: When you go to their house and you say, 'Okay, you're doing really well, I'm going to close your file' and they beg you not to.

...

P3: Or you have clients who've re-opened and they want you. You know, for whatever reason, they might re-open as a non-protection file for support, and they ask for you, that's always nice.

(Community based site 1: front line workers)

P1: ... I love the interaction with the kids and it's helpful because then the kids see me as a positive person in their life and hopefully the parents then also start to see me as someone who is not meant to be threatening, but to be helpful. And then when we get to that point where they actually see me like that, that's a real blessing.

...

P2: I think what's rewarding about our job is I like when I see a client who is able to accept change and is able to be in that change model where they're able to, if we connect them with the appropriate resources in the community they can thrive and we can move out, and we don't need to stay there,

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

P4: Well and giving parents the confidence that they have a lot of strengths... a lot of them have a lot of strengths they're just not knowing...

...

P5: I think seeing... I mean personally for myself it's getting involved maybe at a difficult point in the family's life and then um, seeing the kids in the family under a lot of stress and then through our work with you know referrals or even the family visits or whatever, seeing progress and change even if it's a quarter turn and then seeing you know as we pull out there's been change, the kids are happier, they're happier. They feel like they can do this and they've got... you

know the confidence to; to parent and do what they need to do that's... it's nice to see the change, right?

(School based site 2: front line workers)

There are several encouraging aspects of the employment narratives from these school and community based child protection service delivery sites. First, there was an enthusiasm and a belief in the value of these service delivery models. Second, there was a belief that these service delivery models allowed them to be more flexible and do more things to be helpful to children and parents. Third, these service providers felt that these approaches provided them with earlier and more complete information about what was going on in the lives of children and families. Fourth, they described sometimes being able to respond to requests for assistance or to perceptions of danger to children more rapidly because of their informal contacts and networks. Fifth, they talked about being more accessible to service partners and, in some instances, being able to access resources for kids and parents faster. There was no sense in these narratives of the inevitable tension between protecting children and supporting parents common in many discussions of child welfare. They felt that these service models enabled them to do both better than the less accessible models.

On the other hand, they had to manage the unique challenges of working in “fish bowl environments” and to having less access to the support of child protection colleagues, teams or supervisors. A few thought that they might be less safe from angry clients by working in less physically secure premises. Overall, there was a clear impression from these service providers that the benefits of working in these accessible service models outweighed the costs.

This accessible model employment narrative does show quite clearly that, even within the same legislative and financial constraints, it is possible to substantially alter how front line child protection service providers understand and assess their jobs. There is enough in this narrative to merit serious consideration about the value and the feasibility of broader emulation and adaptation of these accessible models of child protection.

However there is a catch. Despite their appreciation of their local service delivery approaches, accessible model service providers also told a story about the broader child

protection system's expectations undercutting what they are trying to do. Like the agency based service providers, they voiced strong concerns about the sustainability of their jobs and about obstacles to doing a good job. This narrative about the formal child protection system raises the question about the extent to which it might undercut any attempt to work differently or more effectively with children or parents. Would such improvements inevitable be mostly cosmetic overlays on more powerful formal child protection system requirements? If so, then we are faced with the need to examine these foundational formal system requirements and to confront much more difficult questions about whether they can be changed and how they should be changed.

Job Impacts of the Formal Child Protection System

Despite the presence of contrasting local employment narratives at the agency based and accessible service delivery sites, another narrative about the impacts of the formal child protection system on their jobs was shared across all research sites. This narrative was noteworthy not only for its pervasiveness but its emotional expressiveness.

The central theme of this formal system employment narrative was that the front line child protection expectations from the formal child protection system were very excessive. There were several main components to this description. First, front line service providers were expected to do far too much. The job was never done. It was not possible to meet all expectations or to remain up to date meeting their job responsibilities. There were always trade-offs and choices about what were the most important responsibilities. Second, there was a perception of a disconnection between formal system requirement and the realities of everyday front line work. Finally, there were vivid descriptions of the inordinate pressures these expectations placed on front line service providers, with significant negative personal and professional consequences. Given its prevalence in these employment interviews, it seemed appropriate to give ample space to illustrating this theme:

P1: ...who the heck else would go up to see their clients Friday night at seven o'clock or whatever? Saturday morning too. Like that stuff doesn't happen in a lot of other jobs or most other... how many nights are we lugging our computers

home to try to complete some of the work and even if you don't complete it that night you still bring it home because... You can't get it out of your head! You feel guilty. We feel guilt. ... you're tired at the end of the day you have the intention to do the work but you're just exhausted. ...

