

# Title IV-E University-Agency Partnership Stipend Programs: Building a Better Workforce

State and Tribal title IV-E agencies have access to Federal funds through title IV-E of the Social Security Act to apply toward the educational training of current and prospective child welfare professionals to support the provision of allowable title IV-E activities for title IV-E eligible children. To administer these funds, child welfare agencies have partnered with universities to offer social work or degree programs with specialized training, placements, and financial incentives to build and strengthen the child welfare workforce. These training programs, commonly called "stipend programs," have become vital in promoting child welfare workforce development.<sup>1</sup> They have been shown to improve child welfare professionals' recruitment, retention, and preparedness.

<sup>1</sup> In this publication, the word "stipend" is used broadly rather than per the definition of the term in [45 CFR 235.61](#) ("basic living allowance paid to a student").

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This issue brief provides a comprehensive look at the history and status of title IV-E stipend programs. It includes an overview of their administration and structure, a review of research and known outcomes, and intersections with related contemporary topics.

## **WHAT ARE TITLE IV-E STIPEND PROGRAMS?**

One purpose of title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which was established under the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, is to make Federal matching funding available to State and Tribal title IV-E agencies as reimbursement for expenditures on the development and provision of educational training programs that cover allowable title-IV E activities. To administer these funds, title IV-E agencies partner with universities to offer degree-granting child welfare training programs. These academic programs are nearly universally required in social work, but that is not a requirement of the Federal program. Although specific formats vary, these stipend programs provide a variety of academic benefits and financial supports to incentivize current child welfare agency staff to pursue education in child welfare and to encourage prospective professionals to enter child welfare with a relevant degree.

Students in stipend programs can access enhanced social work curricula and specialized training in child welfare topics. This may include coursework in innovative approaches to child welfare practice, access to professional seminars and symposia, or advanced training. Internships or placements with mentorship opportunities at county, State, or Tribal child welfare agencies are often included or required.

Financial assistance is most often offered as stipends that can be used to cover part or all of the tuition for the degree being pursued. Some programs provide compensation or reimbursement for expenses like books, travel, fees, and other costs.

In exchange for receiving financial support, stipend program participants enter a work obligation or "payback period" contract—an agreement to seek and obtain employment within an affiliated public child welfare agency upon graduation and remain employed there for a specified period, typically equal to the period for which they received the financial support. Given an agency's interest in hiring well-qualified and specially trained social work graduates, this hiring process may be expedited or otherwise supported through workforce pipelines. Repayments are arranged for students who do not or cannot fulfill their agreements. The hiring emphasis for stipend programs often is for permanency program positions. However, with the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act and its focus on prevention, some States, such as Virginia, have expanded eligible positions for payback to include prevention and in-home services. However, the training costs for those students are matched at the administrative costs rate rather than the training expenditure rate. (See Structure and Funding of University-Agency Partnerships and Title IV-E Stipend Programs in this publication for more information about matching rates.)

The central goal of many stipend programs is to increase the professionalization of the child welfare workforce through enhanced learning and increased bachelor of social work (B.S.W.) and master of social work (M.S.W.) credentialing rates. Stipend programs

also have the potential to increase workforce retention rates (de Guzman et al., 2022) and improve caseworker preparedness (de Guzman et al., 2022).

As of July 2024, 38 States had active title IV-E stipend programs (Cheung, 2024). Researchers at the University of Houston maintain a matrix of States with active university-agency partnerships that details each State's eligibility requirements, the particulars of B.S.W. or M.S.W. stipends, payback specifications, and more. To see this snapshot, refer to [National Survey of IV-E Stipends & Paybacks](#).

For a complete history of title IV-E stipend program development and early implementation, see "[The Use of Title IV-E Training Funds for Social Work Education: An Historical Perspective](#)."

### **Title IV-E Stipend Programs and Tribes**

Due to a variety of legal, social, geographical, and bureaucratic complexities, Tribes face unique challenges in establishing, operating, and integrating with title IV-E stipend programs. To be eligible to receive title IV-E training funding, a Tribe must directly administer a title IV-E plan. Nonetheless, some title IV-E stipend programs and program consortia include work in a Tribal child welfare setting as an option for fulfilling their payback requirement. (For an example, read about the [Minnesota Title IV-E Consortium](#).) For more information on Tribes and title IV-E, see the [Title IV-B and Title IV-E webpage](#) on the Tribal Information Exchange.

### **STRUCTURE AND FUNDING OF UNIVERSITY-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS AND TITLE IV-E STIPEND PROGRAMS**

The particular structure of individual stipend programs and the university-agency partnerships that support them can vary widely. Variations in stipend program implementation can include the following (Zlotnik, 2003; Zlotnik et al., 2005):

- Administrative structures
- Design of their educational programs
- Division of responsibilities within partnerships
- Funding pathways
- Types of financial assistance offered at the university level

University-agency partnerships are most often structured in one of two ways (E. Smith, personal communication, August 1, 2024):

- As partnerships between State or Tribal public child welfare agencies and single universities
- As partnerships between State or Tribal agencies and a consortium of multiple universities wherein one university manages the administration of subcontracts with the other partnered universities

Universities are responsible for providing stipends and other forms of financial assistance, which are ultimately reimbursed by the State or Tribal child welfare agency.

