****

9B18C027

residential child-services facility (B): Selected Field Notes

Professor William A. Andrews wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

*This publication may not be transmitted, photocopied, digitized, or otherwise reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of the copyright holder. Reproduction of this material is not covered under authorization by any reproduction rights organization. To order copies or request permission to reproduce materials, contact Ivey Publishing, Ivey Business School, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, N6G 0N1; (t) 519.661.3208; (e)* [*cases@ivey.ca*](mailto:cases@ivey.ca)*;* [*www.iveycases.com*](http://www.iveycases.com)*.*

Copyright © 2018, Ivey Business School Foundation Version: 2018-08-23

Soon after her arrival at the Christian Children’s Home of Florida (CCHF), Shirley Williams, the new chief executive officer (CEO), sought to understand and redress what she perceived to be a major morale problem. She authorized a consulting team to conduct extensive interviews with employees and former residents in an effort to get a deep understanding of why employees worked at CCHF, what they found frustrating or discouraging, and where they felt supported. These findings could be helpful in increasing morale as well as reducing the relatively high employee turnover. Consistent with grounded theory, a qualitative research methodology, and in an effort to decrease research bias, consultants initiated the interviews with general open-ended questions, asking their respondents to describe their work experience generally. Subsequent questions arose from the responses provided to previous questions. The observations below are largely the verbatim notes of the consultants, along with their reflections on what they were learning. Based on the following observations, the consulting team needed to build hypotheses about the causes of the morale problem from the actual qualitative data.

Consultant #1: Interview with House Parents

1. The couple was asked how they became house parents or how they came to the children’s home. They stated that they had been house parents before, and the husband spoke of being laid off from a different job before coming to CCHF [Christian Children’s Home of Florida].
2. We asked the couple what a typical day was like and they gave us a list of activities. They wake up at 5–5:30 a.m. to get medications ready for the girls and have them do morning chores and clean up their rooms. They then both take the girls to school and get back to the house around 7:30. Two days a week they get groceries from an on-campus store. On Mondays, they have about an hour or so of free time. They get the kids from school at 2:30. Dinner is around 5:30. They go to chapel and there are chores to do later in the day. There was also paperwork and meetings throughout the day.
   * The amount of work seemed to take up a lot of their time with very little downtime. The couple spoke of meetings that they go to regularly but when asked about the meetings and training, they both said that it was very repetitive and that it was basically the same things being discussed year to year. They said the best part of the day was when they finished all their paperwork and get to sit down with the girls and connect with them. “Establish a connection” was a phrase that came up a lot during the interview.
3. When asked what could be changed to help make their job better or easier, the couple said that [CCHF] should lower the number of kids per home. Most of the time, there are 10 kids in each home and the couple believes six to eight would be ideal. Right now, this couple had seven kids, but they usually have 10. They stated that being able to connect with the girls is much easier with a smaller number of girls. Another big thing that the couple mentioned that would help is if administration could understand what house parents do. There was also mention of having an assistant in the homes.

* You could really tell that the couple did not think that administration was doing a good job. They do not think that these people should be making decisions for them when they do not truly know what it’s like to do the job or what it takes to do the job. There was definitely a negative tone when talking about administration. The couple also suggested having a house parent representative. They had one in the past who they could shadow during the hiring process.

1. When asked about their time off, they talked about taking the girls out to different activities such as the park, restaurants, or even just a trip to Walmart. They said that they do at least one activity a week and that these are some of the most important teaching opportunities. They talked about [looking for] any opportunity to mesh the girls with the public and teach them how to socialize with others.
2. We then asked the couple about their off week and if they work during their week off. They said they did not have another job and did not express that that was something they were looking to do. The husband did say that he would be starting school in February.
3. The couple was then asked how their relationship with the children was. The wife said that it was very inspirational working with the girls. Overall, they said that their relationship was good and that they’re more likely to co-operate with you if there is a relationship. We then went into how long they will spend with the same group of kids and the couple said it was a range anywhere from three years to a few weeks or months. On average they spend about a year with a particular kid.

* You could really tell that they care about the work they are doing and the kids when answering this question. They were enthusiastic about creating the relationships and talked about how important it was to do so.

1. We then asked how the program was working for the kids. They said it could be better. When pressed about what could be done specifically, they said that the children’s home could teach more living skills in the home. [Another] suggestion was that they start caring for the kids at an earlier age because they would be more impressionable. Some skills that the couple thought were important to focus on more were managing money and social skills. Something that both the parents seemed to agree a great deal on was holding the kids accountable when they do something illegal. They stated that it tends to get swept under the rug and the home will use the excuse that it’s okay because they are going through a tough situation.

