



# The Human Services Workforce Initiative

## *Toward a High Quality Child Welfare Workforce: Six Doable Steps*



Prepared by  
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## **Toward a High Quality Child Welfare Workforce: Six Doable Steps**

### **Cornerstones for Kids Introduction**

The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. HSWI's premise is that human services matter. Delivered well, they can, and do, positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, often at critical points in their lives.

We believe that the quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload, and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover; in others an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork render otherwise capable staff ineffective; and keeping morale up is difficult in the human services fields. It is remarkable that so many human services professionals stick to it, year after year.

HSWI's mission is to work with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a series of publications and other communications efforts we hope to

- β Call greater attention to workforce issues
- β Help to describe and define the status of the human services workforce
- β Disseminate data on current conditions
- β Highlight best and promising practices
- β Suggest systemic and policy actions that can make a deep, long-term difference

In this paper, Susan Robison, a consultant engaged by Cornerstones for Kids, has described a number of promising practices in use across the country to improve the working conditions and quality of the child welfare workforce. These practices are not intended to be an exhaustive list of innovative responses to the child welfare workforce crisis, but are rather a sample of the many ways that those who are committed to addressing workforce issues have attempted to make improvements more central to the work that they do every day. While improving workforce conditions can be a complex and enormous undertaking, the steps outlined here are good places to start. Taken together, these steps would go a long way towards helping today's child welfare workers make a difference for vulnerable children and families. These steps also provide a foundation of knowledge and understanding as we continue to develop technical assistance resources to help child welfare agencies build the workforce of tomorrow.

Additional information on the human services workforce, and on HSWI, is available at <http://www.cornerstone.to/index.htm>.

Cornerstones For Kids  
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## **Introduction**

Many in the child welfare field are committed to exploring and understanding what it takes to build a stable and effective workforce that will lead to better outcomes for children. A number of the steps in this effort may require a significant investment of time, resources, and infrastructure. The scope of changes that are needed, the range of players that must be involved, and the time it will take to build a higher quality workforce that can make a difference in the lives of children and families are formidable. At the same time, there are many strategies that involve comparatively little time or money and can be implemented now.

This paper outlines six immediate, practical, and relatively low-cost steps for building a more effective child welfare workforce. Specific examples are used to illustrate each step and represent an emerging toolbox of creative and collaborative efforts. The profiled individuals and organizations demonstrate commitment, collaboration, and courage to work together in new ways. Besides contributing to worker satisfaction and effectiveness now, these doable steps can help pave the way for even more ambitious strategies in the future.

It is the author's hope that highlighting examples of the successful steps that child welfare agencies and their partners are taking will encourage others. The workforce is the heart of child welfare. As those involved in the child welfare field reach farther to support workers, the core will become stronger. And no one will benefit more than children.

## **Methodology**

The strategies and examples presented here are drawn from a range of sources. The search drew from existing studies and reports, comprehensive Web-based research, legislative and agency documents, presentations at conferences, and colleagues in the field. Using these sources, the author tried to identify state and local agencies working actively to address turnover and the strategies they have employed to reduce it. She then conducted interviews and reviewed material from these agencies and, in some cases, their partner organizations.

The research focused on strategies, activities, and tools that fit informal criteria for being doable: relatively easy to manage, no or low-cost, and possible to implement in a comparatively brief period of time. In addition, the author chose strategies that contribute to more comprehensive or longer-term workforce improvements. Based on this informal assessment and the opinions of the individuals interviewed, the steps and examples included here meet that test. At the same time, this is not an exhaustive inventory of doable strategies nor is it based on scientifically rigorous research. Therefore, the activities that are not included here should not be judged as ineffective. To the contrary, the author believes the examples presented here are the tip of the iceberg and that many more individuals and organizations are taking effective, manageable steps to reduce unwanted staff turnover.

## **How “Doable” Steps Can Contribute to a More Effective Workforce**

The search for manageable improvements in the child welfare workforce has revealed a great deal of activity. Public agency leaders are working with managers, supervisors, frontline staff, human resources professionals, private sector agencies, universities, legislators, unions, and others to strengthen the workforce. Together, these partners are examining what it takes to retain effective staff, using creativity and determination to design strategies that will work, and leveraging existing resources to take positive steps.

One priority is to boost the morale of a workforce that has been battered by tragic outcomes for individual children, media attacks, and lack of public support. There are many ways to let staff know that they are valued and appreciated: positive communication among co-workers, supervisors and administrators; tools that help staff do their jobs; a work environment that provides support and opportunities for growth. Only a few examples of these strategies have been included.

Many actions outlined here also help to change the “culture” of child welfare agencies—reform that when taken on directly can be formidable and elusive. There is no single strategy for the far reaching changes in practices and attitudes that many believe are needed. But, while there are no quick fixes, a range of actions can contribute to a shift in outlook and performance that helps attract and retain effective staff.

## **Low Cost Steps for Addressing a High Cost Problem**

The focus of this report is on steps that, along with their other benefits, offer a high financial return on the investment. In addition to negative outcomes for children, unwanted staff turnover has destructive budgetary consequences. Human resources experts estimate that the costs of replacing an employee are about one-third to one-half of the exiting worker’s annual salary. At the same time, 20 percent annual turnover of child welfare workers is considered low by many sources. If replacing a frontline worker who makes \$27,000 per year costs \$10,000, the price of current turnover rates is enormous.

