



STRATEGY BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How are child protection agencies navigating and addressing workforce challenges?

The recruitment and retention of knowledgeable, engaged, and committed staff in child protection agencies has been a challenge that [goes back decades](#). It has become [more urgent](#) during recent years as agencies recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, respond to calls for social and racial justice, and take steps to partner with families, communities and other agencies to transform their child welfare systems.

The current workforce crisis, while extremely difficult, is also a profound opportunity to transform organizational culture, engage with communities, and rethink services. Shifting child welfare services upstream to focus on family strengths, foster care prevention, and community well-being opens the door to new ways of working and engaging with families, communities, and other systems — and necessitates the development of a workforce that can meet the demands of this 21st century vision.

A well-resourced, well-trained, highly skilled, and appropriately deployed workforce is foundational to a child protection agency's ability to achieve the best outcomes for the children and families it serves. [Workforce turnover](#) is a key factor. High turnover [directly impacts families and communities](#), has a [negative impact](#) on relationships with families, slows the completion of caseworker duties, and leads to poorer reunification and permanency outcomes.



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Decades of inquiry, innovation, and investment have made clear that there are no quick fixes for making significant workforce improvements. While there are many specific strategies agencies can implement to improve recruitment and retention, high turnover often is a symptom — not the cause — of broad systemic challenges that must be addressed before a stable, high-quality workforce can be achieved. Such challenges include: the over-surveillance of poor families and the [overrepresentation of Black and American Indian children](#) at different decision points along the child welfare continuum; broad [definitions of child neglect](#) that contribute to unnecessary family separations and an overreliance on foster care; insufficient access to housing and healthcare; and a lack of [supportive pathways](#) offering timely and culturally relevant prevention services to children and families.

This brief provides examples of how a range of jurisdictions are implementing and testing different strategies to stabilize and strengthen their workforce.¹ Many jurisdictions have had to rethink or reprioritize strategies due to the combined influences of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), the “[great resignation](#)” that happened as a result, an elevated desire among system leaders to [reckon with racial injustice](#), and a growing [youth mental health crisis](#). Child welfare leaders shared several of the examples included in this brief in late 2021, when the pandemic was still raging and concern over workforce turnover had reached unprecedented heights.

Comprehensive workforce development strategies

The many strategies that are critical to building and maintaining a strong workforce can be clustered into five core areas:

1. Understanding workforce needs
2. Creating manageable, family wage jobs
3. Hiring and onboarding strong applicants
4. Building and maintaining a healthy, equitable climate and culture
5. Offering training, development, and advancement opportunities

Focused attention on racial equity is critical within each of the five strategies, and attention to workforce development is incomplete if it does not also attend to workplace discrimination, bias, and the impacts of white supremacy culture on child protection agencies and staff.

Addressing workforce issues in a holistic and sustainable way requires structure, intentionality, and collaboration. Structures such as workforce [innovation teams](#) or [design teams](#) can help leadership assess workforce issues, track and explore related data, and develop recommendations for policy and practice changes. Such teams should be cross-functional with active involvement from human resources, and engage staff working at multiple levels within the agency.

Innovative change leaders see this crisis as an opportunity to address long-term problems and to look at their system more holistically. You can't separate broader child welfare issues from workforce issues. We have to change the way we operate, the way we provide services, and the way we structure programs.

— ROBIN LEAKE,
PROJECT DIRECTOR, NATIONAL CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE INSTITUTE

Tools for understanding workforce needs

Needs and gaps assessments, data analysis, and building sustained feedback loops with new and experienced staff are critical for developing a comprehensive understanding of an agency's unique workforce issues.

Various tools are available for assessing workforce needs. The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development created a [Brief Workforce Needs Assessment for Child Welfare Agencies](#) that provides leadership with questions to support a thoughtful and data-driven identification of root causes of retention issues. The [Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment](#) is a free tool that provides insight on the complex issues and root causes of turnover. Its mixed-methods approach includes a staff survey, interviews, and focus groups with key staff and community partners, and a contextual assessment of community demographic data, agency performance indicators, and other reports or studies related to the workforce and agency performance. The Annie E. Casey Foundation developed [Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce](#), a guide with tools such as a sample annual staff satisfaction survey and a sample employee retention interview. Agencies also can leverage [existing workforce](#) data and consistently [measure turnover](#). It is crucial to apply a racial equity lens when analyzing workforce data in order to understand who is being recruited as well as who stays, leaves, and is being promoted.

