



May 2026

# How can leaders center workforce wellness in child protection agencies?

“A focus on personal wellness and the wellness of your workforce is not optional. It is a necessary element, not only for your success as the leader, but also for the success of children, families, communities, and your workforce.”

—Kim Johnson, Secretary, California Health and Human Services Agency

A strong, stable child welfare workforce is important to staff morale, organizational functioning, and positive outcomes for the children and families being served,<sup>1</sup> and sustaining one is a constant challenge facing child welfare leaders. Child welfare work is complex and emotionally draining. Leadership, from supervisors to executive administrators, plays a key role in shaping the organizational culture that best supports the physical, psychological, and social well-being of their staff.<sup>2</sup>

Wellness is as important for high-level executives as for frontline caseworkers. Leaders often work under extreme pressures and stressors without a safe space to process or discuss their experiences. Leadership strain and burnout can negatively shape organizational culture, decision-making, and support for frontline staff, ultimately affecting service quality. To learn more about the connection between leader wellness and organizational stability, see the companion brief: [What do we know about wellness in child welfare organizations?](#)

This brief describes strategies for promoting wellness at the individual and organizational levels, with the goal of supporting positive staff performance, and effective engagement and service delivery for children and families. The ideas presented are informed by a group of child welfare and human service executives<sup>3</sup> who participated in a multi-year wellness collective initiative to explore leadership development, strengthen peer support networks, and exchange strategies for systems improvement.

## Modeling wellness

“How can leaders serve children and families from a place of emptiness? We can’t. So we must model wellness and what it takes to have longevity in this work. This is not an individual commitment; wellness should happen in community with others. That’s how we can put ‘human’ back into human services.”

— Aprille Flint-Gerner, Former Child Welfare Director, Oregon Department of Human Services

Occupational health [research](#) illustrates that inspiring and motivational leadership practices are associated with positive employee mental health, whereas aggressive and authoritarian practices negatively impact employee well-being.<sup>4</sup> Leaders, of course, need to be well themselves in order to model positive leadership practices, and those who participated in the wellness collective say that practicing self-care, being intentional, setting boundaries, and taking time off all contributed to their individual well-being — and therefore their ability to model positive behaviors for their teams.

### Practice self-care

Self-care among the child welfare workforce has been recognized as a strategy to support staff and mitigate turnover.<sup>5</sup> Self-care can take many shapes, but regardless of the activity, it requires intentional effort, strategy and follow-through. As one leader described it, self-care can be as simple as staying hydrated, practicing intentional breathing and movement like taking a five-minute walk to reset after a meeting, or performing stretches while sitting at the desk to release tension. One tool to support leaders and staff alike is the [8 Dimensions of Wellness framework](#), created by the Wellness Initiative at Syracuse University. It emphasizes that users should become aware of the steps they are taking to support their well-being, and encourages them to [formally track](#) all the different ways in which they are attending to their personal wellness. This tool recognizes the multiple dimensions of wellness and the wide variety of activities that count as wellness, including some that initially might seem surprising.

Allowing oneself permission to practice self-care can be difficult when working in a complex, busy, and pressure-filled environment. Child welfare leaders habitually may work late, send emails from home at night, skip lunch breaks, or rarely take time off. These behaviors send subtle but powerful signals to staff about what work behaviors are expected and acceptable. On the other hand, leaders who routinely practice their own self-care are more likely to recognize signs of depletion in others and, as a result, legitimize self-care and achieving a healthy work-life balance as professional priorities.

Research suggests that leader self-care can improve staff well-being<sup>6</sup>. One leader compared it to being on an airplane and putting the oxygen mask on yourself first so you can then help others. Kim Johnson, Secretary for the California Health and Human Services Agency, said she has become more attentive to signs of work fatigue and burnout among staff: “I am much better at noticing people who don’t take time off, and I insist that they do, to replenish and recharge.”

### Make wellness practical

Leaders identified practical wellness activities such as getting adequate sleep, staying hydrated, increasing physical movement, and taking time off as critical to enhancing professional performance. DeShawn Harris, assistant commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, described how he incorporates breathing practices “to center himself amid the chaos of the day,” which he believes improves his judgment and overall decision-making.

Practical wellness activities can be embedded throughout a child protection agency. Aryka Radke, deputy commissioner of the Vermont Department for Children and Families, shared how agency leaders encouraged each district office to create dedicated wellness spaces, some featuring music, walking pads,

and a massage chair (which was donated). “Staff now have space to relax and decompress in between meetings,” Radke said.

### Be intentional with your time

Leaders who make points of protecting and managing their time are better able to remain present, grounded, and effective, benefiting not only themselves, but the workforce and the children and families they serve. In child welfare, where urgency and crisis are constant, designating time for both professional tasks and personal well-being creates space for physical and emotional restoration. Radke shared that managing her time better resulted in strengthening her ability to strategically plan: “I had to build in calendar time for balcony-level thinking. Before, I didn’t have time to think about new initiatives because I was trying to get through each fire. But when I felt physically and mentally better, I was able to open my mind to do longer-range planning, which translated to having a stronger plan for our child welfare division.”