* Right when the questions were asked you could tell in their voice that they were not really behind how the home was being structured at this point. They seemed really iffy on the job that was being done and offered a lot of suggestions about how to change things. **Accountability** was a key term in this question.

1. The question was then asked how long the parents see themselves staying with the children’s home. They said that it was hard to say. When they first started at the home, the goal for them was to stay five years and they are about halfway through that period. They said that if they were supported, that they could stay longer. They wanted to see changes and mentioned that the new president was trying. They are slowly seeing changes and there have been small changes over the past month.

* They seemed to be behind the new president and liked that the president was pushing to make changes. They said that seeing small changes was a real **morale booster**.

1. When asked to rate their level of satisfaction as house parents, they agreed on about a 7 or 8 and stated that if we had asked this question a month or two ago, it would have been around a 2 or 3. They said that added support from administration has improved their level of satisfaction recently.
2. We then asked if they had ever seriously considered quitting and what may have led to that feeling. They stated that being **underappreciated** by management and never being asked their opinions for improvements [were feelings that would make them consider quitting]. They repeatedly said that there was **no support, no say** in what was going on, and made it clear that it was **never the kids** [that were] the reason for considering leaving.
3. We then went on to ask about the kids and how often there are arguments or problems on a weekly basis. They said that the girls were pretty good and said that this was because they are older (15–18). They said that the lower the number of kids in the house, the bigger the opportunity for **connection** was.
4. When asked about the other set of house parents for their house, they said they were civil but not best friends. They said there was not a lot of interaction with them outside of seeing them at meetings for an hour or so every week. They said that when there are a set of house parents on the same page, it could be great for the kids, but when the house parents are opposites, it can take a toll on the kids.

* I got a sense from the husband that he did not like the other set of house parents in their house. [It was] just from the tone of his voice, and he was very dismissive of them.

1. The couple was asked if they feel the kids appreciate them being their house parents. They said it is not expressed in the house very much but, deep down, they feel that the kids do appreciate them. They said that it is more common for kids who have left the house for a while and come back to visit to really thank them and show their appreciation. The parents said that there is a lack of trust that they must fight through with the kids before they open up and feel that they are appreciated. This could take weeks, months, or years.
2. The parents were asked if they think their house is more or less successful than others. They said that it honestly was probably the same. The husband talked about the younger girls being more impressionable than older girls. They both agreed that every house is similar in that they will all have their successes and failures. When asked if they would choose a different house over their own, they said that they would choose to stay at their current home. The husband said that he prefers taking care of boys because it is easier, but he’s used to [the current situation] and wouldn’t change houses.
3. When asked about the impact that this job has had on their marriage, the couple stated that, in the beginning, they were pushed to the edge. It was tough spending every second of every day together and they would get on each other’s nerves. They then went on to talk about how it has strengthened their relationship but for other house parents, it has led them to divorce.
4. We asked if they felt safe and they said absolutely yes. There really wasn’t anything else to that question.
5. We then asked about their feelings toward their immediate supervisor and they said that he was new to them. They were still in a “feeling out” phase. Something interesting taken out of this question was that the supervisor was also the therapist for the kids. The couple felt this was a **conflict of interest**.
6. When pressed more about management, they continued to say **improvements need to be made**. They talked about how although there was a new president that was striving to change the culture of CCHF, top management still was filled with a lot of the same employees that had been there for years and weren’t interested in making changes. They both agreed and stated that there should be replacements made in management in order to change to culture.
7. We finished up by asking about the system for matching up house parents with kids. Surprisingly, the couple said there is no real system. The couple was **frustrated** and said that there should be a better way. They said that, basically, they would just take a kid and sign them up for a house with no thought going into matching up personalities or situations with the house parents.

Consultant #2: Interview with House Parents

These are the interview notes from the phone interview with two house parents of CCHF. The questions asked will be presented first, along with a summary of their response as well as a commentary by me. We went ahead and asked some demographic questions first, and then moved on from there into more in-depth questions.

Other information to note: Male did most of the talking for this interview, even though Female was present for the interview, as well. Female did respond to some questions, but not as much as Male did. Male and Female are currently married and have been for 10 years. They have a daughter and a dog. They bring the dog with them to the home they work in at CCHF and all the girls love the dog. (They work in an all-girls home of about 7 to 10 girls, with ages of 15 to 17 years old.) In total, we believe the interview lasted about 45 minutes.

How did you come to be house parents with CCHF? Tell me about your journey here.