In contrast, the steps outlined here are all relatively low cost. Although specific savings have not been identified, the agencies implementing these approaches report that many pay for themselves if they prevent the turnover of even a single worker. Countless strategies rely on communication, leadership and time, rather than direct expenditures.

This is not to deny that many featured strategies do require financial resources that agencies are hard-pressed to find. Among those that research indicates make a difference to workers are stipends that provide incentives for recruitment and skill enhancement, technological tools that help staff do their jobs, and information system improvements that reduce paperwork. However, even these are relatively low-cost compared to the price of unwanted turnover.<sup>1</sup>

None of the steps described here will solve the child welfare workforce crisis alone, but all can make a difference for individual workers and provide success on which to build. Many of these steps provide a design for additional strategies and make progress toward

more ambitious changes. By taking small steps, while at the same time working toward more comprehensive reforms, child welfare agencies can make significant progress toward an effective, stable workforce.

### **Six Doable Steps for Improving the Child Welfare Workforce**

#### **1. Moving from an “us versus them” to a “together we can” mindset**

- Knowledge of the workforce through ongoing exit interviews, focus groups, and worker surveys
- A focus on two-way communication
- Modeling strong teamwork

#### **2. Making a strong match with recruitment and hiring**

- Selecting staff with the right competencies for the job
- Attracting diverse staff to improve community match
- Giving recruits an accurate picture of the job
- Using internships

#### **3. Investing in high quality supervision**

- Strengthening supervisors as teachers
- Strengthening supervisors as mentors
- Giving supervisors adequate supports
- Giving supervisors opportunities to practice skills they can pass along
- Using staff feedback to design supervisor training

#### **4. Ensuring that workers have the tools they need**

- Transforming paperwork into a worker-friendly information system
- Taking advantage of technology
- Making training meaningful

#### **5. Recognizing and supporting the private sector**

- Making professional development and training available to private agency staff
- Designing contracting practices to support private agency staff
- Partnering with private agencies to develop and improve training

#### **6. Encouraging and rewarding staff performance**

- Publicly recognizing and rewarding individual staff
- Providing accessible and affordable opportunities for professional development
- Providing bonuses for language skills that are in great demand

## 1. Moving from an “Us Versus Them” to a “Together We Can” Mindset

In some child welfare systems the frontline staff and managers operate as adversaries, instead of as partners and teammates working toward the same results. Although not often a deliberate divide, this attitude may be a deeply entrenched part of agency culture and tradition. Studies show that child welfare workers are strongly affected by organizational factors such as a non-supportive agency climate, dissatisfaction with policies and procedures, and feelings of powerlessness and exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Removing barriers between direct service workers and management can help strengthen the agency and improve outcomes for children and families. In this review of agency practices, alliances between staff and management were found to be strengthened when agency administrators and managers looked critically at their own actions, constantly asked frontline staff and supervisors for their ideas and feedback, and acted on their comments. Most of all, leaders strengthened connections with staff by making building teamwork a cornerstone of efforts to improve outcomes for children and agency performance.

### **Knowledge of the Workforce through Ongoing Exit Interviews, Focus Groups, and Worker Surveys**

The factors and dynamics that affect frontline staff and supervisors are unique to each state and local agency. And they are constantly changing. Understanding current staff and the factors that impact their job satisfaction and performance is a critical step to developing strategies that will improve the workforce.

Routinely collecting information from frontline staff and supervisors helps administrators monitor the work environment and worker satisfaction, identify factors that contribute to staff turnover, and pinpoint problem units or supervisors. Assessment tools are also useful for identifying emerging practice challenges and gauging the usefulness of training and other supports. To develop strategies that will strengthen the state and county workforce, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) recommends that agencies carefully collect information from direct service workers. APHSA has developed a practical, step-by-step guide for conducting exit interviews, focus groups, and surveys of these workers.

#### ◦ **RESOURCES**

- **Workforce Data Collection Field Guide for Human Services Agencies**  
American Public Human Services Association:  
[http://www.aphsa.org/Publications/Doc/Workforce%20Data%20Collection%20Field%20Guide%20\(7-30-03\).doc](http://www.aphsa.org/Publications/Doc/Workforce%20Data%20Collection%20Field%20Guide%20(7-30-03).doc)

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## **A Focus on Two-Way Communication**

Although it is useful to routinely survey frontline workers and monitor the findings, personal interaction between administrators and staff is a key strategy for building teamwork. Communicating directly with frontline staff and supervisors helps administrators identify priority workforce issues, informs meaningful strategies, and reinforces successes. Interaction with leaders who communicate their respect and appreciation for staff while seeking their views and ideas can greatly improve morale. At the same time, it demonstrates to staff throughout the organization that frontline work is prized and it models desired leadership skills.

Richard Anderson, Director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, puts a premium on frequent communication with field staff, who he says have the “most important job.” Such regular interaction keeps him in touch with the conditions and issues of frontline workers and lets staff know that he values them, the jobs they do, and their ideas. His actions have helped reduce staff turnover to 13 percent annually.

- Anderson invites staff to email him directly and responds to each message. He particularly values emails from frontline staff, who keep him up-to-date on developments in the field and suggest steps to improve performance.
- Like many other child welfare administrators, he writes a monthly article for the division newsletter. To help staff get to know him, Anderson tries to personalize the content, and he often asks for their thoughts about practice issues.