...

P2: meeting with the clients and the clients' needs get put first, making those calls have to be done and your report gets put last but then the pressure comes if that's not done.

...

P3: It's a huge thing so now we're accessible so you're driving, you answer your phone and you have a conversation you still have to document that and then your phone rings again? So it's brutal.

(School based site 1: front line workers)

P1: ... but it always seems as front line workers we're the end of the line and if there's no driver available, if there's no visit person available, if there's no foster home available we don't take kids home for the night but it's always us left holding the bag and working 12 hour days because someone's got to supervise the visit, someone's got to drive kids

...

P2: You are, absolutely. I take three week blocks now for one three week block in October, but to get ready for that is just, you're insane, I now need that three weeks and that's when I'll have my anxiety attacks, my panic attacks, I'll get sick I always get sick on vacation because it's like my body is like, staying well, staying well ok, I'm on vacation whoosh. ... And then two days before you come back, sleepless nights again thinking, 'what's going to hit me when I come back, what's it going to be?'

...

P1: I hate not - always feeling like I'm not caught up and I'm behind.

...

I just find it even takes up time when I'm at home because I'll be thinking, 'oh my God, I forgot to do this' or making mental notes to myself, 'you need to do this tomorrow, don't forget to do this' kind of thing, so it's constantly thinking about the job and what I need to do.

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

P1: ... I just came through training everybody on Differential Response and I really love the philosophy ... the intentions were good, but the standards have been expanded even more now than they were before and so there's more accountability on workers in terms of making sure they're doing this and that and the other thing ... there's still sort of this oppressive, 'this is how you need to do

things' ... you're constantly trying to make sure you're meeting all the standards because there's no flexibility ...

...

P2: Well, now ... you have to... you have to set goals with the client beforehand, you have to pop in on them while they're doing that. You have to do a close out meeting and I get those for the families, but as a worker, I've got too much other stuff to do to spend an hour doing this each time for just a parent child interaction.

...

P3: Or supervised access where you have to be in there every 3 weeks with a new goal! (chuckles) Like, I don't have time to give you a new goal!

(Community based site 1: front line workers)

P1: It's quite scary, actually, what's expected of us and yet we know, is it even possible, I don't think so at this point.

...

P2: I've been – you get sick, you know, when your child is sick you're not staying home with her you're passing her off to grandma to take care of her because you've got court to be in, so I just find it's hard to manage the amount that we have and try to be a good worker, because that's what you want to be, right.

...

P3: It's frustrating, absolutely.

...

P4: ... the job's never done, you could work overtime forever, you know, but you just can't do it otherwise you sacrifice your own physical, mental health and it's not worth it.

...

P5: I don't love my job. How can you love being – yeah, do you want to be overworked and stressed and seeing what you do every day and the amount that goes on – how can you love that?

(School based site 2: front line workers)

P1: It's like ADHD on wheels (shared laughter). There's so many different things – I don't know ...

...

P2: But when your phone is ringing off the hook, right, and you're dealing with juggling how many crises in a day that are supposed to be other people's crises but become your own – and waiting at the court house for hours and days ... so you know, there's so many different things coming at you it's impossible, with ORAM especially, to – I found it completely impossible to keep caught up.

...

P3: ... there's so many hats that we're just getting saturated that nothing really is getting done, so to speak – I mean, how much can you accomplish when you only are able to visit a family once a month, or once and you miss that month and it's two months – what's really being done

...

P4: And when you take time off then you have more work to come back to – see, like I think we need more vacation, but if we took more vacation we'd have more work to come back to.

...

P5: Sometimes you know your head is spinning so fast that it's overwhelming ... being compensated is one thing, but I just don't have enough time to fit all the stuff in that I need to do and then give – I know the big stress that I have and [colleague] and I talk a lot about this is that I don't give my family the same amount of attention that I'm giving to my work.

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

P1: Right now I feel like we're all trying to do everything, like Craig said, 'jack of all trades' but we're just touching everything and we're missing timelines and it's too hard...

...

P2: I think the expectation is 'yeah, there's been a lot of change, but suck it up, guys, you've got to figure it out' and there's not, I don't feel, a lot of guidance in doing that. I feel it's 'here you go and good luck'.

...

Everybody's running, everybody you know busy and we can hardly build that good, solid interaction – we don't have that because we are already really busy because of the work that we're doing so...