Kwesi Booker, director of Children and Family Services in Hennepin County, Minn., said he dedicates Friday afternoons to administrative tasks: “Unless there is an emergency, my assistant builds in a block of time for me to catch up on emails, review administrative work, and approve policies. Previously, we would have a full day of meetings and wouldn’t even start those admin tasks until 6 p.m. But designating time for admin work has helped alleviate that stress, and now I see my leadership team doing the same.”

### Set boundaries

Research suggests that maintaining work and life boundaries can improve the relationship between workload and work-life conflicts among social workers<sup>7</sup> and can help prevent emotional and mental exhaustion at work from spilling over into personal life. Alger Studstill Jr., executive director of the Social Services Administration at the Maryland Department of Human Services, described how firm boundaries allow him to maintain personal commitments to himself: “I believe in having hard boundaries. I am committed to going to the movies in the evenings once a week. That is my personal time. We’re expected to be available 24/7, but there are times when I just need time to recharge.”

Implementing other simple boundaries such as turning off the cell phone for a period of time while delegating responsibility to other leaders, and scheduling and showing up for personal non-work-related appointments, also can support overall psychological and physical health. Booker reflected on how establishing clearer boundaries has improved his relationship with his own children: “They knew that once the phone rang, everything stopped. Whether we were eating dinner or playing a game, that call took priority. Now, I realize that when I’m having quality time with my kids, it’s okay to have a backup leader on point who can handle issues and call me only if it’s absolutely necessary. My kids no longer expect me to disappear when the phone rings.”

### Take time off

Being overwhelmed, a relatively common feeling reported by the child welfare workforce, can result in cognitive fatigue, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, and impaired problem-solving.<sup>8</sup> Although it is often challenging for child welfare leaders and staff to be away from the office for an extended period, rest is important. Leaders can help foster an agency culture where workers are open to taking occasional days off and longer breaks. One leader described implementing a “vacation buddy” system to address staff reluctance to take leave due to concerns about the workload awaiting them upon return. Leaders assign a colleague to manage cases while a staff member is away and assist with work re-entry by reviewing emails, sharing updates, and clarifying expectations. Implementing this system has made staff more comfortable taking time off without feeling anxious or guilty, the leader said.

When leaders take time off, they create opportunities for other staff to emerge as future leaders by designating responsibilities to them. This hands-on experience builds confidence, improves decision-making skills, supports professional growth, and strengthens organizational capacity, which is especially important in child welfare, where turnover rates are often high. Johnson shared how she implemented a structure in California designed to “replenish and refresh” leadership capacity: “While serving as the

director of Social Services, I've taken responsibilities of different leaders in the organization and have added additional people to support those areas. We now have additional capacity to ensure we always have someone who can keep the work going if someone needs to take time off. The people who had a harder time taking time off feel better about doing so with the new structure.”

“In a system where wellness and psychological safety is not prioritized or given much forethought, there is a lot of burnout, turnover, and punitive actions.”

— DeShawn Harris, Assistant Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Children’s Services

## Prioritize wellness agencywide

People at every level of an organization must feel a sense of physical safety and psychological support to perform effectively. This includes elements such as visible symbols of inclusivity, access to natural light and safe outdoor space, and opportunities to have a voice within the organization. Leaders and administrators play a pivotal role in cultivating psychological<sup>9</sup> and physical safety for the workforce.

### Build wellness into agency culture

Child protection agency leaders in [Kansas](#), New York City, [Ohio](#), and counties in Colorado implement group-based training and peer supports to enhance job satisfaction, optimism, social support, and self-care while mitigating secondary traumatic stress and burnout among frontline staff and supervisors. [This approach](#) — combined with support from agency leadership — has been found to reduce stress and increase engagement among the child welfare workforce.<sup>10</sup>

Peer supports rarely exist for child welfare executives, however. Creating opportunities for leaders to share professional experiences while giving and receiving emotional support from others managing similar stresses can positively impact their wellness, and ultimately strengthen how they administer their agencies.

### Promote psychological safety

The concept of [psychological safety](#), which emerged from the business world, refers to an environment where people feel safe to take risks, contribute ideas, and admit mistakes without fear of punishment. In child welfare, the fear or punishment associated with mistakes often is paramount. “In our practice, failure sometimes means bad outcomes for a child or family, so it’s hard to understand what it means when saying, ‘It’s OK to fail,’” one leader said.