### **RESOURCES**

Current and past issues of the newsletter, *Child and Family Services Update*, are available at: <http://dhs.utah.gov/index.htm>

- Annual visits to each of the state’s 130 field offices are a key strategy. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Anderson provides data comparing Utah’s performance with the nation’s and with the division’s past performance. He congratulates staff and talks with them about progress and next steps.
- One of his favorite activities is to gather frontline staff around the conference table and talk about their work. He targets people who have been on the job for six to 12 months, asks them about their work, listens and learns.

## **Modeling Strong Teamwork**

Agency leaders can directly demonstrate effective problem-solving strategies by forging strong partnerships with frontline staff, human resources specialists, private agencies, service consumers, community organizations, the courts, universities, unions, and other stakeholders. Along with many of the strategies featured throughout this report, the following actions by administrators send a message that teamwork is valued and expected.

Partnering with Human Resources: Mike Masternak, former human resources director for Michigan’s Department of Human Services, reports that including the head of

human resources in a department's executive team has had positive results. As they work together day-to-day, administrators gain mutual understanding of staffing and service delivery issues, and they are better equipped to design and implement recruiting, hiring, and retention strategies that work.

**RESOURCE**

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Enlisting Union Partners: According to David Sanders, director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, partnership with the public employees' union was critical for redesigning child welfare service delivery and redeploying staff to provide necessary support for workers. Eager to support staff, union representatives examined workers' responsibilities and provided legislative testimony on behalf of proposed agency changes.

**RESOURCE**

No longer available on Internet.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Teams: A partnership in New York between the SUNY-Albany School of Social Welfare, Social Work Education Consortium and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services is using design teams to develop worker retention strategies. Each participating local team includes new and experienced frontline staff, supervisors, managers, and administrators all the way up to the commissioner. Naysayers are intentionally included. Drawing heavily on input from frontline staff helps teams stay connected to workers' needs.

**RESOURCE**

No longer available on Internet.

Including Policymakers: Pennsylvania's Recruitment and Retention Task Force has been working together for eight years. Core members (from the state agency, county child and family services administrators, state civil service commission, state training group, and university) are joined by other organizations to address particular issues. For example, the legislative budget and finance committee recently conducted a study

of the state civil service system and joined the group to follow up on its recommendations. Including authorized decision-makers has enabled the group to directly affect state policy. For instance, the state residency requirement for child welfare positions was dropped—a change that allows recruitment of individuals living in the bedroom communities of bordering states.

**RESOURCE**

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<http://www.pcy.org/Pages/default.aspx> (PCYA Web address)

Partnering with Local Agencies, Service Consumers, and Staff to Respond to Community Diversity: The Greenbook Project is a collaborative effort of public and private agencies in El Paso County, Colorado, to ensure effective intervention in cases that involve domestic violence and child maltreatment. The project surveyed staff and customers to assess agencies' effectiveness in serving the community's diverse cultures. Topics covered in the surveys include the diversity of service delivery staff, organizational environment, and other factors related to cultural competence. Participating agencies are using the survey findings to develop strategies for improvement.

**RESOURCE**

The El Paso County, Colorado, *Greenbook Cultural Competency Organizational Self-Assessment Toolkit* is available at:  
[http://www.thegreenbook.info/documents/El\\_Paso\\_toolkit.pdf](http://www.thegreenbook.info/documents/El_Paso_toolkit.pdf)

## 2. Making a Good Match with Recruitment and Hiring

At their best, recruitment and hiring involve a mutual selection process that results in a good fit between the worker and the job. When well designed and implemented, the process can significantly reduce turnover of employees who have been on the job for only six to twelve months—when turnover is most likely to occur. Research shows that people who leave their jobs during this time believe they made a bad career choice. According to a 1997 study, people who find work environments that match their skills, abilities, and values are more satisfied and less likely to leave.<sup>3</sup>

A careful match between applicant and job helps ensure that new employees are able to perform the job well and helps to keep them there. It also saves money. Making good hiring decisions avoids

- training and other job preparation expenses for staff who do not stay with the job
- disruption, stress, and performance problems for remaining staff who must assume the caseloads of departing staff
- the cost of recruiting, hiring, and preparing a replacement

Job candidates need opportunities to question, reflect, and assess their fit with the job. Child welfare agencies can carefully structure the recruitment and hiring process to

- give the recruit a realistic picture of the job and the agency
- learn whether the candidate has the skills to succeed
- ensure that mutual expectations are clear
- provide tools and opportunities for reflection by both the recruit and the agency

Among the strategies that state and local agencies are using to improve job fit are competency-based hiring, diversity recruitment efforts, realistic job previews, and involvement of current staff in the interview and selection process.

### **Selecting Staff with the Right Competencies for the Job**

The Maine Child Welfare Training Institute, a partnership between the University of Southern Maine and the State Bureau of Child and Family Services, conducts a range of projects to improve professional development and organizational effectiveness. The institute has engaged human resources experts—both the Bureau of Human Resources, an office within the Department of Administrative and Financial Services, as well as the human resources staff within the human services department—to help reduce worker turnover and improve a hiring process that was frustratingly inefficient and ineffective. Human resources staff provide training on legal and contract issues related to screening, partner in developing a database to track turnover and improve recruitment strategies, and serve on the institute’s steering committee.

The Child Welfare Institute and its partners focus on five types of worker competencies: work management, conceptual (using information effectively), interpersonal, self-management, and technical knowledge (information necessary to perform the job). In 1995, they revised the hiring process to screen job candidates using the identified competencies. The institute designed a curriculum and provides training to help supervisors focus on competencies when they hire frontline staff.