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P1: ... the environment is always okay, go, go, go and sometimes staff really put you under a lot of pressure, you know, to catch up, to do your work ...

...

... there's cases where we have to go and apprehend, we could be out until 11 or 12 at night and we're only given hour to hour for that and their responses are, oh, you know, 'flex the next morning', which in most cases you can't because you have home visits or supervised access...

...

I started as a student here and spent 10 months as a student ... I hit the ground running. In fairness though, I hit the ground running as a student pretty quick though too.

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

Frontline are totally down and out right now. If I let you talk to frontline staff right now they would be saying, 'we just can't do this job and [manager's] expectations are just way too high for us someone should talk to that [person] (laughter), because she's not getting this'.

(Agency based site 3: manager)

P1 ... so basically what we're expected to do is just keep going out, 7 p.m., 8 p.m. if we have to to meet these families because they're not allowing me to really put the reality of why some of these standards aren't being met ... So it's basically falsifying not giving them the true sense of why you can't make these commitments.

...

P2: We're the gerbil on the wheel.

...

P3: And that's where you get the disconnect. What our view of child welfare and how long a case takes and the issues around that and what the Ministry's expectations of timeline and how much time is allotted to a file, is very different.

...

P4: The pace with which they've asked us to completely change how we work on a day to day basis has been head spinning.

(Agency based site 3: front line workers)

P1: Some of the limitation is time. ... we have four different hats almost and realistically you have five days a week and seven hours in each of those days and the demands are so high I think in terms of what we're asked to do...

...

P2: ... you have all these great intentions to work with a family, develop these relationships and get to the heart and soul of what is going on in the family but we don't have time to do that...

(School based site 3: front line workers)

P1: I mean, you're never caught up, you're always dealing with something, some crisis and that other stuff gets left behind or is on the back burner...

...

P2: there's 34 hours in a week that we have to do it and there's in excess of 50-60 hours of work that needs doing.

...

P3: you just get 12 messages on your answering machine, but you've got this huge list of things to do, and learning that it's okay to let some things go because you have to, you just have to.

...

P4: ... the higher the expectations your family has on you, unfortunately because of the workload you're not able to meet those expectations and then the relationship suffers ... Personally, I would say that my biggest limitation is engagement with clients.

(Agency based site 4: front line workers)

One of the largest demands on these front line service providers time was completing the formal documentation requirements of their job. At all sites, front line service providers talked about spending 50% to 70% of their time on documentation. A common frustration was that this left little time to provide services adequately. Service providers believed that compliance with the accountability requirements of their work outweighed any other priorities in their jobs. They stated that this reflected a self-protection emphasis for the Ministry and child welfare agencies. They also felt that their child protection organization would be assessed by funders in terms of their compliance with these documentation requirements. Service delivery timelines were also built into these documentation requirements obliging them to work on schedules that were sometimes seen as inflexible and unreasonable. Being complaint with these documentation requirements and service timelines was also a way for service providers to protect themselves. If something went wrong, they thought that they needed to be able to show that they had complied with all formal system documentation and timeline expectations.

One of the ambitions of the Transformation Agenda was to free up more service time for children and families. With the caveat that these data were gathered early in the process of implementing this Agenda, the impression from these service providers was that, while some recording procedures were more efficient, overall documentation required for their jobs may have increased under these reforms. This increase was linked to the amount of additional documentation required by new mandated procedures (e.g. kinship care, mediation, family group conferencing) and by the new expectation that all contacts relevant to any case be recorded in computerized case notes. Their perception was that these case note requirements were to have credible evidence about what was done in a case if involvement with the court was necessary:

P1: ... the client's needs get put first, making those calls have to be done and your report gets put last but then the pressure comes if that's not done. ... you have to case note every time you talk to anybody at the school ... now you just have people popping in randomly and you're scrambling to find something to write on or your walking in the hall and you have to remember to document that somewhere ... Like we're putting all that stuff in, all the consultations, like a lot more paperwork has come with the job.

...

P3: ... we're documenting even if they just... if we consulted and gave them a resource we have to open up a new thing and document all that too like it's not just referrals in the file, if we're consulting, if we're giving a resource, we have to open up a new thing and document all that too... whereas before we never would have had to do any of that.

...

