



STRATEGY BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How does New Jersey **maintain a stable child welfare workforce?**

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) believes that its workforce is crucial to achieving the vision that all New Jersey residents are safe, healthy, and connected. Staff that have both necessary skills (such as assessing risk and safety) and critical values (such as the urgency of keeping children with their families and connected with their communities) are essential to an effective child well-being system.

Recruiting and retaining staff with the competencies necessary for quality practice with children and families is challenging for most agencies across the country. Annual [child welfare turnover rates](#) have averaged between 20% and 40% over the past 15 years. In New Jersey, however, DCF's Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP) has maintained a turnover rate between 6% and 10% since 2006.¹

This is a result of strategic activities, including the adoption of a new [case practice model](#) and implementation of a set of comprehensive workforce development policies. Across all categories of child welfare staff and supervisors, the vacancy rate is consistently less than 2.5%. Among caseload carrying staff, the turnover rate in the state was 4.3% in 2020, compared to 14.7% in 2005. Only 114 out of over 2,500 caseload carrying staff left DCPP in 2020, a clear indicator that New Jersey's child protection workforce remains stable.



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DCPP leadership understands the interrelationship between caseworker contentment, a stable workforce, and child and family well-being. Over the last 15 years, DCF leaders have demonstrated how highly they value their workforce by implementing a comprehensive set of strategies to support the DCPP staff's professional satisfaction. Middle managers have maintained this commitment and provided consistent leadership despite changes at both the commissioner and governor levels.

The six key strategies DCF has implemented to support its workforce include:

- Positive organizational culture and peer support, including the creation of a department-wide Office of Staff Health and Wellness.
- Concrete resources, such as manageable caseloads, salary, benefits, and equipment.
- Opportunities for education, training, and professional development.
- Deliberate recruitment and selection processes.
- Connecting to community.
- Communication and transparency.

Organizational culture and peer support

DCF has placed a high priority on organizational support for workforce development and wellness. In 2019, DCF created a commissioner-level office focused on workforce development and well-being: the Office of Staff Health and Wellness. Understanding that staff working in fields such as child protection, behavioral health, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence are at high risk of experiencing vicarious trauma, DCF focuses on health and wellness to ensure that staff are working in environments that set them up to succeed in engaging with children, youth, and families.

[DCF's 2019-2021 Strategic Plan](#) recognizes that family is the agency's primary focus — including the family of staff — and establishes staff health and wellness as one of the agency's four major priorities to achieve DCF's transformational goals. Core approaches to support both staff and the families they serve include race

equity, healing centered practice, collaborative safety, family voice, and the protective factors framework.

Child protection work can be intense and emotionally taxing. DCF responded to this reality by creating the [Worker2Worker](#) program in 2013 to provide support to the workforce through a confidential peer-counseling helpline and help staff cope with the everyday challenges of frontline child welfare practice. The peers who work in the program are retired employees with extensive experience in the agency and knowledge in how to address common stressors of the job. A psychologist leads the Worker2Worker team, which provides real-time mental health support and connects caseworkers to therapeutic supports. This program provides a place for staff to seek assistance outside of their supervisory structure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Worker2Worker also hosted an eight-part wellness webinar series that addressed social, emotional, financial, and environmental stressors, among others.

[Worker2Worker](#) is designed to support staff with challenges such as managing the workload, maintaining work-life balance, and dealing with transference, countertransference, and secondary trauma. Crisis debriefings also are offered for teams that have lost staff members or are experiencing crisis in their personal lives. Since its inception, Worker2Worker has had more than 50,000 contacts with staff.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency also provided robust support to staff, including the creation of volunteer COVID-19 Impact Teams. Staff who volunteered to be part of a COVID-19 Impact Team conducted all in-person case activities during the first months of the pandemic, so that caseworkers who were uncomfortable with in-person contact were relieved of that responsibility. DCF launched a comprehensive [COVID-19 online resource page for staff](#) to facilitate communication and support resiliency for those working from home. The department also created a [Mindfulness webpage](#) as a resource for staff to engage in meditative activities promoting self-health and wellness.

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Concrete resources

In 2006, DCF identified a critical need for more caseworkers and created new positions. Since then, the agency has been steadily working to reduce caseloads so that staff have manageable workloads and can spend more time with the youth and families they are serving. In 2020, almost 100% of caseload-carrying staff were meeting DCF's caseload standards:

- For intake staff: No more than eight new intakes a month, no more than 12 primary families, and no more than 14 total families.
- For permanency staff: No more than 15 families and 10 children in placement.
- For adoption staff: No more than 15 children.

Supervisory ratios are similarly reasonable so that managers can effectively guide and support staff with the level of oversight needed to ensure high quality practice. On average, supervisors are responsible for five caseworkers. In 2020, the supervisor-to-worker ratio compliance was 100%.