In a work environment where expectations and stakes are high, creating a psychologically [safe workplace culture](#) allows staff to raise concerns, ask for help, and learn from mistakes to improve practices and ultimately prevent harm. Leaders should encourage open communication and model vulnerability to create a safe workplace that promotes well-being.<sup>11</sup> This can be accomplished by normalizing help-seeking and using mistakes to prompt learning and curiosity. Harris indicated that he is intentional about building a psychologically safe environment for his Tennessee team through encouragement and thoughtful listening. He insisted that “being vulnerable with staff” has increased their comfort in being vulnerable with him, which he believes has helped the team to become “unified.”

### Share wellness responsibilities

Leaders emphasize the importance of listening to the ideas and interests of staff to better support their wellness activities. One leader revealed that leadership-initiated wellness strategies for staff, such as offering on-site yoga or providing Fitbit watches, may have been well-intended but did not reflect staff desires.

Listening to staff also helps gain buy-in, build psychological safety, and help shift the core responsibility of agency wellness from a top-down mandate to a shared initiative. Studstill of Maryland suggested that agency leaders identify wellness champions or influencers within the organization and empower them to define priorities and plan, with the executive stepping back to serve as a sponsor who provides resources and demonstrates outward support. This approach allows staff to gather and share without hierarchical pressure.

### Support affinity groups

Affinity groups help foster supportive professional relationships by creating spaces where individuals with shared identities, roles, or lived experiences can connect, reflect, and problem-solve together. One leader explained that being a part of an affinity community of peers provided a trusted sounding board that was pivotal to his psychological wellness.

Affinity groups also can help leaders identify opportunities for staff development. Demetrius Starling, senior deputy director for children's services at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, has launched a workgroup focused on preparing men of color for advancement in child welfare. Recognizing that men represent a small percentage of the child welfare workforce, and that men are even more underrepresented in leadership positions, he brought together staff at all levels — from administrative assistants to second-line managers — to demystify the path to executive leadership while offering guidance on career progression. The initiative has reinforced the message that advancement is attainable and that diverse leaders belong at every level of a child welfare organization, he said.

“I think affinity groups are helpful because there is a base-level understanding of what connects all of us in the room, no matter what the affinity is. It gives a sense of safety, but trust still must be built.”

—Alger Studstill Jr., Executive Director, Social Services Administration, Maryland Department of Human Services

<sup>1</sup> Zeitlin, W., Kenny Lawrence, C., Armendariz, S., and Chontow, K. (2023). Predicting retention for a diverse and inclusive child welfare workforce. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*. 47(1), 9-27.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The content in this brief was informed by conversations with: Aryka Radke, Deputy Commissioner, Vermont Agency of Human Services, Department for Children and Families, on October 31, 2025; Kim Johnson, Secretary, California Health and Human Services Agency, on October 31, 2025; Alger Studstill Jr, Executive Director, Social Services Administration, Maryland Department of Human Services, on November 24, 2025; Demetrius Starling, former Senior Deputy Director for Children's Services, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, on December 1, 2025; Kwesi Booker, Director of Children and Family Services, Hennepin County, Minnesota, on December 8, 2025; and DeShawn Harris, Assistant Commissioner for West Regional Operations, Tennessee Department of Children's Services, on December 9, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Montano, D., Reeske, A., Franke, F., and Huffneier, J. (2017). [Leadership, followers' mental health and job performance in organizations: A comprehensive meta-analysis from an occupational health perspective](#). *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 3, 327-350. doi:10.1002/job.2124

<sup>5</sup> Miller, J.J., Donohue-Dioh, J., Niu, C., and Shalash, N. (2018). Exploring the self-care practices of child welfare workers: A research brief. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 84: 137-142.

<sup>6</sup> Klug, K., Felfe, J., & Krick, A. (2022). Does Self-Care Make You a Better Leader? A Multisource Study Linking Leader Self-Care to Health-Oriented Leadership, Employee Self-Care, and Health. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(11), 6733.

<sup>7</sup> McNeill, I.M., & Cullington, E. (2025). [Workload, work-life conflict, and stress amongst mental health professionals: The moderating role of segmentation preference](#). *Stress Health*. August 2025; 41(4):e70095. doi: 10.1002/smi.70095.

<sup>8</sup> Zucker, R. (2023). How taking a vacation improves your well-being. *Harvard Business Review*

<sup>9</sup> Clark, S.L., Riley, E. N., Lardner, M.D., Theile, K., Edge, L., Pearson, T., and Cull, M.J. (2025) [Team culture factors and child welfare professionals' well-being: Association of psychological safety, workplace connectedness and mindful organising with secondary traumatic stress](#). *Child & Family Social Work*. 0:1-10. doi:10.1111/cfs.70104

<sup>10</sup> Quality Improvement for Workforce Development (2023) [Ohio Department of Job and Family Services: Supportive supervision and a resilient workforce](#).

<sup>11</sup> Clark, S.L., Riley, E. N., Lardner, M.D., Theile, K., Edge, L., Pearson, T., and Cull, M.J. (2025).

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