



## How do some states **hire, train, and retain their hotline intake screeners?**

If you view the hotline worker as a conduit to the community and as the first person who moves the call toward the agency's values of child safety and permanency, it changes how you view those workers, who you hire, how you train them, and how you support them.

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The public has a reasonable expectation that children who come to the attention of the child protective services (CPS) agency will be safe from future harm. Meeting this expectation is only possible if the professionals who are placed in these crucial

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roles possess sound judgment and decision-making skills and are provided with the tools and guidance they need to accurately assess which children require intervention from the agency.

As both a first point of contact and gatekeeper to services and supports, an effective intake system is crucial for any child protection agency. When an individual calls with concerns of child abuse or neglect, the interaction between the intake worker and the caller is the agency's first opportunity to demonstrate its values in action, and the seriousness with which it approaches its role and responsibility within the community. These values should be reflected in the intake worker's customer service orientation with the caller, and the sense of urgency and appreciation for the caller's time and the issues being shared. The questions posed by the intake worker also lay the groundwork for the critical decisions that the agency will have to make to fulfill its mandate of not just regarding child protection, but also permanency and family connections. These decisions have significant implications for staff in all program areas of the agency, throughout the life of the case, and, most importantly, on what happens to children and families.

Agency leadership can take steps to ensure they carefully select intake staff who have a clear appreciation of the agency's values around child safety and family strengths, and a proven ability to demonstrate critical thinking and decision-making skills under challenging circumstances. Ongoing training, strong supervision, and a focus on retaining excellent staff is also foundational to a high-performing hotline system.

## Overview<sup>1</sup>

This compilation provides the key themes and lessons learned from five states—**Florida, New Jersey, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington**—on their practices for hiring, training, and retaining intake screeners in their child welfare systems. It was prepared to assist the exploration and analysis of a large northwestern state that had identified five jurisdictions to help inform decision-making regarding designing a new centralized hotline system.

Jurisdictions interviewed reflected on the five essential components needed to support a quality intake screener workforce:

1. Infrastructure
2. Hiring
3. Training
4. Supervisory support and quality assurance
5. Retention

## Infrastructure

The work of a child abuse and neglect intake line is part child welfare, part call center. Both of these parts must be attended to, in order for the intake line to be responsive and effective. The states interviewed emphasized that running a call center has multiple logistical considerations and challenges. One key to success is creating a very clear shift schedule to staff the call center appropriately 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In most of the states highlighted in this brief, supervisors and sometimes even managers are expected to take reports if necessary, when call volume exceeds staff capacity. Another key to success is to have a business analyst who can monitor the business functions of the call center and its responsiveness to the public.

While the size and structure of each state's hotline varies according to the needs of the state, a common element includes the ability to record all calls, which is a great resource for training and ongoing quality assurance (QA), and also serves to protect staff against false complaints.

Three of the states provide a separate line for law enforcement to be able to make reports more quickly, and have expanded their hotline to accept online reports, to be responsive to the multiple ways in which people share information today.

Technology also emerged as an important decision point for ensuring the smooth operation of a call center. Utilizing a call management system is one essential tool for intake lines. In addition, staff in most states have access to



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multiple state databases to gather collateral information about the alleged perpetrator, such as criminal history.

Some states have moved from a decentralized to a centralized intake system in order to improve consistency in screening practice. States underscored the importance of continuously educating the field and community partners about the hotline, and how to provide the information most essential and appropriate directly to the hotline staff.

## Hiring

Paying attention to the quality of the child welfare intake line requires hiring people with the right background and skills to be effective in a busy call-center operation. The jurisdictions interviewed have approached the candidate selection process in myriad ways, with some requiring extensive field experience, and others hiring staff at an entry-level position.

Washington and New Jersey have had success in hiring experienced caseworkers from the field to fill their intake positions, requiring child welfare experience to be considered for a position at the hotline. Another jurisdiction, however, found that field experience alone

did not result in the selection of the most qualified staff. Tennessee redesigned its hotline and staffing so that intake positions are no longer perceived as “easier than fieldwork.”

Alternatively, in the remaining states, the intake screener is considered to be an entry-level position. This is a significant difference, which then translates into a different approach to training new staff (see Training section below).

One commonality that all states shared was that interviewees are required to pass a typing and writing test, as these are core functions of the position.

## Training

Addressing the quality of child welfare intake lines also requires paying close attention to the training provided to intake staff so it supports development and expertise in engaging callers, analyzing the information provided, and making the best decision possible with the information available. Training considerations shared by the jurisdictions interviewed included attending to the format, length, and content of training for new hires, as well as focusing on measurement of knowledge acquisition and skill development as a result of training. All of the



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jurisdictions provide a combination of classroom-based training accompanied by on-the-job training, and all include some form of evaluating knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis, as well as at the end of the training period.

New screeners are provided with coaching, mentoring for a specified time after they complete their formal training, and closer supervision. All five states provide ongoing training opportunities for staff and specialized supervisor training for new supervisors.

## Supervisory support and quality assurance

Meaningful supervisory oversight and quality assurance processes are vital to ensuring that staff are performing at their best and to identifying any areas that need ongoing attention or additional training at both the individual and organizational levels.

All jurisdictions have found the supervisor's role to be key in ensuring quality decision-making by staff, and they have invested in the quality and capacity of the supervisory level of their hotline systems. While the supervisor-to-screener ratio varies by state, the average ratio is 1:8.

Supervisors are also seen as an integral part of the quality assurance (QA) process, in addition to specialized QA staff. In all of the states interviewed, supervisors are responsible for reviewing some, if not all, of their staff's calls and decisions.

Whether it is daily, weekly, or monthly, developing a strong QA process is vital to the effectiveness of the intake line. Effective QA protocol includes a process for discussing any disagreements from the field regarding hotline decisions. In New Jersey, for example, the QA team also reviews all of the information and referral reports from the previous business day, while in Tennessee, the QA team reviews a random sample of calls monthly.

## Retention

Each jurisdiction interviewed for this report acknowledged that intake screening is difficult work; even though screeners are not in the field, they are receiving and processing calls that can be incredibly disturbing and challenging. It is also important to remember that call center work is intense and does not allow staff a lot of freedom or flexibility to take breaks, or work in non-traditional settings. Jurisdictions recommended that staff be provided with a menu of the different types of support that are available when they need it.

Every jurisdiction has some form of formal support available to staff, typically through the agency's Employee Assistance Program. Some of the jurisdictions have developed more creative strategies to support and retain their hotline staff, such as Florida's Project Hope, a competitive, yearlong professional development opportunity for their hotline staff. In Texas, the retention workgroup has implemented several innovative retention strategies, such as their monthly therapy dog program and a teleworking option for staff.

<sup>1</sup> To learn more, see [How do some states hire, train, and retain their hotline intake screeners? \(APPENDIX\)](#) on [Questions from the field](#).

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