The **Jefferson County, Colo.**, Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection began conducting an annual job satisfaction survey in 2014. Agency senior leaders call the survey a “game changer” as it allows them to regularly hear from staff about what satisfies them about their work and where the agency can improve. The response rate on a recent survey was over 80%. In the early years of implementation, the survey results indicated that work culture and climate issues were impacting turnover. This feedback led to the development of a practice model that revamped the hiring process and increased supports for supervisors.

In addition to periodic assessments, agencies need structures to support ongoing staff feedback and engagement. Jefferson County developed a committee

structure that brings staff working at different levels and in different roles into organizational decision-making and provides a mechanism for making changes and building a culture of consensus across the agency. Committees are organized by work streams and held accountable by a steering committee that includes committee co-chairs and management team representatives. Barb Weinstein, division director at Jefferson County Human Services, described the committee structure as a key part of agency culture. “We have great participation,” she said. “Staff have choices and are encouraged to find something they are passionate about. They can see that their participation is meaningful because virtually all key changes have come from the work of these committees.”

Conducting [retention interviews](#), which are dedicated one-on-one conversations with staff about their work experiences, is another useful strategy for understanding workforce needs. After the **New York City** Administration for Children's Services reviewed data showing it was losing 55% of staff by their second year on the job, the agency's deputy commissioner and chief operations officer conducted retention interviews with 100 staff who were approaching their one-year anniversary. The interviews revealed that staff felt overwhelmed, fearful, and unsupported. Onboarding processes were strengthened and extended based on these conversations, and agency leadership increased communication and support for supervisors and managers.

New Jersey's Department of Children and Families and Department of Human Services recently collaborated on a comprehensive [labor market analysis](#) focused on state-contracted service providers in the social service and behavioral health sectors. The state agencies are now using various avenues to [share information](#), [seek feedback](#) from, and collaborate with providers to identify creative solutions for strengthening and stabilizing the workforce that state agencies rely on to effectively serve families.

Creating manageable, family wage jobs

Having a job that allows for a balance between personal and professional obligations has become even more important to many people as a result of

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living through the COVID-19 pandemic. [Supportive workplaces that prioritize well-being](#) offer [manageable workloads](#), [telework](#), [flexible work schedules](#), [opportunities for advancement](#) in the organization, and fair compensation, and are [focused on equity and inclusion](#).²

Connecticut's Department of Children and Families leadership cites manageable workloads and fair wages as the most important strategies for reducing workforce turnover. Central office staff monitor caseloads and when caseworkers get to 75% of a full caseload (10 to 12 intakes, approximately 15 families), the team works to keep them there. Predictive hiring — based on fairly consistent workload trends and peaks from past years — allows the agency to anticipate staffing needs and ensure caseloads and workloads are manageable. Competitive salary and benefits are key factors in Connecticut, where union-negotiated salaries for entry-level social workers begin at \$58,000, with increases built in at four and 12 months.

Many agencies now offer hybrid and flexible working options to staff. At the **New Jersey** Department of Children and Families, core office hours expanded in 2022 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., to 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., which allows employees to organize their work hours around personal and family obligations, and provide services to families outside of traditional business hours. Following a telework pilot, 80% of agency staff began working remotely, and an alternative workweek program has created some flexibility for employees who can't participate in telework. In **Connecticut**, 80% of

Department of Children and Families staff have been working remotely, a practice that started during the pandemic but later was embraced by leadership.

Jefferson County, Colo., has a personal choice work model and compressed workweeks. A working group of caseworkers, supervisors, and program managers developed the model, which launched in late 2021. The model allows employees to choose which days they work from county offices and which days they work remotely (from home or in the community), with exceptions for certain meetings that occur in-person and/or in the office. Compressed workweeks include either four 10-hour shifts (available after one year of service) or 80 hours in no less than nine days over two weeks (available after six months on the job). A job satisfaction survey in 2022 collected very positive feedback about the flexible approaches.

Casework teaming is a strategy that can help address staff isolation, burnout, work-life balance, and workload, as well as support improved decision-making. Similar to a [casework teaming approach in New York State](#), **Franklin County, Ohio**, Children's Services has piloted a strategy where individual casework is supplemented with a team approach to families, which shifts responsibility for outcomes and progress from the individual caseworker to the entire team. Primary and secondary caseworkers are assigned responsibility for accomplishing case tasks and receive input from an expanded team. This team can gather assessments and information from multiple sources rapidly, and expedite service provision. Daily huddles

Today's workforce is resourceful and creative and they have found multiple streams of income, so the only ways we have been able to keep people are: first, to advocate for decent pay; second, to continue to communicate the mission and how their work connects to it, because we know this generation wants to contribute to a higher cause; and finally, support them as much as possible with the resources they need and create an environment that's conducive to them succeeding and growing and learning.