Male mentioned that he actually had done previous work just like this for another organization for about a year. However, he got laid off from his job (both he and Female). Luckily, he had friends who were house parents at CCHF who got them interested in working at CCHF as house parents, and that is what they decided to do. (I don’t think they are house parents anymore, because he mentioned they “were” house parents at the time).

This leads me to believe that they might actually really like this type of work if it is what they did before and what they do now—that they enjoy helping people and making a difference in people’s lives. However, up to this point in the interview, they did not sound too thrilled; it sounded like they are not very happy at the moment.

When you first heard about the job, did it sound like the kind of work you would be attracted to doing?

Male said yes, and since he and Female had done this work before, he knew what it would be like.

Could you walk us through a typical day at CCHF as being a house parent?

Male spoke and mentioned that Female starts her day at 5 to 5:30 a.m. She gets up and gets ready, and gets the girls’ medications ready. The girls are up at about 6 a.m. to get ready for school. Male and Female then administer the girls’ medications, and the girls do their morning chores (bedrooms clean, etc.). Male and Female have breakfast for them; the girls clean up their mess, and Male and Female supervise to make sure they clean everything up.

They take the girls to school and usually get back around 7:30 a.m., and then check their e-mail and do paperwork. Two days a week, they have to pick up groceries, and they have to go to a training session one day a week that is about two hours long. Male said on Monday they have about an hour of extra time to get done whatever they need to get done, and they usually try to do some extra work before they go pick up the girls at around 2:30 p.m.

Male and Female usually try to prepare dinner around 1:30 to 2:00, because they deal with girls who are classified as “pre-independent living,” so most of [the girls] work right after school. They take any girls that have to go to work to work, as well as to any medical appointments they might have. They transport them to tutoring on campus if needed and go one day a week into the community to take the girls out. Male said that they pretty much are on the go, running the girls to places up until about 7:30 p.m. The girls who work usually work until 9:00 p.m., so [Male and Female] go and pick them up as well.

The girls are also responsible for their nightly chores, be it vacuuming, cleaning the kitchen, etc., so Male and Female supervise that, as well. He mentioned they work with the girls hand-in-hand to make sure the house is in good shape. Usually around 10:30, everyone is home and in bed.

Obviously, they seem really busy. This leads me to believe that they are overworked during the time that they are there and stretched thin as far as help goes (two house parents handling all these girls sounds pretty hectic). Doesn’t seem like they have much time for fun; it’s very routine and structured.

Is the house you both work in an all-girls home?

Male and Female said yes—a “pre-independent living” home, with girls ranging from 15 years old to 17 years old.

Are there any houses on the CCHF campus that are co-ed?

Male said yes—they have the therapeutic home which is co-ed. They used to have another on campus but that changed back into an all-girls home.

Leads me to think that for some reason, co-ed homes do not work very well.

On a typical day, what do you feel is the most enjoyable part of it?

Male mentions that [they enjoy] when they finally get all of the paperwork and running around done, when they actually have some time to sit down with the girls and interact with them on a personal level. They can talk about their day and life in general, their goals and plans. [Male and Female get] to build a personal relationship with [the girls], to get to really know them—where they came from and what their goals in life are and how [Male and Female] can help [the girls] reach their goals. Female says she agrees.

I like the response they gave for this one. They like the job for the right reason—the relationship and communication aspect of it, getting to really know the girls, and creating a family environment.

What would be the part of a typical day that you enjoy the least?

Male mentions the training and the paperwork. It takes up a lot of their free time, so it takes the place of other things they could be doing instead. (I think he mentioned cleaning around the house.)

Sounds like busywork—administrative tasks, jobs that are spent doing things without the kids around. Less interaction involved in these tasks, less creativity.

Specifically with the training, do you find that you’re learning new stuff as you go along or are these meetings mostly preaching repetitive stuff you already know?

Male mentions they do this kind of training every year. It is pretty much repetitive. You have to do it a few times every year. You go over the same things every year.

Sounds boring—waste of time, repetitive, perhaps useless. Could definitely have room for improvement with meetings. He may feel like he is not growing with the organization, and this may be a factor toward de-motivation.

Do you feel that there is anything CCHF could do to make your job a little easier or more productive on a day-to-day basis? If so, what?

Male mentioned that if they had fewer kids in the home, they would have a lot more success in dealing with the kids. They can hold up to 10 kids in a home, so trying to meet all of the expectations with 10 kids in a home is difficult. You’re really stretched thin at times. He doesn’t really know if you can truly be effective with that many kids in a home. He feels six to eight kids is the ideal number of kids to have in a home.