P5: And we're measured by our paperwork. Not by our social work, we're measured by our paperwork and that is so frustrating

(School based site 1: front line workers)

P1: It's almost all. If we're supposed to work 6 ¾ hours a day, then I would bet you that there's 3-4 hours that are spent in front of a computer. Right now, a little bit more because of the migration and everything has to be caught up and approved by managers before it can migrate ... I mean, people are really in a spin about that, right?

...

P2: ... but the thing that makes you not want to work is all the bureaucratic crap, all the paperwork, the policies and procedures you don't understand, a lot of the barricades that keep us from doing our job effectively.

(Agency based site 1: front line workers)

...it's mostly about the recording and that's because for the last 10 years, it's been hammered into our heads about, "it needs to be recorded, it needs to be recorded". And so people are so anxious about the recording and about documentation and now we have an inquest, so again, and it goes back to, "How good was your recording? How good was your documentation?"

(Agency based site 1: manager)

sometimes we get sucked in to our concerns about the audits and what the Ministry wants, and dada da da, and then we, as managers, we get e-mails, you know 'your team is 70% compliant with recordings' – I'm sure other managers

have mentioned this to you too – and then, so I don't usually even mention it to my workers because it's just (laughter) never mind the quality of work that you're doing with clients...

(Community based site 1: supervisor)

I: Can I ask what percentage of your time you would spend in paperwork now? What would your guess be?

...

P1: When we went to risk and safety, and even though, I think, we're going to be high, but I would say minimum 75%?

...

P2: I would agree with that.

...

P3: Absolutely.

...

I: This might sound incredibly naïve, but why? Who ...?

...

P1: Liability ... protect yourself.

...

P2: Liability, accountability.

...

P1: See the case notes, all those things are very instrumental with your court documents, but not every family goes to court, but they're great information. If there's an audit this is what they're going to be looking at – or if there's a complaint.

...

P3: They are shorter. I love that.

...

P4: Well, I guess I appreciate certainly how the recordings have become less monotonous in terms ... Um, so I certainly appreciate though that it has become smaller and it's not quite as tedious and it allows us more time to maybe be with the clients.

(Community based site 1: front line workers)

...so what often happens is when you have a week of vacation booked you end up having two or three days of flex time because you've been spending all this time making sure your recordings are done and then you can take your vacation.

(School based site 2: front line worker)

P1: I would say 75%. (of the job is paperwork)

...

P5: I'd say 50% and then what happened is that most of us were not ever caught up, which – not that you're ever completely caught up anyway, but the ongoing stress of knowing that your paperwork is not caught up when you're talking about these kinds of issues, is pretty mind blowing at times – said the woman on blood pressure pills, I don't know, I try (laughter).

...

P3: Paperwork is crazy; frustration, you're never ahead of the game and when you get ahead of the game – two weeks ago I was doing my happy dance because I had no tasks overdue, got three investigations in a 24 period, an apprehension in that period as well, next thing I know I'm drowning in paperwork, don't know where to start and that's frustrating.

...

P4: Well, maybe 70% even in the old days because it was a lot less – because you spent so much time doing the paper trail with everything, you know and ...

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

P1: ... Everything is done in a legal context, it's about us being accountable for what we're doing with our families and it's 70% of our job, to report, it's a huge, huge component ... I look at it 70% recording, 10% meetings, 20% with your clients...

...

P2: The paperwork requirements are ridiculous.

...

P1: Now we have to do it all at work so it's not – you have to come back to the office and enter it all on the E based thing and before we weren't E-forms based you could type from home

...

P3: Because we used to handwrite them all and now they have to all be in the database.

...

P4: Oh, I – I am not a court guy, I do not – I try to stay out of court, but yeah, you get up there at trial, you're cross-examined, you're grilled and ...

...

P3: It's on your case notes.

...

P4: So you have to be really diligent with what you write and how often you write and if you don't it sets you up. But the problem is, you can't get it all in because of the work, so it's this chase your tail kind of life.

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P1: Yeah, the priorities are all the administrative and, you know, have you got this done and that done, whereas when I do a priority list it's working if I've gone and done a two hour meeting with a family and felt like we made great progress, but oh shoot, I'm thinking I've got to get that document done that I was supposed to have done, that's frustrating.

...

P2: I think that hinders us in doing a proper, good assessment because you're always worried 'well, I've got this time to do this' or whatever and 'I need to get out', you know, it's just ridiculous the expectations they have on us in terms of administrative work.

