

Establishing Effective Hiring Practices

A Guide for Private
Child Welfare Agencies



State of Illinois
Department of Children and
Family Services

Richard H. Calica, Director
Denise Kane, Inspector General

The Importance of Effective Hiring Practices

Private agencies play a vital role in the continuing effort to address the many challenges facing children involved with the child welfare system in Illinois. In conjunction with the Department, private agencies help to achieve stability and security in the lives of the state's most vulnerable children.

In order to ensure the safe and effective delivery of services to these children and their parents, guardians and caretakers, agencies must operate with consistently high levels of professionalism and develop effective guidelines and policies regarding the hiring of prospective employees. A private agency supported by a strong foundation of professional standards is better able to provide valuable services to clients. The selection of staff members who will adhere to these standards is essential to maintaining an agency's effectiveness as a service provider.

Child Welfare Employee License (CWEL)

If a candidate is hired to provide or supervise direct child welfare services, the candidate must become licensed to provide direct child welfare services. Licensure must be verified, prior to assigning any direct service responsibilities including case assignment, through the Department's Division of Employee Licensure at (217)-785-5689. **Licensure is not a substitute for thorough evaluations of work and criminal histories.**

Evaluating prospective employees

Private agencies must be confident not only in the ability of the individuals who represent their organizations to perform the tasks required of their position, but also their compliance with the standards of character established by the Department. Agencies must develop personnel practices and hiring standards that support effective hiring policies, allowing agencies to be confident in the fitness of their new employees. Private agencies should be familiar with Department Rule 385 (Background Checks) prior to engaging in the hiring process. It is easier to develop personnel practices designed to ensure the hiring of viable employees than to address deficiencies after hire. The assessment of a candidate should include a thorough examination of their personal work history as well as a reasoned evaluation of any past criminal behavior.

Assessing Prior Work History

All previous employment can be considered relevant to the candidate's desired position. A prospective employee's work history can provide valuable insight into their ability to successfully perform the tasks required of the position they seek to fill. In addition, it can offer an opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the individual and provide a more balanced perspective of their suitability.

Employment timeline.

The candidate's most recent positions should offer the most pertinent information. Discuss their experiences in these jobs as well as the reasons behind their departures. Inquire about a pattern of frequent job changes or any extended gaps in the candidate's employment history. Since honesty is a critical element of child welfare practice, be careful to document all questions asked, as well as the answers provided, for future reference.

Obtain consents for release of information.

With the candidate's permission, private agencies may contact previous employers for assessments of past performance as well as confirmation of the candidate's stated reason for leaving. In order to ensure the cooperation of previous employers, candidates should be asked to sign statements releasing their previous employers from any liability for truthful information provided to the hiring private agency (DCFS Form CFS 717b can be utilized for this purpose). Information obtained from former employers should be carefully compared to the prospective employee's interview responses.

When checking references, be wary of unverified contact information. Agencies must independently verify the existence of any businesses or organizations cited and the roles of individuals identified as references. Local phone companies, civic business groups and other resources can be utilized to confirm the validity of references.

Private agencies should also anticipate requests from other organizations for information regarding former employees. In order to facilitate the process of honoring these requests, private agencies should direct their Human Resources staff to create a centralized repository of employee information including date of hire, job responsibilities, performance evaluations, date of leaving and the circumstances surrounding the

employee's departure. Employees should be required to direct all inquiries to the central repository.

Assessing Criminal History

All applicants must pass criminal background checks. Agencies may hire individuals who have not passed a background check, provided they have submitted their fingerprints to the Illinois State Police. Agencies should obtain written consents from candidates permitting law enforcement to release pertinent background information. If any convictions are discovered, the agency must assess the employee's suitability to retain the position. If the individual has a conviction that is barred under the Child Care Act, the employee must be terminated or shifted to a position that does not involve contact with children unless it is an offense for which a waiver can be secured.

Private agencies should conduct full and forthright discussions with candidates regarding any possible prior criminal convictions in addition to reviewing any written answers provided during the application process. Again, both questions and answers should be carefully documented for future reference.

Make sure all questions regarding criminal history are answered completely.

Any prior conviction, whether felony or misdemeanor, could be relevant to child welfare practice and should be fully explored. Application forms requiring written answers should be reviewed to ensure all questions have been answered and that any yes/no boxes have been checked. Failure to do so creates the potential basis for an argument from an employee that they simply overlooked a particular question. During interviews, questions should be direct and precise. Any answers affirming previous criminal convictions should be explored in their entirety. Some candidates with criminal backgrounds may disclose only a partial criminal history. If any criminal history is disclosed, the interviewer should ask the candidate if they have any other information regarding their criminal background to divulge and document the response.

Verify the candidate's statements.

If a candidate acknowledges a past conviction, their account of events should be corroborated with information from involved law enforcement. Arrest reports, court documents and other related materials should be obtained from relevant sources.

Assess the candidate's credibility.

It is possible a candidate could make a legitimate error in recounting their criminal history. Determine the likelihood of an honest omission by considering the severity of the crime reported and the amount of time that has passed since it occurred. Alternately, a candidate may provide only a partial criminal history or attempt to minimize actual events. Compare the account provided by the candidate with underlying information obtained from law enforcement and judiciary sources.

Obtaining Criminal History Information

If additional information regarding prior criminal arrests and convictions is required, the following resources may be utilized:

- Certified copies of court transcripts, docket sheets and case dispositions can be obtained from the Clerk of the County Circuit Court where offenses occurred.
- A check of the archives of the Clerk of the County Circuit Court where offenses occurred may produce other relevant information.
- Certified copies of law enforcement reports delineating the circumstances leading up to and the events of an arrest can be acquired from the arresting agency.

The evaluation and selection of prospective employees is not a foolproof endeavor. There are numerous reasons why the hiring of an individual may later prove to be unsuccessful. However, instituting a framework of hiring policies designed to obtain the most complete possible insight into a candidate's past behavior and present character can reduce the inherent risks. In doing so, private child welfare agencies can continue to cultivate professionalism within their organizations, uphold the public trust and maintain a safe environment for the children of Illinois.