He feels that administration needs to have a better understanding of what house parents actually do, and if they did, they would appreciate the house parents more, and that would make it easier to understand what they are dealing with and [would make it better] when they make decisions that affect house parents directly. What works on paper doesn’t necessarily work in the home. He said having staff that knows what house parents experience in the home would be really helpful.

Seems like they are overworked and could really use extra help. This hints at Male/Female having problems with the administration—a disconnect of what is really going on in different tiers of the organization. Shows that they are not having their voices heard—a potential source for higher turnover among house parents.

So, do you currently deal with 10 kids in the home?

Male mentioned that right now, they only have about seven but they can take up to 10, and they’ve been at 10 mostly year-round. Male feels that is a big factor for all the house parents – which they usually operate with around 10 kids year-round. Female also wanted to mention that having an assistant in your home—not all homes have that luxury—would be a great asset, as well as having the same assistance consistently in the homes so that the children know what to expect each day. Male then mentioned that [consistency would help the assistant] the relationship with that house parent and work to make the home more stable.

This shows they are usually over-stretched/overworked and understaffed at times. They could really use additional help but seems rather uncommon.

I know you mentioned that it would help if the administration knew what was going on in the house and what house parents deal with, so as far as decision-making goes, do you have any suggestions as to what you would like to see, in order to make your voice heard?

Male mentioned that they’ve had house parent representatives in the past go and have meetings with the administration, and he would like to see representatives who actually shadow and sit down with the kids for a couple days—just to get an idea of what actually goes on—so they can see how much work house parents actually have to put in to what they are doing. Female mentioned that house parents should be involved with the kids, especially when they are moved to another home on campus, because they have been the direct caregivers and should still maintain a relationship with the child even when [the child] moves to another house.

Stresses the idea that there is a disconnect between management and the workers in the organization—needs to be stronger communication flow.

Any other things you do in your free time?

Female mentioned that they have their outings which may involve going to a movie or the park. Sometimes CCHF gives them tickets for different events that they have on campus, but with their schedule right now (including academics), it makes it hard to spend free time with the girls. Male mentions that they try to do one activity with them a week, as far as taking them off campus. It may just be going to Walmart, going out to eat—where they show them how to interact in public, etc. So, even when you’re spending free time out with them, you still are teaching them how to interact and teaching them how to behave/be a productive member of society.

They seem like they enjoy spending free time with the girls but are limited by their busy schedule and having no additional help.

Do you have any other jobs in your free time, considering your schedule of seven days on/seven days off?

Male and Female said no, but Male said that he hopes to start school in February. I asked him if he still plans to work at CCHF while he goes to school, and he said yes.

This suggests that Male and possibly Female might not be planning on staying with CCHF for years to come. This may suggest that this type of job may have been one of the only career paths they could choose considering he is just now going back to school, perhaps in hopes of getting something better.

How would you describe your relationship with the children (i.e., young ladies)?

Male thinks they have a really good relationship with their girls. They try to be very relational and the girls are more likely to co-operate with you if you can build a personal relationship with them, getting them to see you as part of their family, as someone who actually cares about them and is interested in them, as opposed to someone who just stands there and gives directions and instructions to them all the time and correcting them when they make mistakes. If you can build that relationship with them—“There are times when we have fun and joke and laugh and play around—things a normal family would do. They respond better to that when you do have to give them instructions or correct negative behaviour because they don’t just see you as that person who is always trying to change them, but they see you as a person who really cares about them.”

Shows they value the importance of relationship building with their girls. They care about the individual and are not on a superficial level just to get the job done and go home. They take pride in their work.

How long do you typically spend with the same group of girls?

Male says it varies. They will have some from the time they are 15 to 18, and they have one now that will be with them for only two months before she turns 18, and then she’ll move on. Male thinks they say the average is a year but, to be honest, it is case-by-case—some could be two weeks, and some could be three to four years.

It seems hard for them to build meaningful relationships with the girls (or any kids for that matter), considering the short time frame (average about a year) they have with each kid, especially with two house parents and 10 kids. The kids must also know that they will switch house parents each week and by the end of the year will no longer see [the house parents], so the constant rotation may make it hard for house parents to develop meaningful relationships with kids.

Do you personally feel that this program is working for the kids?

Male feels it is a good starting point, but feels there are a lot of areas needing improvement as an organization in terms of setting the kids up for a better chance of success, to be more successful in the future.

