



STRATEGY BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How did Texas decrease caseworker turnover and stabilize its workforce?

Introduction

High rates of workforce turnover are a concern for many child welfare agencies. Frequent turnover impacts caseloads and workloads for remaining staff, which can make it difficult to conduct frequent face-to-face visits with children, youth, and families. The quality and timeliness of caseworker visits has been demonstrated to impact child welfare outcomes, and when a child experiences multiple caseworker changes, permanency can be delayed.¹ The goal of this strategy brief is to inform and inspire other child welfare jurisdictions that may be seeking methods to reduce caseworker turnover and strengthen the workforce.

This information from the **Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS)**² summarizes implemented strategies that resulted in a **27.5 percent decrease** in caseworker turnover in just over one year.

Agency background

DFPS is the state agency in Texas responsible for investigations, child protective services, adult protective services, prevention and early intervention, and centralized intake. The agency commissioner reports directly to the governor. Child protection functions are divided into two separate areas: investigations and ongoing services. These two areas encompass the following stages of service: investigations, conservatorship (out-of-home care), and family-based safety services (FBSS, or



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in-home services). About 10,000 full-time employees work in both investigations and ongoing services.

Prior to September 2016, the agency's caseworker turnover rate had hovered around 25 percent for several years, with even higher rates in the investigations division.³ According to exit interviews and survey results,⁴ elements such as training of caseworkers and supervisors, workplace culture and morale, workloads, and pay scales were contributing factors. Turnover impacted workloads and caseworker stress, often resulting in a cycle of more turnover. The impact of this cycle was being seen in a number of areas, including the ability of caseworkers to make timely face-to-face contact with children, youth, and families.

Key strategies

Texas' approach to stabilizing the DFPS workforce has been multifaceted. Strategies include

- Changes in leadership;
- Adoption of a new caseworker training model and mentorship system;
- Increased appropriation of resources from the state Legislature that enabled the agency to lower caseloads and increase salaries;
- Development of enhanced promotion practices;
- Increased emphasis on organizational culture;

- Enhanced focus on staff recognition; and
- Adoption of revised safety protocols.

According to agency leaders, no single strategy has been responsible for the decrease in turnover. Instead, all of these strategies have functioned together to create sustainable change.

Child welfare workforce as a leadership priority

A new DFPS commissioner was appointed in May 2016. Following an initial tour across the state to hear from staff, the commissioner and his leadership team took immediate steps, both internally and externally, to stabilize and improve the workforce. The commissioner was appointed during a time in which child welfare system reform was a top priority of the governor and the Legislature. In hearings with legislators, the commissioner consistently provided information that linked the agency's workforce challenges with agency outcomes.

Administration reset and refresh

Shortly after the new commissioner took the helm, all filled and vacant regional director positions were posted. Consequently, individuals in filled positions had to reapply for their jobs. This strategy was implemented to assure that regional staff would be led by someone able to direct efforts to transition to both a new model of practice and a new management approach to support

The influx of resources was huge; it was a game changer. But without everything else that we were doing, or have done, or continue to do, I'm not convinced it would have been enough. That by itself...would have slowed the tide for a little while, but I don't think the change would have been quite as dramatic, and I don't think it would have been sustainable.

- KRISTENE BLACKSTONE, ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER,
CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES, TEXAS DFPS

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agency turnaround. The agency sought to retain or attract leaders who were solutions-focused and aligned with the vision of the agency, commissioner, and governor. About half of the regional directors were rehired into their positions.

According to agency leaders, these changes were critical to alter the culture and morale of the organization that was, at the time, being significantly impacted by a slew of negative media attention, and a series of high profile child deaths. “We really wanted to promote some excitement, energy, optimism, and a can-do spirit,” the associate commissioner said. “We wanted to say that we can do this; we can set a course for our future and will have leadership that can deliver it.”

New caseworker training model

Texas has a fairly **rigorous caseworker screening process**. Applicants are required to complete a screening tool for aptitude and fit, and to watch a realistic job preview video before being interviewed. The agency also has **revamped its training curriculum and onboarding process**. Whereas the prior training curriculum had new caseworkers in a classroom for six to 12 weeks before going into the field, the new model balances classroom learning with almost immediate field experience. This provides new caseworkers with hands-on experience earlier, and it helps determine fit between the individual and the job more quickly. Throughout the training and onboarding process, trainees spend about every other week in the classroom and in the field. In the final month, they are assigned very few cases — about one third of a standard caseload — while continuing their classroom training. Trainees complete homework assignments and tests, in addition to meeting regularly with their future supervisor in order to review progress on core competencies.