Eligible and approved expenditures at the State or Tribal level are then reimbursed through the title IV-E funding stream, which provides either a 75 percent or 50 percent match for eligible training expenditures and a 50 percent match for eligible expenses related

to the administration of these programs.<sup>2</sup> These match rates are determined by the topic of training offered. The reimbursement calculation must also take into account the penetration rate of the State or Tribe. (The term "penetration rate," also called the coverage rate or title IV-E ratio, refers to the percentage of children in placement within a jurisdiction who are eligible for title IV-E program services. For more information about its use, see [Title IV-E Ratio](#) by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.) The State or Tribal agencies or a public university provide the non-Federal match portion of the expenditures. Universities often provide the required match through faculty, overhead, and curriculum development expenditures. Guidance on allowable costs for program design and administration can be obtained from the [Child Welfare Policy Manual](#) and by contacting the Children's Bureau's [Regional Offices](#).

### Penetration Rate Example

Here's an example of how a penetration rate works. Suppose a State's penetration rate is 45 percent, and they have eligible training expenditures of \$500,000 that qualify for the 50 percent match rate. In that case, the Federal reimbursement is calculated by multiplying the eligible expenditures (\$500,000) by the penetration rate (45 percent) and then by the match rate (50 percent), for a Federal reimbursement of \$112,500.

## APPLYING FOR PROGRAMS

The application process generally requires an application, essays, and reference letters. Interviews—often conducted jointly by university faculty and staff from the affiliated public child welfare agency—are commonplace. Additionally, students may be asked to assert that they are eligible for employment in a child welfare setting (e.g., they do not have a criminal history or child welfare finding that could bar them from such a position) and that they are willing and able to do so.

## THE NEED FOR TITLE IV-E STIPEND PROGRAMS

Child welfare agencies have been facing workforce challenges on multiple interconnected fronts for decades. High turnover, low retention, recruitment difficulties, and deprofessionalization have been persistent. These issues have measurable costs to agencies and child welfare professionals and lead to problematic service outcomes for children and families. To understand the aims of title IV-E university-agency partnerships and their efficacy in addressing these concerns, it is important to examine the environment from which the partnerships emerged.

## ADDRESS WORKFORCE TURNOVER, RETENTION, AND RECRUITMENT

Workforce turnover in public child welfare agencies is an erosive problem that comes with financial and administrative costs to agencies and States or Tribes, a host of negative impacts for child welfare

<sup>2</sup> All title IV-E and IV-B training activities and costs, including the provision of any trainee stipends, must be identified in the State's training plan, as required by Federal regulations at 45 CFR [1356.60\(b\)\(2\)](#) and [1357.15\(t\)](#). The training plan must be submitted annually with either the 5-year Children and Family Services Plan (CFSP) or the Annual Services and Progress Report.

professionals, and poor outcomes for children and families (Leung et al., 2021; Zlotnik & Pryce, 2013). National turnover rates in child welfare have been estimated at 30 percent to 40 percent annually (Lin et al., 2016), with some individual agencies reporting upwards of 85 percent (Carr et al., 2019). Turnover also affects the remaining employees, generating unrealistic expectations, increased workloads, burnout, and further turnover (Trujillo et al., 2020).

The effective recruitment of well-qualified prospective child welfare professionals is a critical step in strengthening the child welfare workforce, but has long been a challenge for agencies (Casey Family Programs, 2023). There is a shortage of staff who can provide quality practice, and the work demands, low pay, and other factors make recruitment difficult (Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development, 2022).

## DEPROFESSIONALIZATION

Deprofessionalization is the overall reduction in child welfare employees' minimum education and educational requirements. Workers with a B.S.W. or M.S.W. have been shown to have higher levels of practice readiness compared with workers who do not have a social work degree (Ahn et al., 2016) and help promote better outcomes for children and families (Leung et al., 2021).

## OUTCOMES FOR CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

Title IV-E stipend programs come with a range of benefits for recipients, including improved recruitment, turnover, and retention; a professionalized workforce; and enhanced career advancement opportunities.

## WORKFORCE RECRUITMENT

There is widespread agreement in the literature that university-agency partnership training programs like stipend programs improve recruitment efforts (Barbee et al., 2018; Newell & Bounds, 2020). Stipend programs have been shown to boost recruitment efforts in the following ways:

- By offering financial incentives in the form of stipends and other monetary assistance (Trujillo et al., 2018)
- Through careful vetting of candidates who possess retention-associated traits (Barbee et al., 2018; Zlotnik et al., 2005)

Using distance learning technologies and modalities (e.g., asynchronous teaching, noncontinuous semesters, part-time programs) may allow stipend programs to recruit from broader workforce and student populations than traditional approaches, including residents of rural areas, itinerant military service members, Tribal members, persons with difficult time commitments, persons lacking physical access to places of education, and people with disabilities (Morris et al., 2013; Trujillo et al., 2018). This allows individuals in remote or underserved areas to participate in title IV-E training programs without the need to relocate during or after their education (Trujillo et al., 2018).