- **RESOURCES**
- **The Maine Child Welfare Training Institute homepage is available at:**  
<http://www.cwti.org/>
- **Contact:**  
Freda Bernatovicz  
Director, Institute for Public Sector Innovation  
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[Freda.Bernotavicz@maine.gov](mailto:Freda.Bernotavicz@maine.gov) (email)

### **Attracting Diverse Staff to Improve Community Match**

In addition to hiring staff with appropriate professional competencies, many agencies are working to ensure that staff represent the communities they serve in both cultural diversity and ethnicity. Hiring staff who understand cultural customs and norms and who speak the languages of service consumers can help improve both frontline practice and the agency's fit with the community. Some California counties use targeted strategies such as community job fairs to increase the diversity of recruits.

The El Paso County, Colorado, Department of Human Services created a Diversity Coalition to lead efforts to recruit and retain minority staff. The coalition, which includes staff from all levels of the department, has developed and promoted a broad range of strategies aimed at making the agency a more diverse and welcoming work environment. It conducts brown bag lunches that feature training and discussion of cultural issues, fosters connections with community residents, monitors the ethnic composition of department staff, makes recommendations to the department's executive committee, and issues an annual progress report.

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**
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### **Giving Recruits an Accurate Picture of the Job**

Realistic job previews provided at the right time in the application process can help reduce early turnover. Human resources research suggests that new workers who leave their jobs may be misled by organizations that try to sell themselves or provide applicants with incomplete impressions about the nature of the work.<sup>4</sup> Even child welfare recruits who have completed social work education programs are often unprepared for the complexity and challenges of frontline practice. Realistic job previews help ensure that candidates' expectations are aligned with actual job responsibilities and may lead to new hires who are better prepared to cope with the job requirements and conditions.

A growing number of states and local jurisdictions (including Delaware, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, Pennsylvania counties, parts of Texas, and some California counties) use videos to provide realistic previews of the job. The videos often portray a "typical" day in the life of a child welfare worker—depicting work with families, the courts, and staff, as well as paperwork and other activities. The Delaware child welfare agency reports that the \$5,000 production cost for its video has been repaid many times over.

Michigan's video provides a realistic portrayal of the challenges and stresses that child protection and foster care caseworkers face, as well as the reasons they stay on the job. Preliminary research indicates that this honest depiction led about ten percent of prospective recruits to abandon the application process, caused about 20 percent to give

more intentional, honest thought to their ability to handle the challenges, and left 70 percent still interested and feeling better prepared.<sup>5</sup> Researchers in Nebraska found that applicants used the video to eliminate themselves from the hiring process, allowing the agency to focus on candidates better suited to the job.<sup>6</sup>

CPS Human Resources Services is developing a “Realistic Job Preview Toolkit” with detailed information, including how states can produce their own videos.

◦ **RESOURCES**

◦ For more on the Realistic Job Preview, see [http://www.cpsshr.us/workforceplanning/documents/06.02\\_realistic\\_job\\_preview.pdf](http://www.cpsshr.us/workforceplanning/documents/06.02_realistic_job_preview.pdf)

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After conducting a comprehensive job analysis of county child welfare caseworker positions, the Pennsylvania State Civil Service Commission prepared a job preview video at its own cost. The video, which describes the work of county caseworkers who provide child protection and other child welfare services, is widely distributed through the internet, libraries, state employment offices, county child welfare agencies, universities, and the commission. County agencies use it as a hiring tool; universities use it in social work education classes, pre-service training, and routine training for new workers; and interested individuals use it to explore career options.

◦ **RESOURCE**

◦ The video can be viewed on-line at: <http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/Videos.htm>

### **Using Internships**

Riverside County, Madera County, and Fresno County, California, are among the jurisdictions that use internships as a tool for recruitment, as well as learning. Internships allow undergraduate and MSW students to become familiar with the child welfare agency and the work, while agency staff can get to know the student and assess the individual’s skills and job fit.

The intern/volunteer/work study program of the El Paso County, Colorado, Department of Human Services has attracted students (and potential job candidates) from areas throughout the United States and from Europe. Between 1998 and fall 2005, 147 students participated, including current employees. In addition to attracting new staff, the program allows current workers who are continuing their education to perform a practicum in a

new area within the department. Because there is no compensation from the department, internships are a cost-effective opportunity for the agency to assess the individuals' fit with the work.

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**  
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### 3. Investing in High Quality Supervision

There is a saying common in both the business world and the public sector: “People don’t quit their jobs or companies. They quit their supervisors.” Staff surveys, agency performance reviews, and other research consistently link strong supervision to worker satisfaction and retention.<sup>7</sup> Supervisors who support, teach, and coach frontline workers can make a big difference in how workers perform and whether they stay in their current positions. Effective supervisors model appropriate behaviors, teach specific skills, provide encouragement and correction, and review workers’ actions and decisions. With skilled supervisors in place, training is integrated into frontline work on a daily basis.

#### Strengthening Supervisors as Teachers

In Maine, the trainer, the supervisor, and the new worker meet before, during, and after new worker training. Together, they create a learning and professional development plan that includes distance learning, journaling and self-reflection, classroom training, job shadowing, and coaching by experienced workers and the supervisor. The trainer and supervisor also establish a learning and partnership contract with each other, pledging to freely share information concerning classroom and on-the-job observations with the goal of ensuring a good worker-agency match. More than once, a new worker’s employment has been terminated due to concerns raised by classroom behavior.

