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Social welfare officers' perceptions of family reunification services in Lusaka, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Zambia held its first national consultation on the 'Children's Care Reform' in Lusaka on the 6th of May 2016. The aim of this consultation was to deliberate on issues affecting children without appropriate care, as well as to devise strategies for accelerating the National Child Care Reform process. A Call to Action was drafted on the Child Care Reform process after this consultative meeting. Key among the issues to be addressed was strengthening the capacity of the social welfare workforce to be able to meet the current and increasing needs of children, families and communities where children are unnecessarily separated from their families. Rendering effective services to vulnerable children placed in alternative care arrangements, such as child care facilities was highlighted. For many children who have been placed in alternative care, family reunification is usually possible if effective social welfare services are rendered by social workers and other social welfare officers. The aim of this study was to explore perceptions of district and senior social welfare officers in regard to rendering effective family reunification services to children in alternative care. A qualitative research approach was selected to study the complex phenomenon of family reunification within the context of the Social Welfare Department and Ministry of Community Development and Social Services in Lusaka. Non-probability, purposive sampling was applied through which 18 study participants who met the inclusion criteria, namely district and senior social welfare officers took part in the study. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data using an interview guide as a research tool. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data which was collected during this study. Findings of the study indicate that social welfare officers faced many challenges related to rendering professional family reunification services. For those services to be rendered in a professional manner and based on the best interests of the child principle; adequate funding and staff is required; knowledge and skills have to be improved to enable the social welfare officers to address the complex and unique needs of children and their families in a child welfare system that is undergoing a reform.

KEY WORDS: Social welfare officers; alternative care, social development; child care facility, family reintegration family reunification services.