Male and Female want to make a difference in the kids’ lives, but they are not sure if they currently are. They want to help the kids transition to successfully living on their own, and if they are unsure about the successfulness, then it may make them feel of less importance to the organization.

What are some things that CCHF could do to help facilitate a more successful transition?

Male feels they need to teach more independent living skills in the homes, even though they work in a pre-independent living home. Male feels that as an organization, they could start at an earlier age [teaching the kids] how to cook, manage their money. Social skills are a huge thing for a lot of the kids that come on campus. They’ve never been taught social skills—how to interact with people outside the organization.

Also, if the kids do something that is illegal, we should find a way to hold them accountable for it rather than acknowledging that they are in a group home setting [and] just sweeping it under the rug. Thus [the kids] think it’s okay because since they live in a children’s home, it doesn’t affect them, and a lot of times when they leave the children’s home, they go out into society and think they can break rules and break laws because they’ve been able to do it at the children’s home and there are no consequences. But when they do, they get arrested for it. So, there needs to be a way to teach them accountability for their actions. Just because they’re in a group home doesn’t mean they get away with it.

Sounds like there needs to be changes to policies that are out of [the house parents’] control. Teaching skills at earlier ages is a must, as well as accountability for actions.

How long do you see yourselves being house parents, doing this type of work, regardless of the organization?

Female says that is hard to say. They have a new president now and, hopefully, they will see some changes. It just depends upon the types of changes that they see, because they want to feel like they are actually making a difference in the children’s lives.

Male says it varies week to week. Their original goal was to stay about five years—and they are halfway through that goal now—but if they actually feel that they are making a difference in the kids’ lives, then it is definitely something they could see themselves doing longer. It boils down to how the organization is being run and how things are—morale on campus, etc.

This shows that they did not intend to do this type of work for long, and since they are halfway to their goal, it shows that they don’t have plans for changing the goal. There might be a lack of commitment here—this is not a career for them, and they might not be happy here. (It is possibly just a job to get them by.)

As of right now, how confident are you that the organization will make the necessary changes, or are you in a wait-and-see mindset right now?

Female says they have slowly seen some changes. The new president has inherited messes in many areas right now. They are not expecting the changes overnight but, right now, they are seeing small changes. Male says over the last month they have begun noticing changes that have led to morale boosting for a lot of people and giving them more hope—"maybe I can ride this out for a little longer”—getting them to stay longer.

They seem to like what the new president is doing. At this point, they seem to have a more optimistic tone during the interview. Slow but positive changes.

On a 1 to 10 scale for job satisfaction, where do you see yourselves?

Male said, “This week, I’d probably give myself a 7 or 8.” Female agrees. He says he’s pretty happy right now—that they’ve seen some changes over the past few weeks in some areas that really needed improvement. It has given them a lot more hope than what they’ve had. He mentions that if you were to ask him this question a month ago, he would have told us a 2 or 3, but now a 7 or 8 because of the things they’ve started to see.

The recent changes must have worked wonders on these two. Having only a 2 or 3 shows very low morale and a very high chance of leaving. Whatever rules, policies, or culture were in place before were certainly not the way to go. Shows a change was necessary. Also shows an increase in morale and motivation for Female and Male.

Of the things that you have started to recently see, what are the driving factors behind the move from a 2 or a 3 to a 7 or 8?

Female says the support that they are starting to see from the new administration [is a factor]. [Administration] really want to hear what the house parents have to say, be it positive or negative. [The house parents] feel like they are being listened to and supported. Male says the new administration, especially with the new president, really wants to know what is going on with the house parents in the homes. It shows her respect for what house parents do. She’s trying to build support for house parents they have not previously gotten.

They support the new president and stress the need for greater communication between the top and bottom and appreciation for the house parents.

Have you ever reached a point where you were seriously thinking about quitting? What might have led you to that point?

Female says yes; about a month ago, they had plans for leaving. It had nothing to do with the kids, never the kids. I would say [the issue was] under-appreciation—administration never asking [the house parents for] their opinion about anything, and just no support. Male says, basically, they feel like they had no say in running the home even though they were the ones that had to run the home each day. Everyone was making the decisions for them.

Appreciation seems to be very important for the house parents. It could be a leading factor in turnover. Greater appreciation is needed.

How would you describe the children’s demeanour/attitudes?

Female says their girls are pretty much well-behaved. They have older kids but must keep in mind that every child is different. They have to recognize their different personalities and how they cope with things, but right now they have a wonderful group of girls.

Male says they are typical kids. Male feels that anytime you put seven or eight different boys or girls in a home together, there are going to be arguments just like between a brother and sister. There are a lot of typical teenage behaviours with how they interact with each other. They may get on each other’s nerves and argue like brothers and sisters would, but overall, they have a pretty good group right now.

