

It Takes A Village: Fine-Tuning Cross-Agency Collaborative Efforts

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From: Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre in Singapore

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OBJECTIVE

Examine Big Love's efforts to work with community partners to discover challenges and recommendations.

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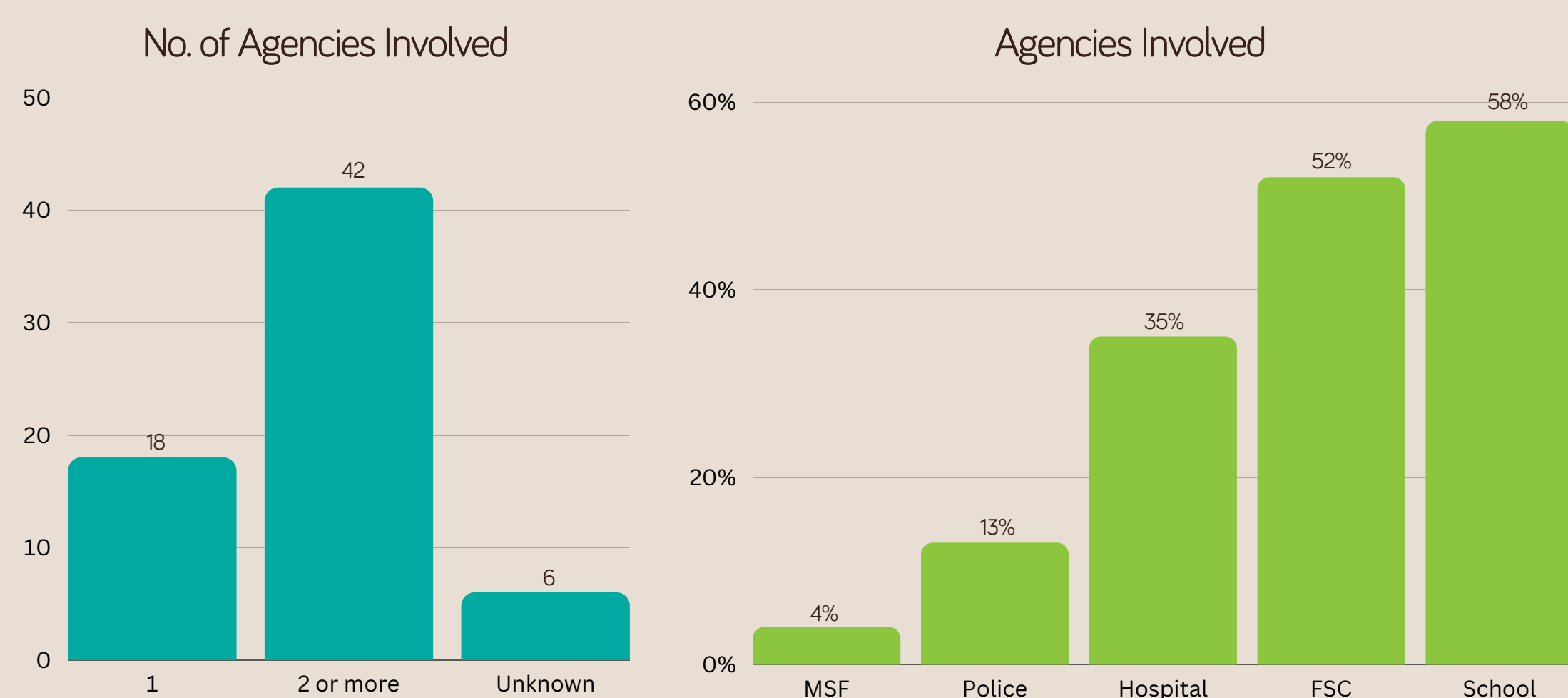
INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre (Big Love) is a community-based non-profit agency that seeks to address child protection concerns within the community by working closely with families to improve their functioning and resilience. Big Love's efforts to collaborate across agencies can influence the effectiveness in responding to and preventing child abuse and/or neglect. It is thus important to identify the challenges in working with and within systems as well as the factors that mitigate the challenges (Prince & Austin, 2007). Data from Big Love with regards to Workers' experience and feedback regarding casework practice of families known to Big Love during April 2018 to March 2021 was used. Qualitative content analysis was then used to analyze the data to inform of the different areas of learnings and possible recommendations.