(Agency based site 3: front line workers)

Two harmful consequences of the above profile were identified by front line child protection service providers. First, many of the service providers at these research sites implied or stated clearly that it was very hard and perhaps impossible to do good work with children or their parents under these conditions. There were also frustrations expressed about difficulties in accessing needed services and supports for clients from the broader service system. But quite a few of these service providers believed that they could not do what they felt that they should be doing with clientele because of these formal child protection system expectations:

... I don't think any ongoing worker should have more than 10 to 12 cases, in order to do a good job considering the profound impact of the decisions we make on the family ... but the thing that makes you not want to work is all the bureaucratic crap, all the paperwork, the policies and procedures you don't understand, a lot of the barricades that keep us from doing our job effectively.

(Agency based site 1: front line worker)

P1: I think when you talk about limits, we're talking about workload and not being able to do good social work in the amount of time that we have to do it; which and we want to do more for our families and we can't do it and if something breaks down in that family it comes back on us.

...

P2: ... so I just find it's hard to manage the amount that we have and try to be a good worker, because that's what you want to be, right.

(School based program 1: front line workers)

P1: I don't think I'm giving them my best efforts to move them forward, you know, frustrating because they have the potential to be a success story

...

P2: I mean, how much can you accomplish when you only are able to visit a family once a month, or once and you miss that month and it's two months – what's really being done – not much other than the file is just continuing to – the services that the families require are not sometimes being met.

...

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

P1: Lack of resources lots of times, you know, it would just be nice to be able to say, you know, 'they need to get into counselling today', not in eight months, right ...

...

P2: We don't invest in connecting with the community resources, we don't have the time to do it ... To me it's a time, they don't give us ...

...

P3: ... that's right, you do band aids, you can't actually help when you have a caseload like that – you don't have the time to give them actual help, all you do is hang around and wait for the next crisis.

...

P4: ... yet always time is an issue wherever you go and so that's a real limitation and I'm afraid I'm doing that the same thing that I fear always, you know, I don't build – I'm not supporting families the way I want to.

...

P4 And that just flips back into the volume issue, right, the volumes are too high. When I'm sitting in supervision for three and a half hours just to get through a caseload, that's just nuts, I'm sorry, that's not productive for my supervisor, that's not productive for me ... when really what we need to be talking about is some clinical stuff. ... I'm still hitting resistance, what different things can you suggest and can we try?' You know, 'I want to develop some skills in x, y, z, how do we go there?', that stuff gets missed.

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P1: ... especially when we're dealing with clients who are more than willing to go to access resources to better their family or help their children and there's wait lists galore ... it just gets really, really frustrating because you're sitting there trying to help your client or advocate for your client who's more than willing to make these changes and they're stuck longer in our system because we can't do it, we can't offer them the things that they actually want to access.

...

P2: ... it only works if we, as workers, have time to be able to do it. ... so child welfare, in a setting like this, will only work if management and supervisors

recognize the need to give us the physical and emotional, mental space to be able to have time to get to know and make those connections and network.

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

P2: I feel like my hands are tied in a lot of ways, that there are things that I want to do but I can't do them.

...

P3: I think that hinders us in doing a proper, good assessment because you're always worried 'well, I've got this time to do this' or whatever and 'I need to get out', you know, it's just ridiculous the expectations they have on us in terms of administrative work.

...

P1: It's hard to do good work with clients when you're coming and going, 'I don't really like my job right now'.

...

P4: Yeah, it's hard to maintain a positive outlook when in here it's so chaotic and you see the person who was here until 8 p.m., they're back at whatever, you see people going off on sick leave, that has an effect on your overall mental health to do this job.

(Agency based site 3: front line workers)

... you have all these great intentions to work with a family, develop these relationships and get to the heart and soul of what is going on in the family but we don't have time to do that and I think the model itself is great in thinking this is what we're going to do with this family, this is what we're going to do with this community but resources-wise, time management-wise, we can't.

(School based site 3: front line worker)

The second perceived negative consequence across all of these service models was that front line service providers leave their jobs⁴. The impression from these narratives was that agency based front line child protection service providers simply wear down and leave their jobs. Despite providing a more enthusiastic local employment narrative, in the words of one respondent, community and school based front line child protection service providers "speak well (of the program) and leave":

⁴ At one research site, front line staff leaving their jobs in a variety of service delivery models appeared to be lower than turnover in similar models at the other sites.

P1: One of the things that I find very frustrating would have to be along the same lines as the client's is – the worker turnover, you know, I have a hard time dealing with all the different workers and the turnover and if I'm having a hard time dealing with it and I'm a pretty functional person, then how are our clients dealing with it...