Female then stressed the lower number aspect—with fewer kids, you can develop better connections with them. She mentions that, in the past, they didn’t feel like they did much for the kids when they had two house parents with 10 kids—just take them to school, administer meds, come back, and do what you have to do, and then go to bed.

Shows that they have no problems with their kids and that there is a lack of meaning in their job when there are too many kids in house (10). It is too busy.

Can you describe your relationship with the other set of house parents that come in?

Male mentions that with the ones that work at the same home they do, they are civil toward one another. They can’t say they’re best friends. It’s hard because they see each other for an hour to two hours each week (usually during the Tuesday meetings), and if one is there and not the other, they’ll just text about what went on and what not, but there is not much interaction outside of that.

Not much communication between employees and management. This should change; signs of an unhealthy culture.

How do you think the kids feel about having to switch house parents every week?

Male says it can be hard but it depends on the situation. If you have two sets of house parents that are on the same page, then it makes it easier, but if the two sets are complete opposites (personalities) working together, it can be difficult for the kids.

How appreciative are the children of you both being their house parents?

Male says deep down, he feels they appreciate them, but they typically will not express it. “A lot of times you won’t hear or see the appreciation until after they leave (maybe even a year or two later), when they might contact you and thank you for being their house parent and everything.” Male feels that when the girls are here, they kind of have this wall built and you have to work to dismantle the wall in pieces every day to get them to trust you, because they’ve been hurt by many different people in their lives so they don’t trust you at first, so sometimes it may take weeks, months, or years for them to realize what you tried to do for them and to show that appreciation.

Feeling appreciated is very important to these house parents. It seems like they do not feel very appreciated, which is a leading factor toward quitting.

Would you consider your house more or less successful than other houses?

Male feels it is probably the same across the board—it is hard to judge. They work in the pre-independent living home, so they spend less time with their girls as opposed to some of the other houses and their children. He feels sometimes you could have a greater impact with younger kids because they are a little more impressionable as opposed to a 17-year-old that will turn 18 soon. They are much harder to change, but across the board, it’s probably the same.

How do you feel this job has helped your own relationships in your own lives, as far as positive effects/negative effects, strengthened/weakened, etc.?

Male thinks that, now, it has strengthened their relationships, but in the beginning, when they first started this, it really does hurt your relationship. “It’s one thing to be married and see your wife every morning and every night when you get home from work, but you actually work with your wife every second of every day. Seeing each other 24 hours a day can be challenging. You can get on each other’s nerves; you don’t really have a break from one another.” They know a lot of other house parents who started off happily married but after being house parents for a while, they divorced because they didn’t know how to balance that relationship. [Being house parents] has strengthened their [marriage] because they’ve learned how to work with each other and give each other space. Female agrees

What kinds of feelings do you have toward your immediate supervisors or upper management?

Male says their immediate supervisor is still relatively new to them, so they are still in the “feeling out” phase. Their immediate supervisor is also the kids’ therapist, and Male is not a fan of that role. He would rather see that position be just a therapist and not a supervisory one as well, due to conflict of interest. Male would like to see some improvements made with management. He feels he has seen some with the new president (Williams) that came in, but there are still some he improvements he would like to see.

They would like to have more autonomy. It seems like everybody else makes the decisions for them and excludes them—a lack of communication and autonomy.

What exactly are some of these changes you would like to see with management? Policy issues? Replacement issues?

Female says there definitely needs to be some replacement of top management personnel. (Male agrees.) Some of the management have been here for several years and are reluctant to change, and [the house parents] feel it is hurting morale when these managers are not willing to go ahead with the changes that are, in essence, trying to make the house parents’ job better. Male says there’s been a complete shift in culture recently and some of the management is reluctant to change with the new culture; they want things to be as they were in the past. Male feels replacement is necessary in order to change the direction of the organization.

Mostly people needing to be replaced—shows that some of the organization’s upper management team needs to change, or else be removed if employees are to feel better about their job and themselves.

Do you feel that CCHF does a good job matching house parents up with the kids?

Male doesn’t feel there is an actual system set up for this but would like to see some changes in this. He would like to see the potential house parents sit down with the kids and to try to get to know them.

Shows lack in policy effectiveness. Change needed—a staff/management team that knows what the house parents have to go through on a daily basis.

Consultant #3: Interview with Former Residents

Interviewed two former residents who had “aged out” (age 18) into the nearby off-campus CCHF campus.