Each of the nine DCPD area offices also has an Impact Team to assist in maintaining caseload standards by taking any overflow of investigations when intakes are unusually high. Impact Teams are able to respond quickly to new referrals and assume caseloads from staff that, for example, have taken emergency leave, ensuring no break in service delivery and no increase in workload for existing staff.

The department also has addressed pay and benefits in order to demonstrate how highly staff are valued. The agency's benefit package includes investment in the state pension, opportunities to contribute to a deferred compensation savings program, day-care center supports, and more. Staff also benefit from the state's Employee Discount Program, which offers discounts for movie passes, sporting events, Broadway shows, and other activities and items. In addition, DCPD caseworker salaries are competitive and account for the cost of living in the state. For example, a family service specialist trainee (entry-level caseworker) receives an annual salary of \$52,278, which is increased to \$54,684 at six months on the job. Annual and promotional salary increases are built into the position such that, with

It is estimated that every time a caseworker leaves, the [cost to a child welfare agency](#) is 30% to 200% of the exiting employee's annual salary.

longevity, a caseworker could earn over \$70,000 per year, providing incentive to remain with the agency.

Other concrete supports include laptops, access to state vehicles, and smartphones. DCF also holds an annual employee recognition event for staff and their families.

Training and professional development

In addition to a rigorous orientation and pre-service training, DCF utilizes [Field Training Units](#), which provide new caseworkers with a learning cohort and other structured supports to ease their entry into the workforce. In addition to teaching the skills needed for the job, the onboarding process includes development of coping skills so that they can gradually assume a full caseload without experiencing high levels of stress and burnout. This initial investment of support sets up new staff to be successful from their first days on the job.

Child welfare staff are more likely to stay if they have opportunities to build their knowledge and advance their career paths. New Jersey DCF caseworkers and supervisors have many opportunities for professional growth and are required to attend 40 hours of professional development training per year. The [New Jersey Child Welfare Training Partnership](#) (NJCWTP) through Rutgers University and DCF's Office of Training and Professional Development (OTPD) provide all training. Established in 2007, this partnership provides a comprehensive menu of offerings for new worker, pre-service, foundational, and elective training, all with an aim to connect learning with improved practice and better outcomes for children and families. For example, NJCWTP's Youth Thrive training, which includes a trainer with lived experience in child welfare, highlights the unique needs of adolescents in care, including their need for permanency.

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DCF also has invested in building capacity at both the local office manager and supervisory levels to help them manage staff and effectively lead without being overly directive or punitive. For example, DCF in 2019 trained supervisors in Leading a Multi-generational Workforce to help them understand the unique strengths that millennials bring to an organization and the role supervisors can play in setting them up for success.

In January 2020, DCF launched one of its core strategies, Collaborative Safety, which incorporates the type of safety science used in aviation and healthcare to prevent adverse events and learn from critical incidents. This process helps build a culture of safety within DCF for staff as well as the families served. In the past, the process of inquiry following a critical incident felt full of blame and shame. Caseworkers and supervisors felt targeted or attacked, which resulted in mistrust and low morale among staff. The Collaborative Safety model creates an inquiry process that allows for a full-circle review of the incident, including any organizational or systemic barriers that may have impacted staff decision-making around a specific case.

DCF also gives supervisors the opportunity to enroll in a [Masters Child Welfare Education Program](#) to strengthen their skills in clinical social work practice and supervision, and obtain a Masters in Social Work.

Recruitment and selection

Recruitment

DCF maintains a proactive recruitment process to quickly fill open positions with the most qualified, committed applicants. DCF's Office of Human Resources created a Dedicated Recruitment Unit, which has a stated goal to make employment at DCF a "job of choice." The unit's efforts result in the receipt of 1,000 resumes each month for caseworker positions. The agency's multi-pronged approach includes a permanent job posting on the New Jersey DCF website, along with social media announcements, posting on various job boards, and recruiting from colleges and universities. For example, the [Baccalaureate Child Welfare Education Program \(BCWEP\)](#), established in 2004, is a consortium of undergraduate social work programs that work with DCF to enhance recruitment

and retention for caseworkers in public child welfare. Up to 30 caseworkers are hired through the BCWEP each year.

To achieve its goal of maintaining a diverse workforce that reflects the communities that the agency serves, DCF tracks the demographics of staff as well as families served. In general, the race and ethnicity of child welfare staff are reflective of the children and families they serve. At times, DCF identifies a need for individuals with specific areas of expertise in order to meet the needs of families. When seeking bilingual candidates, for example, job postings are placed in bilingual newspapers as well as shared through networks of organizations that serve those specific communities. When more male staff were needed to address challenges with fatherhood engagement, the agency specifically recruited for male candidates. In addition, individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system regularly are hired to caseworker and other positions throughout DCF. They are recruited through local colleges and DCF's Youth Council, which is comprised of young people who have lived experience with DCF programs.

As a result of DCF's retention and recruitment efforts, the agency receives **1,000 applications a month** for approximately **350 caseworker openings a year**.