- **RESOURCES**
- For details about Maine’s pre-service training, see:  
<http://www.cwti.org/Training/staff.htm>
- **Contact:**  
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- Draft supervisory standards are available at:  
<http://www.cwti.org/RR/SupStandards.htm>

### **Strengthening Supervisors as Mentors**

The Delaware Department of Services to Children, Youth and Families has implemented a range of workforce initiatives that are credited with reducing staff turnover from 40 to 20 percent in a two-year period. Among these initiatives is a focus on mentoring and coaching. The agency defined mentoring and established written standards and competencies. Supervisors select experienced line staff, usually family crisis therapists, to complete special training and serve as mentors. These mentors then coach new staff who have completed core training. Mentors receive no extra payment or caseload reduction, but report that they obtain great satisfaction from working with other staff.

The department also found that supervisors overseeing more than one new worker at a time were not able to provide the support that new staff needed. In regions with a large number of new staff, “coaching units” were established to ensure that new workers received the training they needed and to prevent supervisors from being spread too thinly. Now, all new staff in these regions are assigned to coaching units, in which supervisors work very closely with them to ensure that they are prepared for their permanent assignments later. Workers report that they feel better prepared to move into permanent positions as a result.

- **RESOURCE**

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### **Giving Supervisors All the Supports They Need**

Investing in organizational support for supervisors can help ensure that frontline staff in turn have the on-the-job support they need. Manageable staff/supervisor ratios that allow time to work one-on-one with staff increase supervisors’ capacity to help workers as they make critical decisions (rather than being restricted to reviewing decisions after they are made). Training specifically for supervisors is a need that many agencies are working to meet. In California, for example, 42 of the state’s 58 counties provide some type of supervisor training. Strategies that support supervisors are best constructed with input from supervisors and direct service workers.

When Viola Miller took over as commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, she quickly realized that supervisors were the weakest element in the department. To improve their functioning, the commissioner herself began doing supervisor training around the state and helped the state’s training consortium develop competency-based training for supervisors. The consortium is now retraining every worker and supervisor in the public agency.

### **Giving Supervisors Opportunities to Practice Skills**

After discovering that poor decision-making was partly to blame for several high-profile tragedies, Arizona's Child Protective Services reform initiative began working to improve practice throughout the child welfare system. The state child welfare agency had Arizona State University conduct a needs assessment of supervisors. The study found that the agency's supervisors are highly committed individuals who value opportunities to learn from their peers above classroom training or instruction.

With these preferences in mind, the agency and university are developing quarterly group sessions for all supervisors and assistant program managers, which will be part of ongoing, required supervisor training. Supervisors bring cases to staff and practice their decision-making skills, and the assistant program managers provide information on new agency policies and practices. Supervisors pass on the skills they learn to case managers, integrating better decision-making throughout the agency.

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**  
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With a grant from the federal Children's Bureau, universities and child welfare agencies in four southern states (Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee) are conducting "learning laboratory" projects to improve supervision. Each project emphasizes on-the-job skill-building in addition to classroom training for supervisors. Arkansas is focusing on mentoring of supervisors by field educators. Classroom training for supervisors is

followed by mentoring strategies that are especially useful for supervisors in small offices where daily, face-to-face support is not available. Support for supervisors in the field includes:

- direct mentoring every other week using structured on-the-job activities
- on-line educational offerings
- peer group sessions using video conferencing to practice applying theory to actual case/supervision situations

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**  
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### **Engaging Supervisors in Preventing Turnover**

In Delaware, supervisors have been key to reducing turnover by half. The child welfare division's goal is to continue reducing turnover until it is below ten percent throughout the state. The individual performance plan of each regional administrator and assistant regional administrator (the staff who supervise supervisors) sets the expectation that frontline staff turnover will not exceed ten percent, though each region has its own goals based on past performance. If unit turnover tops this target, a corrective action plan is developed for supervisors, and they receive specialized training. The agency uses routine exit interviews and informal "stay" interviews with workers to evaluate supervisors' effectiveness. Findings indicate that high worker turnover rates are more likely to stem from the personality of supervisors than their practice skills.

- **RESOURCE**

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### **Using Staff Feedback to Design Supervisory Training and Support.**

A growing number of state agencies and university-agency partnerships are using information from supervisors themselves to design training and support that fits their needs and preferences. Supervisors report that they value being part of a "feedback loop" that designs and adjusts training in response to their input. Some states are including frontline staff in the loop as a way to ensure that supports for supervisors contribute to the effectiveness and retention of frontline practitioners.

The Massachusetts Department of Social Services, working with Salem State College School of Social Work, is using supervisor and worker input to develop plans for supervisor training and certification. Focus groups of supervisors have suggested strategies for supervisor training, and an advisory committee composed of workers, supervisors, and program managers has formed to review and give feedback on a framework for supervisor certification.

The southern regional supervision learning laboratories in Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee are collecting both quantitative and qualitative information from supervisors. Supervisors report that on-the-job learning and support are critical in sustaining and enhancing the classroom instruction they receive. They say that the organizational culture has improved as a result of better supports and that they now have the ability and responsibility to improve outcomes for children.