— JODI HILL-LILLY,

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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provide opportunities for group supervision and aid in communication among team members about task responsibilities and areas where support is needed.³

Workforce challenges during 2022 delayed rollout of the teaming approach in Franklin County. Since implementation began, however, staff feedback has pointed to several positive outcomes including improved communication within the unit, more comprehensive assessments, and enhanced resources available to families.

Hiring and onboarding strong applicants

[Finding, hiring, and onboarding strong applicants](#) is key to fulfilling a child protection agency's mission to support children and families. Ineffective [recruitment and selection processes](#) lead to higher turnover and negatively impact the current workforce. Building on a comprehensive assessment process, targeted recruitment efforts can be used to fill vacancies with individuals who are underrepresented in the current workforce and more representative of the families the agency serves. Efforts to diversify the workforce through recruitment, however, must be backed by inclusive and equitable policies and practices that include [implicit bias training](#) for staff, addressing [workplace discrimination](#), taking a [culturally responsive leadership approach](#), and [promoting anti-racist child welfare practice](#).

Redesigning recruitment and selection processes starts with an assessment of current vacancies as well as the skills and competencies needed to perform well. The **Oklahoma** Department of Human Services implemented a [competency-based personnel selection process](#) in 2020. The planning included an in-depth job analysis to define optimal performance and the necessary characteristics of a strong applicant. These efforts led to a standardized process that includes competency-based interview questions along with a typing, writing, and computer literacy attestation portion. "The quality and consistency of our interviews is much stronger, and our questions now get more to the heart of why people stay in a job," said Leanne Saunders-Jones, the agency's child welfare administrator for leadership and employee support." Feedback and support from supervisors,

field managers, and district directors in participating counties has been positive, and the efficacy of the standardized hiring process is currently being assessed using a randomized control trial.

Many child protection agencies are experiencing a significant decline in job applicants. Oklahoma has sought to counteract this trend through a variety of recruitment channels, including hosting hiring events and sharing a series of recruitment videos through social media and with Oklahoma's largest universities. Oklahoma has also offered [recruitment and retention incentives](#) for those who recruit former child welfare specialists who left the agency in good standing. When the returning employee is hired, the recruiting employee receives \$1,000. When the returning employee completes required training and begins to carry a caseload, the returning employee receives a \$1,000 bonus. Depending on returning employees' past experience with the agency, they may be eligible to carry a caseload immediately, which is the justification for the incentives. If both employees are still with the agency after one year, each receives an additional \$2,500. The total value of the incentives (\$7,000) is estimated to be roughly 10% of the cost to hire and train a new child welfare specialist.

With support from the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development, the **Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians** implemented and evaluated a [five-week onboarding process](#) in which the new hires review policies and procedures, get introduced to supervisors and colleagues, and watch videos explaining team roles, Cherokee history and culture, and how to work effectively with the tribe's families. New hires also follow a fictional family through the case process and shadow caseworkers in all five family safety program teams. Manuals for both supervisors and employees guide weekly supervision sessions. Early [evaluation findings](#) suggest that those who participate in the onboarding sessions have a more developed understanding of Cherokee history and culture, better integration across units, greater clarity of their roles and responsibilities, and higher levels of supervisory support compared to other employees. Job satisfaction and intent to stay were also higher for onboarding participants.

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was developed out of series of listening sessions with stakeholders, youth, and staff who identified that staff needed more support in the workplace, and is one of several [comprehensive workforce development strategies contributing to low turnover in New Jersey](#). The office provides a range of supports including a mindfulness toolkit, resources to help staff manage stress, weekly 30-minute webinars focused on wellness strategies, and a monthly “Real Talk” session where staff share experiences they are grappling with in life and work.

The **Erie County, N.Y.**, Department of Social Services, with support from the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, used the Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment and additional surveys to identify areas in need of attention. Climate and culture emerged as concerns. Department leadership created three action teams made up of staff from all levels of the organization: 1) recruitment, selection, and retention; 2) workload and conditions; and 3) disproportionate minority representation. The third action team is focused specifically on identifying anti-racist actions that will impact the workplace and the agency’s work with families. The action teams’ efforts are intended to contribute to a movement away from a culture of punishment and blame to one that is solution-focused and trauma-informed. Feedback suggests staff feel supported in caring for themselves and that coaching is helping leadership advance anti-racist policy and practice.