...

P2: I think initial chronic disillusionment begins at about 11 months after you're in and then it just sort of builds from there.

...

P3: When I came here they told me that the average turnover for our position is 18 months – that's short.

(Agency based site 5: front line workers)

P1: And that takes years to learn, as a worker, and people are burning out in their third, fourth year – like it's just that learning curve over and over and over again, you know, you never get to that point where you recognize, as a worker, you know, what you can actually do for families.

...

P2: If you want to keep your workers – look at how many new workers are in this room – if you want to keep and support your workers than listen to what they need to do the job.

...

P4: ... that's exactly it, but you get overloaded with families and issues and all these things that you're expected to try to manage and people just get burnt out.

(Agency based site 2: front line workers)

P1: ... people are simply leaving because it's not – the individuals experiences are not reflective of what they're being told...

...

P2: I'm going to guess, I think I lost count at about 12 workers in that two years, should be six a team, so just people moving, they go to other parts of this agency, this is a difficult job...

...

P1: ... we've had a lot of turnover. People speak positively about this, yet after so many years seem to go look for other work and they say it's other challenges, but it might be about the hard work.

(Community based site 2: front line workers)

P1: People leaving, changes all over the place.

...

P2: Staff turnover has not been an issue until the final fourth quarter in this year and we have major turnover; we have had seven people leave our agency in about seven weeks to go to other jobs in the field and it's about workload and had lots to do with the Transformation Agenda that came in...

...

P3: ... in my 10 years in child welfare, I mean like turnover has always been an element in child protection because it's a high moving, high stress job and there's a lot of demand and there's a lot of workers and people move on and move around...

(Agency based site 3: front line workers)

There's been staff turnover at a very high rate. I think that some of that has to do with lack of clarity in their roles and expectations. I think it has to do with the length of the process, to get things up and running and that staff get frustrated and want to leave, because they want to get down and do the job.

(School based site 3: supervisor)

... I don't think a lot of people are running out the door or changing jobs and taking other jobs because of the way they're treated in this organization, as much as the workload and the difficulty in managing it – and the liability involved in what we do, I mean, it's a huge responsibility and with trying to balance so much, you know ...

(Agency based site 4: front line worker)

Employment Survey

There was some confirming evidence for the patterns identified from the employment survey of front line child protection service providers. However, the relatively low return rate for this survey suggests that these results be interpreted cautiously. In particular, the low return rate combined with small program size makes it impossible to illustrate employment environments at specific accessible or agency based research sites from the survey data. Consequently, we have reported survey results separately in an aggregate fashion for agency based and community based samples. In addition, we compared the 2008 survey results with results from similar surveys of community based front line service providers in 2004 and child protection direct service child welfare workers in 2001.

With the ongoing workload pressures described by agency based and accessible program model service providers, it would be reasonable to expect that many would show signs of moderate or high employment “burnout”. One manifestation of burnout would be greater difficulty feeling empathy for service clientele. The Depersonalization Scale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory measures an unfeeling and impersonal response towards recipients of one’s service (scale range 0-24). Table 1 shows that between 54% and 75% of front line child protection service providers scored in the medium and high range of this measure of depersonalization. In all four samples, at least one-third of direct service providers scored in the high range for depersonalization (11 or higher). There were no clear differences between accessible model and agency based service providers on this scale.

Table 1: Maslach Burnout Inventory—Depersonalization

	2008 Agency Based Sample (N=93)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2004 Community Based Sample (N=21)	2001 All Direct Service Workers Sample (N=237)
Low (Score 0-5)	30.7%	45.8%	25%	33%
Medium (Score 6-10)	36.3%	16.7%	25%	30.3%
High (Score 11 or higher)	33%	37.5%	50%	36.7%

Average Score on Whole Scale	8.79	8.16	10.31	8.85
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The Emotional Exhaustion Scale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory assesses feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work (scale range: 0-54). Only about 25% of front line service providers in all four samples scored in the low range on this measure of emotional exhaustion. On average over 40% scored in the high range (28 or higher) on this

scale. Once again, there were no clear differences between agency based or accessible model service providers on this measure of emotional exhaustion. Equally important, there is no evidence here that levels of emotional exhaustion have declined for child protection service providers between 2001 and 2008.

