



October 2025

# How has Jefferson County, Colo., maintained a stable child welfare workforce?

Jefferson County, Colo., is situated just west of the City and County of Denver and is home to several suburban cities. The county's child protection agency is the Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection (DCYFAP), which has a workforce of 230 organized into five program areas, all dedicated to improving well-being of those in the community. The division has had steady leadership for the past 13 years that has supported workforce improvement by engaging the voices of staff to improve agency climate and culture. Leadership also prioritized making the division the right size to reflect the needs of the community and existing workload. The efforts have helped keep staff retention high and resulted in decreased vacancies.<sup>1</sup>

Many child protection agencies grappled with high post-pandemic turnover due to staff members' heightened levels of stress, psychological distress, and concern for the health and well-being of their own families and communities, [according to a study](#) of child welfare workers in Ohio. In Colorado, Jefferson County DCYFAP also struggled, experiencing a 22% turnover rate in 2021. The agency therefore leaned into an array of workforce supports and cut that turnover rate in half by 2024. The supports are designed to mirror the agency's vision that children, families, and agency workers all thrive, and that their success occurs within an atmosphere of equity and inclusion for all.

## Building and maintaining a strong organizational culture

[Research shows](#) that organizational culture impacts employee well-being, productivity, and turnover. Staff thrive in healthy organizations where structures are in place that build and maintain a positive professional climate. DCYFAP leadership focuses on the values that employees share in the workplace, which include a focus on preventing child maltreatment (as reflected in their practice model), giving staff a clear voice, and making sure they feel supported.

“There’s a vision for what practice looks like, and everyone buys into the vision. People may have different ideas about how to implement it, but you feel like you are part of one unit pushing in the same direction. It makes a big difference.”

—Meagan Crow, Social Caseworker, Jefferson County  
Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection

**The practice model as an anchor.** In 2012, Jefferson County began a five-year collaboration with The Annie E. Casey Foundation to launch and implement a new practice model that anchors the organization and shapes the workforce. The trauma-informed practice model provides “a framework for how the Division will work internally and partner with children, youth, adults, families, services providers and others to put our vision and mission into action in daily practice and operations.” The model highlights practices designed to prevent child maltreatment while also ensuring that agency workers thrive.

**A clear vision.** Division leadership created a tree visual to capture the core elements of the model. The image is displayed throughout agency buildings and offices. The image depicts the practice standards, with people making up the trunk and branches of the tree, which is rooted in equity and inclusion. The leaves feature the agency’s approaches, including being an employer of choice, having a focus on prevention, and incorporating trauma-informed and poverty-informed practices, all of which are articulated to influence how staff and leaders operate. The practice model guides how employees are trained and how they work, and has shaped the culture of the organization.

**Commitment to equity.** The practice model framework is rooted in equity and inclusion. The agency has an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Coordinator staff position to carry out its commitment to children, families, and staff. Equity and inclusion is also a workstream within Jefferson County’s committee structure. One sub-committee is reviewing disparity data and research related to child removals, another is exploring how to keep poverty at the forefront of how workers engage with families, and another is dedicated to creating a safer, more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ youth, families, and adults.



**Prevention focus.** Jefferson County established a prevention team in 2021 as part of the agency's response to the federal Family First Prevention Services Act. The goal is to reduce instances of child maltreatment and avoid unnecessary involvement of children and families with the child welfare system — and the traumas associated with both. The prevention team reaches out to families that have been referred to the agency but have been screened out for investigation. Rather than simply drop the referral, the agency's prevention specialist offers families case management and navigation assistance to obtain community-based resources to help stabilize family circumstances. Families drive the decision on whether to accept the agency's offer of assistance.

According to Jefferson County reports, in 2024, 1,791 new families were referred to prevention services following a screened-out referral. Of those referred, 78% of families engaged with a prevention specialist. Those who engaged were 24% less likely to have subsequent child welfare involvement than screened-out families that did not engage. The agency strongly believes in the accuracy of its screenings of referrals, and even created a second prevention team to expand the effort. The agency has found this strategy to be less expensive and more supportive of children and families.

**Committee structure.** Jefferson County DCYFAP has a collective decision-making committee structure designed to bring staff input to the process. The structure includes one steering committee and six workstreams: (1) building a stronger workforce; (2) strengthening agency decision-making; (3) organizational health; (4) family engagement; (5) race, equity, and disparity; and (6) a category called “what if?” for new ideas that don't fit neatly elsewhere. Committees meet regularly (virtually or in-person) to work through various issues affecting the workforce, ranging from staff recruitment and retention to risk-taking practices.

Each staff person with one year or more of agency experience is required to sit on a committee. Supervisors typically chair the committees and help staff select ones that meet their interests. Ideas that workstream committees approve are taken to the steering committee for consideration. The steering committee is made up of division management, workstream co-chairs, and two community members with lived experience in child welfare.

As the management team consists of only eight people, leadership relies on the committee structure to support decision-making, and they estimate that committee-based decisions constitute 85% of decision-making in the agency. Agency leaders feel the committee structure improves transparency and supports the positive culture they are trying to achieve, and staff survey feedback validates this.