- **RESOURCES**
- For more information about the Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center for Child Protection Supervision Learning Laboratory Projects, see:  
[www.uky.edu/SocialWork/trc](http://www.uky.edu/SocialWork/trc)
- **Contact:**
  - Crystal Collins-Camargo
  - Training Resource Center
  - University of Kentucky College of Social Work
  - 1 Quality Street, Suite 700
  - Lexington, KY 40507
  - 859-257-5476 (p)
  - [Crystal.Collins-Camargo@uky.edu](mailto:Crystal.Collins-Camargo@uky.edu)

#### **4. Ensuring that Workers Have the Tools They Need**

While supervisory support is critical, it alone does not ensure that workers have what they need to do their jobs. Worker focus groups, exit interviews, and other research stress the importance of ensuring that workers have adequate tools and resources to fulfill their mission of improved outcomes for children and families. Only direct feedback from frontline staff can determine the specific tools that will help them do their jobs better.

Supporting workers generally means minimizing the time they spend on tasks that take them away from their direct work with families. In Los Angeles County, for example, the two reasons that most child welfare workers leave is supervision and travel time. The long hours spent moving across the county's huge geographic area affect workers' quality of life and their direct contact with children and families. To help relieve travel time for individual workers and to strengthen the workforce overall, the child welfare agency has redesigned jobs to allow team service delivery and has redeployed ten percent of its staff to put more workers on the frontlines.

Strategies that can make a difference for workers include streamlining burdensome paperwork, using technology effectively, and ensuring that time spent in training is meaningful to the work.

##### **Transforming Paperwork Into a Worker-Friendly Information System**

Research suggests that frontline staff spend an astonishing amount of their time—between 40 and 80 percent—on documentation tasks required for state information management systems.<sup>8</sup> Detailed reports must be made regarding child and family visits, changes in the child's status, court-related tasks, and additional activities of daily practice. Reducing time-consuming paperwork and data entry and redirecting practitioners' time to work with children and families has a variety of potential benefits. Staff are able to do the work they love, they are more likely to stay on the job, fewer

frontline staff are needed for the same amount of service delivery, and fewer new staff must be recruited, hired, trained, and supervised.

Alabama and Oregon are among those jurisdictions where public agency caseworkers deliver their notes from field visits to support staff, who enter the information into the state data system.

One of the goals of Iowa's child welfare redesign, "Better Results for Kids," was to eliminate the burdens of unnecessary paperwork. As part of extensive planning that shaped the redesign, the Department of Human Services identified critical decision-making points for caseworkers, how decisions and actions are documented, and how the information is used. Planners realized that they needed to go beyond reducing the paperwork. They set out to align paperwork with case decisions and use it to support casework.

With the help of a consultant and some programmers, the department began developing its Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) as a case management tool, reducing worker reports, and incorporating online task screens that help workers make important decisions. For instance, when a worker reaches a critical decision point in a child's case, such as a placement decision, she can find guidance by clicking on relevant policies and procedures.

While this portion of the redesign is still a work in progress, paperwork has been reduced, duplicative practices have been eliminated, and communication has increased. For example, in the past child abuse staff conducted a risk assessment, but often the information was not passed along to the child's ongoing caseworker, who repeated the assessment. Now, the risk assessment findings are part of the online case plan. The assessment automatically uploads into the case plan along with other information including case history, court hearing schedules, and reports.

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**
  - Mary Nelson
  - Division Administrator
  - Division of Behavioral, Developmental and Protective Services for Families, Adults and Children
  - Iowa Department of Human Services
  - 515-281-5521 (p)

### **Taking Advantage of Technology**

Access to cell phones, pagers, laptops, and other equipment allows workers to

- complete work during the downtime that occurs between appointments and with court procedures
- stay in touch with office information and supervision

- ensure their safety by making their whereabouts known and allowing calls for back-up if needed

As part of Florida’s efforts to improve child protective services, investigative staff are supplied with cell phones, digital cameras, and laptops.

### **Making Sure Training is Meaningful**

Effective adult learning provides opportunities to apply principles to “real” situations, to interact with peers and coaches, and to practice new skills. Agencies use both classroom sessions and on-the-job training to connect practice theories with actual job responsibilities and situations. To be sure that training helps workers do their jobs, agencies monitor their satisfaction and performance and include frontline staff and supervisors in designing training.

Due to new funding appropriated to hire staff and to ongoing staff turnover, about half of Arizona’s frontline child welfare workers have been on the job less than one year. To train new case managers, the Arizona Department of Economic Security developed its CORE curriculum. Two weeks of “foundation” training are followed by four weeks using a prototype case moving through the system to teach use of practice tools, critical thinking strategies, and other skills. Hands-on activities in computer labs help staff learn how to report and use case information. Foster care alumni conduct a workshop intended to cultivate workers’ understanding and empathy. Juvenile court simulation, which teaches workers how to provide testimony and work with the judiciary, is conducted in a courtroom and facilitated by attorneys general.

After the CORE training, new Arizona workers enter the field training stage. Coaches and field training supervisors work with the new case managers. Reduced caseloads are maintained until staff have been with the agency for 24 weeks.

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**  
Holli Sanger  
Training Manager for Child Protective Services  
Arizona Department of Economic Security  
HSanger@azdes.gov (email)

## **5. Recognizing and Supporting the Private Sector Workforce**

The practice of contracting with the private sector for child welfare services has become widespread in many states and localities. In Illinois, 80 percent of child welfare services are provided under contract with private agencies. In Florida, all child welfare services except child protection investigations are provided by community-based lead agencies (local nonprofit organizations) or their subcontractors.

