

My Student Field Placement at DYFS

Contributed by Tonya Montgomery, BSW

I believe the purpose of social work in society is to promote social change that includes problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment of people to enhance well-being. It also includes utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems to help people interact with their environment by utilizing appropriate community-based services.

The aspect of social work that appeals to me the most is the process of helping to reunify parents with their children when they are removed from the home. Some individuals or families really need the caseworker's help. I believe the relationship between the caseworker and the family is very important, because the caseworker's behaviors determine the rapport with the families. If the caseworker is honest and sincere in helping individuals to achieve their goals, the process of reunification with families could be a smoother transition.

On the other hand, the aspect I do not like is that there are not enough facilities for children to go into once they are removed from their homes, especially in southern New Jersey. When we remove children and place them in a temporary shelter because a foster home is not available, we send a message that the child may have done something wrong. This does not provide the most supportive environment to help the child or children to feel safe.

While working for the Department of Children and Families (DYFS), I realized that I wanted to become a social worker. Seeing children and their families come in and out of the office, some worried, some struggling, and some who just didn't care, I began to think how I could make a difference. One day, I just decided that this is what I want to do. Therefore, I changed my major in college from business administration to social work, and my future career began.

In 2005 during my sophomore year, I began my internship with DYFS. I began to learn social work as a profession. The social work values such as service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, and the principles that ground and guide us, were instilled in me by professors and colleagues. I also had the opportunity to observe a lot of workers and interviewed a few clients. Interviewing clients was interesting to me, because I was able to utilize new skills for the first time, such as paying attention and listening. It also gave me the opportunity to show my personal qualities, such as caring and empathy toward the client. I also felt like part of the team by being flexible and reliable within my unit. It was an amazing experience that left me wanting to learn and do more.

Afterwards, each year I have continued to do my internship at DYFS, learning something new each time.

In 2006, during my junior year, I was placed in the permanency unit. The permanency unit is an ongoing unit where social workers manage a caseload. They work along with the families, helping them to get their children back. While working in this unit, I learned how to pay attention, listen, accept and give praise, respect other people's time and space, and respect the environment. During my internship, I had the opportunity to learn about the life of a case. If the case is opened, it's sent up to the permanency unit where we see the case to the end (Reunification, Kinship, Legal Guardian, or Adoption).

I had the opportunity to shadow a worker who had two teenagers in the foster care system for 12 months. In New Jersey, DYFS gives parents or families 12 months to comply with the Division before a permanent plan is set. If the parent or families do not comply, then the next goal is adoption, but the goal of the Division is always reunification.

In this case, the mother relocated to Texas, got a job with an advertising agency, and got an apartment. The caseworker and I returned the teenagers to their mother in Texas. When we arrived at the home, their mother had their room filled with balloons and presents on their bed. Seeing a child reunified with her mother for the first time was an amazing feeling that I will never forget.

In 2007, during my senior year, I had the opportunity once again to do my internship at DYFS. This time, I was placed in the intake unit. Intake unit workers investigate any allegations of abuse or neglect of a child. In this unit, social workers really should know how to listen, pay attention, speak kindly, and avoid personal questions. It's really up to the social worker to determine whether a child is living in a safe environment or if a child is placed at risk.

As an intern, I received my first case. I was assigned to a case in September for the purpose of completing a child abuse/neglect investigation. The case was that of an autistic child who ran off from his family and ended up in a restaurant in a casino. I had to go and interview the family to find out why the child was alone in a restaurant. This is where I truly began to understand the process of engaging clients by using active listening, empathy, and paraphrasing.

It also allowed me to see empowerment while working with clients. This allowed me to help them identify strengths and to provide some available resources. As the intake worker, I helped my clients to understand the purpose of attending a support group for families with autistic children, as well as how their participation would help them to achieve their goals.

As of January 2008, I am completing my internship in the intake unit. I will be graduating from the Richard Stockton State College in May. This field experience has been a very enlightening experience for me. I have had the opportunity to evaluate and assess various strengths and weaknesses in my behavior, personality, professional development, and knowledge. Of course, growth never comes without some "growing pains," and I have felt a few. But I have also had good experiences that have helped me identify the social work core values and guiding principles and what is most important to me, both personally and professionally.

Field experience has allowed me to demonstrate the various techniques and skills I learned in class. It's a wonderful opportunity for students to recognize the areas they have grown in and what areas they still need work in.

Tonya Montgomery, BSW, graduated from the Richard Stockton State College on May 10, 2008. She has been employed at the Department of Children and Families since 2002 and became a case manager/social worker there in May 2008.