When coding the responses given by the two interview subjects, you see the recurring themes of an organization that is striving to create a family atmosphere for the children residing there. The conversations with both subjects brought out several key aspects of a typical family: a general feeling of safety; close knit homes where members looked out and cared for one another (almost like siblings); preparation for life as an adult and encouragement from “parents”; a loving, open environment where the children felt comfortable talking to their parents; chores, and even being punished like in a typical home (cottage restriction). So, to answer the question of whether the CCHF actually succeeds in creating the family atmosphere they strive for, judging from the responses given by the two subjects, the answer appears to be yes.

In regard to the house parent turnover, you can code out several items from the observations made by our two subjects. The most prevalent (and mentioned by both participants) was the restrictions that CCHF is placing on them in regard to being able to help the kids in certain ways (monetary mentioned by both) and male parents not being able to be alone or have physical contact with female children. Low pay seems to be a factor as well because both subjects brought the topic up, so it is clear that the parents are talking about it to the extent the children can become aware. Stress levels placed on the parents by the children in their home are contributing to the turnover of house parents in some cases as well. There also seems to be a problem with the amount of staffing, as was also brought up by both subjects, which caused stress on current staff.

Certain stresses the parents are under are expected, such as unruly child behaviour. There may be potential solutions for others. When thinking about the low pay, you are probably not going to relieve the stress cause by the amount of pay for parents who are there for a paycheque first. We do see that there are parents who genuinely care about the kids and are there for the kids first. This motivation helps relieve this stress. Could this issue be reduced with a better screening process for the parents to make sure they are hiring house parents that are about the mission of the home more so than a paycheque?

The restrictions being placed on the parents as discussed by the two subjects appear to be excessive in the eyes of not only the children, but the parents too. Perhaps evaluating the restrictions with the input of the house parents could solve some of the issues because the house parents would have their voices heard and be part of the process. If adding new staff is not an option due to budget restrictions, then perhaps an evaluation of resource utilization may be necessary to maximize current workforce. These evaluations can be done by simply talking to lower level employees to find recurring themes of resource shortfalls and re-allocating some underutilized resources to those in need.

Consultant # 4: INterview with House Parents

We spoke to the wife while she and her husband were driving to visit their three kids and grandchild in Michigan. They have to be at least in their late 50s, obviously very established in their relationship. They were foster parents for 10 years. (Wonder if this is a qualification for house parents? Or is no experience necessary?). Grounded couple who obviously have experience and are more comfortable than most, I gather, in caring for kids from the “system.” [The wife] stated they wanted to move “somewhere warm” and found CCHF in the process. (Are all recruitments of house parents this haphazard?) The couple has been married for 33 years. Again, very established/trusting relationship that has built-in coping mechanisms for dealing with some of the stresses of this job.

The couple has worked as house parents at CCHF for two years and five months. (Her tone hints almost at pride at this fact. How long do house parents usually last?)

Their home is an all-boys cottage, with six to eight boys ranging from age 12 to 16. The longest they have had one of the boys is one year and six months. They are matched to the home by age, gender, and behavioural/emotional issues. (Is this the best method? A home full of physically and sexually abused boys doesn’t seem like an ideal situation.)

The wife indicated that the boys tend to run their mouths, indicating their propensity to instigate conflict. She also briefly mentioned that homosexual residents have been brought in. (With such varying degrees of hostility/behavioural issues/abuse/sexual abuse, is adding this additional dynamic safe for these homosexual youths [or for the others]? The wife’s voice indicated almost exasperation at the addition; it’s just another issue to add to the mounting pile.)

The boys go to regular schools—city of Deltona schools primarily. Time without the kids is spent doing paperwork, cleaning, grocery shopping (they seemed content with the on-campus setup), and going to appointments. In their free time, the parents like to go out to lunch, take mini road trips, and the like. (Seemingly modest lifestyle outside of work).

We spoke about the differences between their work as foster parents and as house parents at CCHF. As foster parents, you have to take on the responsibility of taking the child to therapy and such. You do not have the at-hand support CCHF provides.

**Support**: This came up frequently. They are very grateful for the amount of support they have, from other house parents and staff “right on campus.”

\*Code grey = other male house parents come in to control a situation with one of the boys.

**Structure**: Boys have after school schedule with study hour and two tutoring sessions a week, and a chore for the month. (The wife knew the history of CCHF. They understand its foundations and believe in what it is trying to do. However, she made an interesting comment: CCHF has been around for 108 years and it has its rules, “but rules can change because time changes.” Seems to be hinting that there are some changes that need to be made.)