Private child welfare agencies report that annual turnover averages 40 percent—up to twice as high as the rates in public agencies. Staff of private agencies have the same needs and many of the same issues as their public agency peers, but their salaries and benefits are usually lower, and their access to training and other supports may be more limited. If services are provided by the private sector, it is important not to simply hand off the problems of the public child welfare workforce to private agencies or to require that private agencies meet caseload, certification, and other standards without regard for the resources required. Private agency staff must be full members of the child welfare team.

### **Making Professional Development and Training Available to Private Agency Staff**

A number of public child welfare agencies (including those in Kentucky, Illinois, and New York) allow staff of private provider agencies to participate in public agency training or provide training for them in other ways. However, there are federal financial disincentives for this practice. Even though Title IV-E requires that the federal government reimburse states 75 percent for allowable training costs, this reimbursement does not apply to training for private agency workers. To help extend training opportunities to private staff, state agencies often claim private worker training as an administrative expense, which is eligible for federal reimbursement at the lower rate of 50 percent.

Public agencies and training consortia report that private organizations often are unable to spare workers from the frontline to attend training or professional development sessions. Designing training in collaboration with private agencies helps to ensure that topics, scheduling, and delivery approaches are useful and accessible.

The University of Kentucky Training Resource Center's Residential Worker Competency Project (RWCP) uses Title IV-E administrative funds to train staff of private agencies that contract with the state's child welfare agency or juvenile justice agency. Trainees include, but are not limited to, staff of emergency shelters, group homes, residential treatment facilities, psychiatric residential treatment facilities, acute psychiatric facilities, and therapeutic foster care facilities.

The objective is to provide high-quality professional training opportunities to all eligible private agency staff at no cost to the contract agency. The project offers an array of opportunities for staff at various levels of their careers and with a variety of scheduling needs. Although some offerings are designed in a traditional classroom format, others—such as on-line courses, one-day workshops, and intensive multi-day sessions—provide more flexibility. Some sessions may involve transportation and lodging expenses for participants, but no fees are charged. An assortment of courses is available for undergraduate or graduate university credit at no charge.

- **RESOURCE**
- **Contact:**  
University Training Consortium  
859-622-6212 (p)

### **Designing Contracting Practices to Support Private Agency Staff**

In Washington, 70 percent of the Department of Social and Health Services' \$8 billion annual budget goes to private contractors. A private Washington agency that is a longtime provider of child welfare services reports that changes in contracting practices have forced it to transition 60 percent of its staff to hourly wages, a practice that undermines staff recruitment, retention, and effectiveness. In the past, contracts were for a stable amount of funding per case with the expectation that the contract agency would see a certain number of clients and with penalties for poor performance. Now, private contract agencies bill the state by the hour for most services. The private sector blames this practice for staff utilization problems.

Upon taking office in March 2005, the new Secretary of the Washington Department of Social and Family Services announced that improving relationships between the department and its contract agencies is a top priority. The Children's Administration is reviewing hundreds of provider contracts to identify and solve problems. As a long-term strategy, the department is updating its 1970s-era information system for Medicaid management, which pays health care and social service providers of Medicaid-reimbursable services. Using 10 percent state and 90 percent federal funding to purchase the costly new system, the department plans eventually to use the system for all contract payments—a move it anticipates will simplify payments for providers and the agency.

### **Partner with Private Agencies to Develop and Improve Training**

With the exception of child protection investigations (which are handled primarily by local sheriffs' offices), the Florida Department for Children and Families contracts out most child welfare services to Community-Based Care lead agencies. In each of the state's 12 districts, the private, nonprofit lead agency directly provides services or subcontracts with other nonprofits. Florida state statutes require that direct service workers are certified, and department contracts reinforce this requirement by stipulating that lead agencies ensure that workers are certified for the specific services they provide.

Training and worker certification is much "like law school." All workers must pass a certification exam, but the way they gain the knowledge and skills to become certified may vary. Money for training is allocated to each district, sheriff's office, and the department's central office. The Florida Department for Children and Families recently created a permanent Training Excellence Task Force. The task force is a partnership of the department and community-based care agencies and is co-chaired by a department district administrator and the CEO of a lead agency. Plans for the task force include

- selecting and overseeing a new state training academy that will train and certify trainers
- developing a standard, core curriculum that allows local flexibility to respond to community practice issues by adding enhancements
- acting as a quality improvement team that monitors the effectiveness of training and certification and makes improvements as needed

- **RESOURCE**
- For more information on the Training Excellence Task Force, contact:  
Nancy Dreicer, Co-Chair  
District Administrator,  
Florida Department of Children and Families  
904-723-2000 (p)

## 6. Encourage and Reward Staff Performance

A body of research links child welfare worker burnout and job dissatisfaction with lack of a sense of accomplishment, achievement, and recognition—even the specific absence of a reward or recognition program.<sup>9</sup> Letting workers know that they are valued and recognizing them for a job well done can go far toward boosting morale and retaining staff. Recognition can take many forms, which are limited by creativity more than funding. In fact, salaries, though important, may not be as rewarding as personal recognition. Treating frontline staff and supervisors as full partners in the agency by inviting their feedback and ideas is a prime example of an effective strategy.