Selection

Selecting the right person for the right job at the right time is a difficult process. New Jersey's methods ensure that there are always more than enough highly qualified candidates to fill open positions.

DCF uses "Job Fests" to narrow down the pool of applicants. Job Fests started as statewide events, but recently evolved to a county-based process. Up to 30 candidates are invited to each local Job Fest. Invited applicants are selected from the larger pool of candidates, typically ranked by degree with MSW graduates being the top choice, then BSW graduates with child welfare experience, followed by BSW

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graduates with no experience, and then individuals from related professions such as human services or psychology.

Candidates spend approximately three hours at a Job Fest, during which they submit paperwork (proof of degree, references, resume, etc.) and attend a realistic job preview with local staff. Candidates who decide to move forward must submit a writing sample and participate in an additional interview with two agency representatives from different offices.

Once the interview is complete, the candidate leaves and the interview is scored. This score is combined with the writing sample score and the top candidates are placed on a matrix that includes up to 150 people who successfully have completed a Job Fest in that county in the last 18 months. When an office has a vacancy, 10 candidates from the matrix are invited to attend a final interview. Although candidates were previously interviewed at the Job Fest and deemed appropriate, this additional interview provides the agency with the opportunity to find the best person to fill an opening on a specific team.

The selection process is set up so that applicants have a clear understanding of the role they will be filling and hiring managers have an understanding of both the skills and values that applicants would bring with them into the position. The local office staff who serve as interviewers attend extensive training with DCF Human Resources to prepare for this role. Training includes guidance on how to follow the interview script,

what follow-up questions to ask, how to respond to candidates' questions, and how to interact with the candidates.

Community connections

All employees want to feel pride in the work they do and the organization they work for, and public perceptions of child welfare work often impact caseworkers' job satisfaction and intent to stay.³ Building mutual respect between the agency and communities is one way to ensure staff feel confident, valued and supported. At New Jersey DCF, building strong relationships at the organizational level has facilitated positive relationships at the staff level, as well as positive perceptions of staff in general. Both of these are factors that enhance workforce retention.

Fifteen years ago, DCF had a very strained relationship with community stakeholders and providers. These relationships have been strengthened as the case practice model evolved and the agency advanced a collaborative approach with the public. Stakeholder feedback has been key in identifying unanticipated consequences of change efforts and figuring out how to move forward together. For example, DCF includes community stakeholders at the beginning of exploring or planning all new initiatives. When the department embarked on solution-based casework, community members participated in subcommittees to inform on potential impacts of this change and how it might alter relationships with families. The DCF commissioner also hosts regular forums with providers to talk about new



How do some child protection agencies approach coaching?

initiatives, changes to current programs, and ideas for collaboration.

Improving relationships with individuals with lived experience in child welfare has been another area of growth for the agency. [DCF's Office of Family Voice](#) serves as the liaison to families, youth, and other stakeholders, and facilitates opportunities for formal feedback that informs policy and guides system transformation. In 2020, the office created the [Wisdom Council](#) to elevate the voice of parents who have received services from DCP.

Communication and transparency

Workplace culture can be a significant factor in an employee's decision to stay or leave an organization. Building a culture of transparency and support within a child welfare agency requires open lines of communication between leadership and staff. At New Jersey DCF, frontline staff and supervisors have

direct lines of communication with leadership as well as forums for group communication. During the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership realized that even more communication was needed to manage the crisis and help all levels of staff understand how issues were being addressed and how to access supports. As a result, the commissioner has held weekly all-staff virtual meetings to provide real-time, tangible information to staff and address their concerns directly.

DCF's [Office of Advocacy](#) also is available to support frontline staff. The office investigates staff questions and concerns about practice or policy, and must respond within a reasonable timeframe. Questions are submitted via telephone or through confidential email, which provides a level of protection for staff who do not want their identity exposed to leadership. When appropriate, leaders are provided with information about the issues that come to the office's attention so that they can identify a local or statewide response, if needed.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, the content of this brief is largely based on an interview with leaders from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families on January 29, 2021. Source material also gathered from: New Jersey Department of Children and Families Workforce Report, 2016-2017 Updates: www.nj.gov/dcf/childdata/exitplan/NJ.DCF.Workforce.Report-FY17.pdf and New Jersey Department of Children and Families Workforce Report, 2015-16: www.nj.gov/dcf/childdata/exitplan/NJ.DCF.Workforce.Report_2015-2016.pdf
- 2 New Jersey Department of Children and Families Workforce Report, 2016-2017 Updates: www.nj.gov/dcf/childdata/exitplan/NJ.DCF.Workforce.Report-FY17.pdf
- 3 Lawrence, C. K., Zeitlin, W., Auerbach, C., Chakravarty, S., & Rienks, S. (2018). Measuring the impact of public perceptions on child welfare workers. Journal of Public Child Welfare. One-page summary of article at: www.ncjw.org/files/LINKD/Lawrence_et_al_Public_Perceptions.pdf

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