She went on for a bit about how cell phones are negating the “no contact” rule the kids are supposed to have with their former families/parents. (“Former” sounds harsh but these no contact rules are usually court ordered.) (Seem to have a hard time containing this issue of technology. Again, times have changed; maybe some methods and processes need to catch up.)

**Relationship with Co-Workers**: Three boys’ cottages create a pod. House parents talk when kids are at recreation or therapy. They are together at movies, bonfires, and Bible study. They seem to have a good relationship with the other house parents. They go out to lunch together, and some attend the same church.

Our couple is not Methodists, but they are Christians. We asked about their relationship with management and support staff. Very positive, nothing negative came to mind. (Was she just being polite?) They also did not have any complaints about the Tuesday switch-over day with the other house parents.

During off weeks, they go on cruises, Universal theme park. They also “like driving.” (Seemingly not limited in doing what they want or like because of their income).

Did not explicitly ask how much they made but rather if they felt it was adequate given the stresses of the job. She hesitated a moment and we heard her husband speaking in the background. He has been making inaudible comments throughout the conversation but have not felt that she has been deferring to him though. She said that she feels life is manageable with the given income, it’s “doable,” ***if*** you think of it as a ministry. She said it is calming. (Calming?! It is exceedingly stressful, yet the thought of this as a ministry is calming to all of that stress. This couple is exactly the type of people CCHF seeks for this role. However, I feel that this ministry mentality is one that is difficult to maintain and recruit for.) [The wife] also stated that it helps if you look at it from the perspective that you only work half of a year.

She explicitly stated that the lifespan of a house parent is 18 months to two years. She also told us that that some couples left after just a week, others after three months. She said that, “it takes a special person to be a house parent. You have to have patience and understanding.” (With couples leaving after just a week, are they not given a realistic preview of the life and job they are taking on? How do you judge that they are that special type of person with the patience to basically survive the stresses these kids put them through? \*\*Is the given support enough?\*\*)

**Anger**: This was a word that kept coming up when describing the kids (specifically the boys. I wonder if the situation in the girls’ cottages are less physically demonstrative/violent). The boys frequently have outbursts. One threw a bicycle at the house parents’ vehicle, other objects in reach, etc. When they get into their negative behaviours—have a bad day as it were—they are “very angry.” The house parents have to know their quirks (which takes time and understanding) and know how to direct and divert that behaviour. (These outbursts and the emotional issues from some of these boys are quite overwhelming. Are these house parents truly being equipped and trained to deal with the emotional damage that enrages these boys?)

We asked what changes they felt they would like to see. The wife was very explicit in her response. She stated that some of the kids need a higher level of care (more counselling and such) than they as house parents can offer. The negative behaviours of some of the kids are affecting the other residents, perpetuating bad behaviours and creating more conflict. (In essence, some of the boys are toxic to the environment, to the point that the kids that can be saved are falling prey to the negative behaviours.)

She said they needed to be taking in less “angry, abusive kids.” “It’s a children’s home, we have a different mentality.” (\*\*I feel this is the crux of the issue, which was hinted at by the new president. The type of children CCHF took in for the majority of its history were not this emotionally damaged. When the wife says it’s a children’s home, she is implying that there is a certain environment such a title denotes. However, given the nature of some of the children, due to policies and such, CCHF is operating between two worlds: a nurturing home environment for children, and a therapy/rehabilitation facility for troubled and emotionally disturbed youths. Without adequate support, the home environment is not sustainable.)

**Support**: Again, we came back to support in the interview. The wife somewhat jokingly said that they would also like to have less paperwork. This led to the discovery that every cottage is supposed to have an assistant (paid, not volunteer) who helps with varying things. However, “CCHF goes through” these assistants frequently and so the house parents do not have access to their assistant on a regular basis because she gets “pulled” to help at other cottages. They really would prefer to have a constantly accessible assistant rather than face the uncertainty of whether or not they will have the support of their assistant on any given day.

So, several recurring themes arose from this interview, the first being support. With support there are varying types (other house parents, assistants, supervisors, and therapists), and different degrees of dependability. The lack of consistency with the assistants is something that should be addressed. While the wife indicated no issues with management, there is obviously some disconnect on the part of management between the perceived needs and reality of the house parents’ situation.

**Ministry**: If the house parents are working under this mentality—that this is a ministry rather than a job—the seemingly lower-end income is not a significant concern. However, operating under this guise is not usually a successful long-term employment strategy.

Thanks go to the author’s Master of Business Administration Organizational Behaviour class for assistance with data collection.