Many universities offer robust distance learning programs with title IV-E stipend program integration. For examples of these programs and their development, successes, and challenges, see the following:

- ["The Future of Online Social Work Education and Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipends,"](#) a case study of the [Colorado Child Welfare Scholars Consortium](#)



- ["The Pathway Program: A Collaboration Between 3 Universities to Deliver a Social Work Distance Education \(DL\) Program to Underserved Areas of California," an article about California's Pathway Program](#)

## WORKFORCE TURNOVER AND RETENTION

Direct comparisons between cohorts of title IV-E stipend program participants and nonparticipants are uncommon in the literature. Still, the majority of existing studies conclude that stipend programs are effective in increasing retention (Barbee et al., 2018). Stipend program participants are likely to stay through their work obligation period and are also more likely to remain employed at their agencies longer than nonparticipants (Madden et al., 2014).

Though the bulk of the research on title IV-E programs supports the idea that the programs produce favorable results for retention, this consensus contains some mixed results. Three studies have shown possession of an M.S.W. to be associated with lower retention (Carr et al., 2019; Hopkins et al., 2010; Yankeelov et al., 2009); however, in two of those studies, participation in a title IV-E stipend program was shown to mitigate those results (Carr et al., 2019; Yankeelov et al., 2009).

For an in-depth look at data on retention, read ["Hot Topic: Title IV-E MSW Education and 'Intent to Stay' in Public Child Welfare."](#)

## DEPROFESSIONALIZATION

Some studies suggest that stipend programs have helped curtail deprofessionalization. In the former California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) system, once the largest stipend consortium in the nation, the

percentage of those holding an M.S.W. in the workforce nearly doubled from 21 percent in 1990—the founding year of the CalSWEC partnerships—to 41 percent as of a 2013 report (Mathias et al., 2015).

## INCREASED SKILLS

While the volume of research that assesses the skills and preparedness of title IV-E stipend program graduates is not expansive, the results are consistent: participants in stipend programs have been shown to outperform their nonstipend counterparts in a number of areas, such as gains in knowledge, applied knowledge, best practice implementation, visitation frequency, and confidence in their abilities (Bagdasaryan, 2012; Barbee et al., 2009; Barbee et al., 2018). In one study, B.S.W. graduates of stipend programs rated themselves as being better prepared when compared with the ratings of their traditionally trained coworkers (Slater et al., 2018), and child welfare professionals with an M.S.W. and title IV-E training scored higher on evaluation tests than M.S.W. holders without such training (Bagdasaryan, 2012).

## CAREER PATHWAYS AND ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Communicating potential career pathways and providing advancement opportunities to current and prospective social work professionals is an essential part of child welfare workforce development. Creating and raising awareness of these pathways may help promote retention among stipend recipients (Clark et al., 2013), mitigate turnover (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009), and integrate updated practices into the workforce (Falk, 2020).

By offering the possibility of continuing education and advanced degrees to currently employed social work professionals, title IV-E stipend programs provide built-in career advancement pathways for their participants. Furthermore, graduates of stipend programs tend to be employed directly following graduation (Zlotnik & Pryce, 2013) and tend to be promoted to higher positions in child welfare agencies more frequently than those without title IV-E stipend training (Piescher et al., 2018).

## OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Research has shown that child welfare professionals with social work degrees are associated with better child and family outcomes, particularly regarding permanency efforts (Leung & Willis, 2012). Advanced degrees have also provided benefits: a study of over 5,000 children in the foster care system concluded that those who had caseworkers with an M.S.W. experienced a significantly reduced length of stay by over 5 months compared with other caseworkers (Ryan et al., 2006). As a catalyst for providing these degrees, title IV-E stipend programs can help improve outcomes for children and families engaged by the child welfare system.

The specialized training provided by title IV-E stipend programs also results in better outcomes for children and families (LaBrenz et al., 2023):

- Compared with caseworkers who did not participate in a title IV-E stipend program, caseworkers with title IV-E stipend program experience had a higher percentage of family reunifications within 1 year, an overall reduction in the length of

time to reunification, and a reduction in the length of time to achieve adoption (Leung & Willis, 2012).

- Graduates of a title IV-E stipend program in Kentucky were significantly more likely than other child welfare professionals to use several best practices with children and families, such as visiting children more regularly, placing more children with relatives, and completing more adoptions (Barbee et al., 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Over the past 40 years, title IV-E stipend programs have emerged as an invaluable tool in child welfare workforce development. In providing enhanced training, financial assistance, and employment pipelines for thousands of child welfare professionals, these programs have positively impacted workforce retention, preparedness, and professionalization. The university-agency partnerships formed to administer title IV-E stipend programs bring additional benefits to their constituents through increased stability, communication, and cooperation. Additionally, title IV-E stipend programs have been shown to produce positive outcomes on permanency measures, and graduates of the programs have demonstrated a more excellent application of best practices in their work with children and families.

To best support the workforce, child welfare systems, including partner universities, should continue seeking ways to enhance the implementation and evaluation of stipend programs in conjunction with other workforce improvement efforts, such as increased salaries and reduced caseload sizes.

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