Researchers at the University of Texas evaluated the new training model and reported positive results. Supervisors found that the caseworkers who completed the new training model were more prepared than those trained under the previous model. Caseworkers who completed training under the new model reported feeling more ready for the job and more likely to stay in the job.

Mentorship

Mentorship is a critical element of the new training model. All caseworker trainees are assigned a **mentor who oversees their field work**. Together, the trainee and mentor complete a checklist of activities that correspond to core competencies.

When the program started, mentors were required to have at least one year of experience and complete a special training. Now that the workforce is more stable, the requirements have increased to two years of experience and approval by the mentor’s supervisor and program director. Mentors receive a stipend for the time they spend mentoring a trainee. DFPS has seen many of the relationships between mentor and trainee persist and provide benefits beyond the paid training period. The program has grown so much that DFPS now has a substantial pool of potential mentors. When a new training class begins, DFPS is able to match trainees with mentors based on location, unit, and personality, as well as consider the mentor’s current caseload and availability throughout the training period.

Increased resources

At a Texas Senate Finance Committee hearing in November 2016, DFPS was given the opportunity to present a plan for staffing and salary increases. The agency proposal resulted in an appropriation to cover significant raises for almost all field staff including a **\$1,000 per month increase for caseworkers** and smaller increases for supervisors, regional directors, program directors, and program administrators. The agency also received approval for **more than 800 new positions** across the state.

The agency grounded its proposal in previously researched benchmarks, including in-state teacher salaries and child welfare salaries in similar states. The recommended figures were later bolstered by a salary study commissioned from the University of Houston. Child welfare salaries are now more in line with child welfare positions in other states, as well as with starting salaries for other professions in Texas.⁵ A new **advancement structure** allows staff to achieve salary increases through time and training, rather than having to

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wait for a position vacancy. Caseworkers with a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree can reach a salary of about \$57,000 a year in three to four years.

According to DFPS leaders, the ability to **right-size caseloads** through the addition of new staff positions had an equal, if not greater impact on staff morale and retention than the salary increases. Staff have shared with leadership that they feel better able to achieve a healthy work-life balance, experience less anxiety, and have more time to conduct critical visits or comprehensively assess indicators of risk because they are not overwhelmed by their workloads.

Supervisor selection

Changes to the supervisor selection process have increased employee morale by giving front-line staff an increased understanding of hiring and promotion practices. Before interviewing for a supervisor position, an individual must successfully complete a competency assessment. This assessment, implemented in May 2017, consists of questions about the Texas Family Code, practice and policy, and leadership aptitude. DFPS also has **formalized the interview process**. A panel of three staff conducts the interviews. The panel consists of the manager with the supervisory vacancy and two more administrators from other geographical areas and/or programs. The new formalized process is designed to encourage diversity and fairness in decision-making.

Culture change

Prior to all of these changes, the agency's performance management system was complex, and perceived by staff to be punitive and inconsistent. Under the new commissioner, personnel actions are now streamlined and routed through the state office. The centralization is designed to ensure that infractions will be consistently handled across the state. **Early coaching and counseling** are now encouraged to prevent issues from escalating. According to the associate commissioner, "Everybody understands, this is hard work. We're sometimes going to have to say, 'Hey, we didn't do such a good job here.' We need to have those conversations. As long as it's not negligence or malfeasance, or complete ineptitude, we know people will make mistakes and we're going to grow from them."

Staff recognition

Another important strategy to change employee morale was to formally recognize staff. In February 2017, the commissioner instituted a monthly, agency-wide **recognition ceremony**. At the ceremony, Awards of Excellence are given to both staff and external partners, and anyone who is being promoted across the state is invited to attend. Recently promoted supervisors and other staff are recognized in front of family members and colleagues, take pictures with the commissioner, and are oriented to the state office staff and management structure.

Most of the people coming in for the promotion ceremony are supervisors because that's our largest management level. We are trying to promote how important this is: The great amount of responsibility we are putting in you, the faith and confidence that we are here for you. People love it — it's the feel-good day of the month, every month.

- KRISTENE BLACKSTONE, ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER,
CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES, TEXAS DFPS

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Caseworker safety

DFPS also made strategic investments in strengthening caseworker safety. The DFPS **Worker Safety Support** unit offers supervisors and frontline staff:

- Support and training to use a mobile app for caseworkers, designed to work through locked phones, to guide an immediate law enforcement response in an emergency or crisis;
- Consultation and personalized safety plan development, review, and problem-solving;
- Enhanced incident support for threats, assaults, and other aggressions, including critical incident debriefing and other crisis support response;
- Tailored trainings and communications for caseworkers and supervisors on topics such as effective staff safety habits, incident reporting, talking to law enforcement, and locating safety resources; and
- New and improved tools and resources to minimize risk and maximize recovery.