Taken together these depersonalization and emotional exhaustion patterns support the theme from the previous employment narratives about the challenges of sustaining front line child welfare employment. In these narratives, this difficulty was related to feeling frustrated in being able to do good work with children and parents as well as having more work to do than they thought was reasonable. The survey results in Table 3 (see below) confirm that most front line service providers in all four samples felt that they did not have enough time to do the work they were expected to complete. Table 4 (see below) confirms the fear in the employment narratives that many front line child protection service providers think a fair bit about leaving their jobs. Once again there were no clear differences between service providers at accessible and agency based sites on these indicators.

Table 2: Maslach Burnout Inventory—Emotional Exhaustion

	2008 Agency Based Sample (N=93)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2001 All Direct Service Workers Sample (N=237)
Low (Score 0-16)	25.3%	28.6%	17.6%	23.7%
Medium (Score 17-27)	34.1%	52.4%	17.6%	32.6%
High (Score 28 or higher)	40.7%	19%	64.7%	43.8%
Average Score on Whole Scale	24.09	22.61	31.82	25.32

Table 3: Time and Amount of Work [Range: 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true)]

	2008 Agency Based Sample (N=93)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2004 Community Based Sample (N=21)	2001 All Direct Service Workers Sample (N=237)
I have enough time to get the job done.	1.91	2.08	1.88	2.0
I am not asked to do excessive amounts of work.	2.11	2.17	2.14	2.08

Table 4: Intention to Leave Job [Range: 1 (never) to 7 (all the time)]

	2008 Agency Based Sample (N=93)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2004 Community Based Sample (N=21)	2001 All Direct Service Workers Sample (N=237)
I think about leaving this organization.	3.70	3.66	3.81	3.64

In the employment narratives, from both the agency based and accessible site service providers, in addition to highlighting the strains of their work, talked a good deal about the rewards of front line child protection employment at their sites. This duality is confirmed by these survey results.

Table 5 shows that 75% or more of front line service providers derived a moderate or high sense of personal accomplishment from their work based on this scale. On average, across the four samples, over 40% of front line child protection service providers scored in the high range (37 or higher) on the personal accomplishment measure.

Both agency based and accessible model in the employment narratives were empathetic that their jobs “were not boring”. Front line child protection work at all sites found their jobs interesting and challenging. Table 6 shows that almost all child protection service providers in all four survey samples agreed without equivocation that their work was interesting and challenging enough.

Table 5: Maslach Burnout Inventory—Personal Accomplishment [scale range: 0-48]

	2008 Agency Based Sample (N=93)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2004 Community Based Sample (N=21)	2001 All Direct Service Workers Sample (N=237)
Low (Score 0-29)	23.1%	26.1%	12.4%	15.7%
Medium (Score 30-36)	37.4%	39.1%	43.8%	35.2%
High (Score 37 or higher)	39.6%	34.8%	43.8%	49.1%
Average Score on Whole Scale	34.07	34.43	35.60	36.17

Table 6: Interesting and Challenging Work [range: 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true)]

	2008 Agency Based Sample (N=93)	2008 Community Based Sample (N=24)	2004 Community Based Sample (N=21)	2001 All Direct Service Workers Sample (N=237)
The work is interesting.	3.68	3.73	3.66	3.74
The problems I am expected to solve are challenging enough.	3.59	3.52	3.66	3.56

Conclusion

There was a duality in how front line child protection service providers in this research experienced their employment. This distinction reflected the difference in how they felt about their local service delivery settings and how they saw the formal child welfare system expectations shaping their everyday employment realities. Reflecting this duality, two important child welfare service delivery system implications stem from these findings – one opening possibilities for positive innovations and the other questioning such possibilities.

It was clear that there is nothing “written in stone” about how child protection service providers understand their work. What we have come to accept as proper and inevitable in child protective service delivery is in fact a choice – there are other possibilities some of which may be a better fit with what we want to do. It was very clear from the narratives of front line child protection service providers at accessible and agency based sites that there were meaningful differences in how they understood and experienced their roles. The suggestion from these narratives is that, if we want more cooperative relationships with service partners, community partners and clientele, it can be done. The implication also is that we do not have to compromise the safety of children to make progress in these areas. The evidence is that both

the service philosophy guiding our efforts and the physical settings for delivering child protective services matter a lot.