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METHODOLOGY

153 households were chosen due to the perceived level of risk and complexity. A random selection of 66 out of the 153 households, where statutory intervention had to eventually takeover, were chosen for discussion with 22 Social/Case Workers from Big Love. These Workers were interviewed over a period of four months, excluding those who conducted the research. These Workers were also of varying levels of experience. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was carried out on the collected quantitative data to analyze Workers' experiences in collaborating with other agencies.



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CHALLENGES

From this study, we found 3 challenges that needed to be attended to and mitigated. The three challenges were:

- Staff turnover rate across and within agencies,
- Families with multiple agencies involved, and
- Agencies having differing assessments

It is common to find that in the field of child protection work/helping services, there "continues to be a high staff turnover in the child protection service" (Scott, 1993). Thus, the handover processes in Big Love and other agencies need to be fine-tuned to prevent the history and knowledge of families from being lost. As a result, the new worker will have to build their rapport with the family from the ground up and also have to re-visit the information that the family may have already shared with the previous worker. This can cause families to feel unheard and disgruntled at having to re-live their past traumas.

The next challenge is having multiple agencies involved in one family (Scott, 1993). The saying "too many cooks spoil the broth" can be applied here. The families, that eventually had to involve statutory intervention, had community support. However, with the involvement of various agencies, each agency's role may have overlapped at times, resulting in uncertainty between agencies and with families. Moreover, families' past relationships/experiences with other agencies may not always be favourable. Thus, this may affect the families' attitudes towards Big Love's involvement, making it tougher to get their voluntary involvement in working collaboratively with Big Love. Overall, the receptivity of these families towards Big Love's intervention may then be impeded.

*"Ok so this case was a case that was pushed around as well" - W3
"even though they were very well-known to the systems, they've never ever been engageable from the start" - W6*

*"I don't want this [agency's] worker lah, no, I don't like him, he made things worse in my family"
- Family reported to W10*

As there are multiple agencies involved, there could be differences in assessments due to the varying goals and tools that are used to assess the family. Hence, there may be diverging ideas regarding the risk levels of the family as well as the required interventions (Sitshange, 2014).

*"But our lens and our agenda is very different I guess" - W1
"they weren't coming in as urgently" - W6*

"Yeah, she kept saying that, oh, the boy actually in school is fine. Then they say the bruises or cane marks is... he is... old scars. Yeah. So... very difficult to get them involved lah." - W12

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RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has also yielded recommendations that can help with the mitigating of our challenges.

- Having supervisory support,
- Having a clear case transfer process
- Providing role clarity amongst multiple agencies, and
- Having a consensus in case assessment.

Having good supervisory support can help workers feel heard and understood in the job that they do. They have shared that they would like this support to be continued in whatever form or way. They feel assured in taking the necessary steps in their case work with the backing of the team in Big Love.

*"I mean I texted her I also asked her stuff. Mmmm So is just guiding through" - W3
"So I think with the help of discussions like with the supervisor and everything it does help set your mind straight of what you need to do" - W11
"the support system in here really helps, plays a big part" - W13*

The support can be enhanced by supplementing workers with a step-by-step guide on what needs to be done for certain types of child abuse cases. This will help new workers understand and be clear on the case management processes that they will have to carry out.

To sharpen the handover processes internally, both the previous and new workers should be encouraged to have more than one joint sessions with the family. This will give the family and the newly assigned worker more opportunities to get to know one another better. This would ease the new worker into the case and help the family receive intervention in a timely manner.

Macvean, Humphreys & Healey (2018) mention that clearer communication between agencies should be fostered. Moving forward Big Love/other agencies should be encouraged to send workers for trainings on how to conduct case conferences. Moreover, having experienced workers facilitate case conferences with new workers will allow the new workers to experience and learn from these experienced workers on how to facilitate case conferences.

An additional way to boost new worker's confidence in collaborating with other agencies would be to prepare them for case conferences. Case conference trainings can be conducted along with an experienced worker to assist with the facilitation of these conferences. This will help new workers gain a better understanding on how they are to navigate communicating with other agencies from Big Love's stance (Macvean, Humphreys & Healey, 2018).

To gain consensus in case assessments all workers involved in the family should have consistent and timely inter-agency debriefs (Herbert et al., 2021 & Sitshange, 2014). This allows all agencies to be on the same level of understanding as to how the family is progressing and the different roles of each agency. At the end of Big Love's intervention, having a closure session with the other agencies will be beneficial for the exchange of information related to the family's progress and needs. This will ensure that all the other agencies are on the same page with regards to the family once Big Love ends intervention.

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