**Formal staff input.** An annual, anonymous all-staff survey was first administered in 2014, with 86% of staff completing the survey in 2024. Survey findings are presented at an all-staff meeting each year. The survey asks about job satisfaction, supervision and performance management, organizational culture, training, workplace safety, staff retention, and risk-taking practices. A committee of management, staff, and supervisors review the data to understand key trends and ensure the results inform future actions. Most questions are multiple choice, but open-ended questions allow staff to provide additional feedback and suggest strategies to improve practice or workplace culture. Most recently, the committee reviewed 25 pages of comments following the 2024 survey. Strengthening supervision is an example of a current agency priority that surfaced through the most recent staff survey.

“I always tell people to find something that fuels what keeps you in this work. I try to also take that advice, so a lot of my committees are related to recruitment and retention, organizational health, and how we take care of our workforce.”

—Janet Bueno, Child Protection Intake Supervisor, Jefferson County  
Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection



## Recruiting and retaining a strong workforce

Jefferson County implements several strategies and practices designed to recruit and retain an effective workforce.

**Hiring and onboarding.** Most new hires come to Jefferson County through a paid internship that is part of the Title IV-E child welfare stipend program, and many of the interns are ultimately hired. During their internship periods, interns learn about and participate in the culture of the agency, which helps determine if they are a good fit.

Professionals hired outside of the internship program participate in interviews designed, in part, to assess stress tolerance. The agency provides the questions 24 hours in advance and all interviews are conducted in person.

About two months after new hires join the organization, they sit down with DCYFAP leadership for a welcome meeting. Discussions center on how the practice model guides the agency's work and what it means to be part of a consensus-based organization, and help set a tone of ongoing engagement and transparency. Leaders encourage the new hires to join a committee so that their input and ideas are considered. New hires are encouraged to schedule additional time with leadership to ask questions and make suggestions.

**Practice coaches.** DCYFAP has practice coaches for new staff to ensure the practice model is guiding their work. A practice coach supervisor works with all new caseworkers and helps them navigate through the state training academy. Once staff complete the academy, the practice coach supervisor works with the new caseworkers' supervisor to ensure that the foundations of the practice model are present in their work.

Practice coaches meet with new staff weekly for their first year and provide support around documentation, talking with families, and setting goals. After one year, the coaching decreases to every other week, and then is accessed as needed. Staff report that practice coaching is a valuable supplement to supervision, which focuses more on case-specific issues.

“New staff talk about how everyone is welcoming, nice, and that it feels like one of the more supportive environments they've joined. They feel welcomed from the first contact with us.”

—Natalie Mall, Associate Director, Jefferson County  
Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection

**Staff supports.** Retention is bolstered through staff supports that help them manage their workload and job stress and build community within the agency. Many supports have been created because of needs identified in the annual staff survey and ideas generated through workstream committees. Specific activities offered during a workday include the [Resilience Alliance](#), a support group that helps staff develop strategies to manage stress and their emotional response to the work, and Puppy Playtime, an opportunity for staff to gather in the office, have fun, and decompress.

DCYFAP also is working to increase support for supervisors. This area was identified in the 2024 staff survey and as a result, is a priority for leadership. JeffCo has group supervision which allows supervisors to share the emotional burden of case consultation. For example, they have used the concept of “leaning into risk: as a scenario for group supervision, to discuss whether individual cases rise to the level of safety issues and imminent risk.

**Allowing for flexibility.** During the pandemic, the agency started a “personal choice work model”, which allows staff to work remotely. The model became an official part of agency policy in 2022 and leadership identifies it as one reason workers stay, with feedback from staff suggesting the flexibility is very well

received. The policy requires staff to participate in two in-person meetings per year and respond to non-urgent client phone calls within 48 hours. There is also an expectation that when working remotely, employees “must be ready to respond to the office or community setting during the workday.”<sup>2</sup> The policy also sets expectations that supervisors provide regular in-person contact with new hires, and it addresses confidentiality, technology, overtime, and working a compressed workweek.

**Staying competitive.** A strong workforce requires ongoing attention and dedication from the entire organization. Division leaders pay attention to the needs of the workforce and act on issues identified through welcome meetings, committees, and the annual survey. For example, a few years ago staff expressed concern about salaries due to increased costs of living. Agency leadership addressed this through successful advocacy at the county and state levels. When any position opens, leadership analyzes data related to workload to determine if the position needs to be filled and related budget implications.

The leaders at DCYFAP have been working on organizational culture and staff retention for 13 years. Their experience suggests a single strategy cannot change a culture, as a comprehensive approach is essential. Part of the county’s commitment to the workforce is to be transparent, which is demonstrated through regular emails to all staff about current topics that can impact child welfare, including the agency budget. Ongoing implementation of tools that elevate worker influence on the job also is key to staying competitive.

“Other counties ask about our success. We’ve been doing this work for 13 years. People want to try one thing, but there is not one thing that can change a culture. It is the cumulative impact of all the different things.”

—Barb Weinstein, Director, Jefferson County  
Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection

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<sup>1</sup> The content of this brief was informed through interviews with leadership and frontline staff of Jefferson County, Colo., Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection: Barb Weinstein, Director, and Natalie Mall, Associate Director, on July 2, 2025; Rosina Hunter, Casework Supervisor, and Janet Bueno, Child Protection Intake Supervisor on August 11, 2025; and Savannah Stanley, Sexual Abuse/Permanency Caseworker and Meagan Crow, Social Caseworker, on August 14, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Personal Choice Work Model Policy and Procedure. Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection Policy and Procedure No. HS.CYFAP37.00, Effective 4/11/22, Revised 1/1/23.

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