It is also important to stress that all of the school and community based models were modest innovations within Ontario's child protection system. These were all relatively small programs. They received no extra funding and operated under the same mandate and procedural guidelines as the agency based sites. Yet the differences were evident. What might the consequences be if more substantial structures were created to facilitate service partnerships? What would happen if locally accessible service delivery of child protective services became the expectation? What if we invested in engaging local communities to partner in protecting children and helping families? What if creating cooperative helping relationship with many or most families became a central part of what we were trying to accomplish? There are other possibilities. The central point is that we have choices and these choices matter. They are reflected in our policies as well as in how we strive to engage with children, parents, families and partners.

Yet these service providers described a force pulling in an opposing direction and it may have been the dominant influence over their employment experience. There were underlying currents of central bureaucratic control, risk aversion and system self protection substantially shaping the world across all of these research sites. The suggestion was that these forces would reshape any efforts at reform to reflect their priorities.

A tangible manifestation of these priorities was the extraordinary amount of time service providers at every site spent in front of their computers documenting their work. It is striking that no front line service providers in these narratives linked these accountability procedures to better protection of children or to providing needed assistance for families. They were much more likely to believe that these accountability procedures represented obstacles to these service goals. The point here is not that accountability is irrelevant or that formal procedures cannot promote better protection of children and assistance to families. But an appropriate balance is required and the portrait painted by these service providers is of a radically unbalanced system.

When we have endeavoured to improve the child protection system, we've tried increasing funding and hiring more service providers. We've shifted emphases back and forth from investigation and apprehension to assessments and more diverse service responses. Local jurisdictions have tried innovative service delivery and programming strategies. Yet the core employment realities for front line child protection service providers seem to have been only marginally affected by these shifts.

Our contention is that we have to examine the nature and consequences of the formal centralized bureaucratic organization of child protection services. This is a much more daunting undertaking than proposing specific changes to service delivery strategies.

The Transformation Agenda outlines some major changes in how child protection services are to be delivered. Some of the desired outcomes of this Transformation Agenda were reflected in the local employment narratives at the school and community based sites in this research. Other Transformation Agenda ambitions include new ways of reaching agreement with families, arranging out-of-home placements, and documenting service activities. However, it is important to highlight that there is little evidence in this study that the broader systemic constraints described by these service providers are being changed under the Transformation Agenda. If not, what might reasonably be expected from these reforms may be limited. To go further, we may have to look to other ways to manage risk and to create space for much more of service providers' time and creative energy to be invested into helping children and families.

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**Appendix A: Research Reports from the Transforming Front Line
Child Welfare Practice Project**

Report #	
1	Service Model Accessibility (Service Provider Perspectives)
	This report examines the differences in service accessibility across central, integrated, and school/community based sites including geographic proximity to families, acceptability of the setting to families, and accessibility expectations of service providers.
2	Client and Community Relations (Service Provider Perspectives)
	This report addresses two important questions: within each service model, how much emphasis is placed on building positive relationships with families and communities? And, how successful is each model at building relationships, minimizing stigma for families, and improving the image of child welfare in the community?
3	Use of Legal Measures and Formal Authority (Service Provider Perspectives)
	The focus of this report is, across service models, how front line protection workers view their formal authority role and the extent to which they relied on legal measures in order to achieve protection goals.
4	Range of Services (Service Provider Perspectives)
	This report examines the differences in range of services across central, integrated, and school/community based sites including referrals to other services, direct support, advocacy, and collaborative efforts to provide services to families.
5	Child Welfare Jobs (Service Provider Perspectives)
	This report compares how service providers experience their employment realities across central, integrated, and accessible service models. Differences in job satisfaction, worker retention, and feelings about the work itself are examined.
6	Values in Child Welfare Work: Perspectives of Child Welfare Service Providers in Central and Accessible Service Delivery Models (Service Provider Perspectives)
	This report identifies what service providers across institutional settings say about the values that guide the work that they do with families and children, as well as their perspectives on professional identities and roles in the day to day delivery of child welfare services.
7	Helping Relationships (Parent Perspectives)
	This report examines the nature of first contacts in child welfare, the level of contact between families and service providers, and the quality of relationships over time across central, integrated, and accessible service delivery models.

8	Services and Supports (Parent Perspectives)
	This report compares the types and diversity of services and supports offered to families, number of service connections, and parents' overall satisfaction with services across central, integrated, and accessible service models.
9	Overall Child Welfare Outcomes: Family Functioning, System Indicators, and Community Attitudes
	Outcomes of accessible and central service models are assessed in this report using three criteria: (1) impacts on parent, child and family functioning; (2) impacts on system functioning (e.g. child placements, court involvements); and (3) impacts on parent and community attitudes towards child protection organizations.