Milwaukee Child Protective Services, a division of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, has been implementing the [Availability, Responsiveness, & Continuity](#) model (in partnership with the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development) after identifying the need to improve organizational culture and climate. The model empowers staff to create solutions to challenges and strengthen organizational culture. Teams of six were created, trained, and tasked with developing proposals to address factors contributing to workplace turnover. The teams presented their proposed solutions to agency leadership and subsequently the recommendations were implemented. Positive testimonials from participants helped support recruitment for a second

phase of the model. Short-term impacts of the model on agency culture and climate and employee well-being are being evaluated, as are longer-term impacts on turnover and the well-being of the children and families that the agency serves.

Offering training, development, and advancement opportunities

Equitable opportunities for professional development provide new staff with the knowledge and skills to do the job well, and seasoned staff with ongoing skill development and potential for advancement. This includes [coaching](#) and training to improve efficacy in practice, as well as access to promotions and support for attending postsecondary degree programs. Training and professional development are also opportunities for organizations to shift the workforce to better support a transformed child welfare agency. While training alone will not transform a system, the topics offered and the language used in training, along with supportive supervision, follow-up coaching, mentoring, and other forms of [peer support](#) can all influence how caseworkers perceive and interact with families.

New Jersey provides access to over 600 free trainings for all Department of Children and Families staff each year. Topics range from personal enrichment (such as mindfulness and time management) to public speaking and direct case practice. Casework staff are required to complete 20 hours of training each year or 40 hours over two years, and have regular opportunities to improve their practice, such as by participating in peer-learning cohorts. The Department of Children and Families in **Connecticut** renamed its training academy the [Academy for Workforce Development](#), signaling a shift from training to career development for all staff. The academy offers an extensive menu of pre-service, in-service, continuing education, and leadership development opportunities each year.

Partnerships with colleges and universities can provide current staff with opportunities to continue their education and advance their careers. **Erie County** partnered with the University at Buffalo to add 18 new MSWs to their workforce using stipends from a five-year grant with the National Child Welfare

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Workforce Institute. While the Department of Social Services only has a handful of positions that require an MSW, the degree increases the likelihood for staff to be promoted to supervisor, increases the number of highly skilled professionals in the agency, and will help expand the agency's ability to provide clinical services and assessments.

In addition to training, coaching is critical to supporting staff development and improving practice. Decreasing burnout by mitigating the impact of secondary

traumatic stress is the focus of Coach Ohio, a supervision model that pairs [Resilience Alliance](#) training with a focus on coaching. In a pilot that included six **Ohio** counties and implementation support from the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development, [preliminary evaluation results](#) found improvements in areas such as coping, work-life balance, job satisfaction, and secondary traumatic stress, as well as higher intentions to stay and lower intentions to leave.

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

- 1 The content of this brief is largely based on strategies shared during a November 2021 ad-hoc convening of the COVID-19 child welfare leaders forum, co-sponsored by Casey Family Programs, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute; and interviews conducted in fall 2022 with: Robin Leake, Project Director, National Child Welfare Workforce Institute; Barb Weinstein, Division Director, and Natalie Mall, Associate Director, Jefferson County, Colo., Human Services; Jodi Hill-Lilly, Deputy Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Children and Families; Nancy Carre-Lee, Executive Director, Office of Staff Health and Wellness, New Jersey Department of Children and Families; Leanne Saunders-Jones, Child Welfare Administrator for Leadership and Employee Support, Oklahoma Department of Human Services; Catie Gavin, First Deputy Commissioner at Erie County, N.Y., Department of Social Services; Frank Cresciullo, Chief Operating Officer, and Sharice Randall, Chief of Staff to the Deputy Commissioner, Division of Child Protection, New York City Administration for Children's Services.
- 2 This and many other one-page summaries and infographics developed by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute on key topics are available at <https://ncwwi.org/1-page-summaries-and-infographics/>
- 3 Presentation by Lara LaRoche, Intake Division Director, Franklin County, Ohio, Children's Services, to Casey Family Programs Systems Improvement Leadership Team on August 16, 2022.
- 4 Pharris, A.B., Munoz, R.T., Hellman, C.M. (2022). Hope and resilience as protective factors linked to lower burnout among child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 136.
- 5 Bowman, M.E. (2022) Child welfare worker wellness: An ethical imperative in the service of children. *Child Abuse Review*, 31 (5). Lizano, E.L., He, A.S., & Leake, R. (2021). Caring for Our Child Welfare Workforce: A Holistic Framework of Worker Well-being. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 45(4), 281-292.

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