Outcomes

Between September 2016 and September 2017, DFPS has seen a sizeable decrease in overall turnover, from 25.4 percent to 18.4 percent. The current turnover rate at DFPS is now on par with other agencies across the state (less than 1 percent greater than the rate for state agencies across Texas as a whole).

DFPS's child protective services investigations division still sees the highest turnover rate at 24.9 percent, but even that rate has come down considerably, from 33 percent in September 2016. Turnover for out-of-home care (conservatorship) and in-home services (FBSS) caseworkers are lower, both currently around 16 percent.

Decreases in turnover also have driven down caseloads. Investigation caseloads are currently averaging 11.4 (a decrease of 32.5 percent), and conservatorship caseloads are approximately 19 children (a decrease of 12.1 percent). The agency plans to make some shifts in the coming months to further reduce conservatorship caseloads.

In-home caseloads had been a significant concern for the agency following a surge in new cases after the implementation of structured decision-making. However, these have decreased 29.6 percent: from 16.9 in September 2016 to 11.9 a year later.

Lessons learned

The Texas experience offers a number of insights for other child protection leaders seeking to make similar changes in their own agencies. Some of these include:

- **Resources alone are not sufficient for lasting change.** Changes in leadership, training, and agency culture are all needed to



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stabilize the workforce and sustain lower levels of turnover over time.

- **Leadership support is necessary.** In the words of the associate commissioner: “Having the right leadership on board with you is number one.” What this means will vary from agency to agency. In a smaller jurisdiction, the focus might include all of the front-line supervisors. As a large state, Texas started with the regional directors and now is turning its attention to middle management — program directors and program administrators who have a lot of influence with the staff they supervise.
- **Legislative champions are invaluable.** In Texas, a group of eight legislators came together with the agency to strategize about improving child welfare. Reform also was a high priority of the governor. Although at times this degree of focus put the agency in the hot seat, without this level of legislative concern, reforms would have been far more challenging to accomplish. According to the associate commissioner, “Our state was really ready to make an investment. You have to have that.”

- **It is critical to demonstrate impact.** Be prepared to put children and families at the center, by showing how workforce concerns ultimately affect the agency’s ability to keep children safe and families strong. In Texas, this was done by connecting the dots for legislators between the current level of understaffing and the agency’s failure to achieve targets for timely face-to-face contact during investigations. DFPS also provided the Legislature with concrete proposals for what the agency could accomplish with specific, location-targeted staffing increases.
- **Progress requires patience.** Although the Texas DFPS workforce development initiative is only a little more than one year old, the reforms implemented have moved the agency’s workforce trend lines in a positive direction. Lasting progress, of course, will continue to require strong leadership and strategic investments in order to continue to build trust among staff and advance a healthy agency culture — neither of which occurs overnight. As the Texas experience has shown, change may be incremental, but it is possible to achieve.

1 Research has found that quality caseworker visits and engagement with the family are positively associated with permanency outcomes, including both reunification and adoption. See for example https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/family_reunification.pdf or <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/planning/>

For an overview of workforce turnover and retention strategies, see the Information Packet, How Does Turnover Affect Outcomes and What Can Be Done to Address Retention? https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs_and_retention_strategies/

2 Interview with Kristene Blackstone, Associate Commissioner, Child Protective Services, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), November 16, 2017.

Interview with Penelope Doherty, DFPS Worker Safety Support Manager, and Kimberly Gibbons, Director of Field Operations for Child Protective Services, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), February 5, 2018.

3 DFPS uses “turnover” to refer only to instances when staff leave the agency altogether. Internal movement within the agency is referred to as “churn” and is counted differently.

4 See, for example: <https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/files/reports/DFPS%20Commission%20Decisions.pdf>

5 The starting salary for child welfare caseworkers in Texas is now \$3,816 per month; caseworkers who speak Spanish or hold an MSW receive slightly more. These salaries are competitive with mean earnings for child and family social workers across the U.S., according to figures obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://money.usnews.com/careers/best-jobs/child-and-family-social-worker/salary>

The increase also brings these positions more in line with starting salaries for teachers in the state, even in the most competitive areas: <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2015/06/27/starting-teacher-pay-reaches-50000-in-many-north-texas-districts>

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org