### **Publicly Recognize and Reward Individual Staff**

Seeing the difference they make in a child’s life keeps many staff working on the demanding front lines of child welfare agencies. In Maine, each fall the Child Welfare Training Institute and Bureau of Child Welfare Services sponsor a conference for staff that features a presentation by a nationally recognized, inspirational, and educational speaker. A conference hallmark is a videotape with comments from people for whom child welfare staff have had a positive impact. Testimonials from youth, families, and professionals who work with frontline staff focus on the importance of each worker and appreciation of his or her skills and style.

- **RESOURCE**
- For information about the Maine Child Welfare Training Institute and many strategies for recruiting and retaining staff, see:  
<http://www.cwti.org/RR/index.htm>

Richard Anderson, Director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, notes the lack of accolades for child welfare work. In his agency, each region submits the names of people who should be recognized. The state board then visits each region, awards plaques for outstanding performance, and congratulates staff. Sometimes, the board is joined by local legislators in thanking and recognizing staff.

- **RESOURCE**
- The newsletter of the Division of Child and Family Services provides recognition for “Heroes for Families” award recipients and other staff who demonstrate special professional competence; available at:  
No longer available on Internet

A staff committee of the El Paso County, Colorado, Department of Human Services placed achievement bulletin boards at three locations within department offices. They use the boards to display pictures, descriptions of staff accomplishments, letters of recognition and other accolades from staff, community members, and customers. The department also presents “Professional Best Awards” to individuals selected in part from staff nominations.

- **RESOURCE**
- For more information, contact:  
Dolores Nelson  
El Paso County Department of Human Services  
719-444-5529 (p)  
[doloresnelson@elpasoco.com](mailto:doloresnelson@elpasoco.com) (email)

California counties report using the following strategies to recognize social workers:

- Staff acknowledgements during meetings
- Recognition in newsletters
- Star awards or employee-of-the-month awards
- Awards luncheons, parties or picnics
- Celebration of social worker appreciation month
- Small monthly prize drawings
- Treating staff with respect on a daily basis

### **Provide Accessible and Affordable Opportunities for Professional Development**

Financial incentives for increasing workers’ skills and education serve the dual purposes of improving worker capacity and increasing retention and recruitment of qualified staff. Stipends and tuition reimbursement for staff who further their education are powerful tools. These benefits may be especially useful for attracting and retaining younger workers, who want to see a clear road for future learning. Other creative approaches focus on removing barriers to professional development activities for busy staff.

Kentucky’s university-agency training consortium has developed several tuition reimbursement and stipend programs, including a pre-employment preparation program for BSWs and an MSW stipend program. The innovative Credit for Learning program, which helps new and tenured staff receive university graduate credit, is a recent addition to the professional development opportunities available to state social workers. The consortium worked with the deans of the public university graduate social work programs to develop courses that qualify for university credit. Through Credit for Learning, new staff now can earn six hours of credit for completion of basic training courses that replace the basic training previously provided. University faculty and state trainers provide the instruction, and the credits earned are transferable among the three participating MSW programs.

- **RESOURCES**

- The Kentucky University Training Consortium describes “Credit for Learning” and other professional development opportunities; available at <http://www.utc.eku.edu/>

An Annual Report tracks developments and accomplishments; available at <http://www.utc.eku.edu/>

- **Contact:**

Steve Fox  
Director of University Relations  
University Training Consortium  
502-545-1927 (p)  
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In 1999, the Maine Department of Human Services (DHS) developed an MSW program that is accessible for workers. The department worked with the state Child Welfare Training Institute to offer tuition reimbursement and release time (an hour per week) for staff attending on-site classes delivered in DHS offices and by teleconference to outlying sites. Now, most first-year, core MSW courses are available through this arrangement. Tuition reimbursement, coupled with “flex time,” compressed work weeks, and other flexible scheduling options, provides additional opportunities for staff to further their professional development.

- **RESOURCE**

- Maine’s Professional Development Handbook contains policies, eligibility requirements, and other information regarding the Tuition Reimbursement Program and On-Site Program; available at <http://www.cwti.org/Projects/pdhandbook.pdf>

Many state and local agencies, including the El Paso County, Colorado, Department of Human Services, provide individual and group supervision that meets the supervision requirements for staff seeking licensing as clinical social workers. This helps staff improve their professional credentials while on the job.

### **Provide Bonuses for Language Skills That Are in Great Demand**

One way that child welfare agencies are responding to the cultural and linguistic diversity of families and children is with rewards for bilingual workers. These strategies help attract staff with needed skills, encourage workers to improve their skills, and reward employee efforts.

Thirty-eight California counties offer a pay differential for bilingual social workers. The bonus may be

- an additional percentage over the base salary (usually 5 percent)
- an additional amount per hour or pay period (ranging from \$.25 to \$1.15 per hour or from \$20 to about \$140 per month)
- additional pay based on the number of languages spoken and/or the extent to which bilingual skills are used on the job

The Arizona Department of Economic Security offers a stipend for frontline child protection staff and supervisors who are proficient in Spanish, Navajo, Hopi, or sign language. In fiscal year 2004, 252 employees took a verbal fluency exam administered by an independent contractor, and 191 were certified as bilingual.

In El Paso County, Colorado, the Department of Human Services' efforts to promote workforce diversity include a systematic approach for equitably rewarding staff with bilingual skills. The department hired a private language consultant from the community and tested staff in their written, spoken, and translation proficiency. Differential payment is based on skill level as well as the extent to which bilingual skills are needed to do each staff person's job. Plans are to expand the approach to sign language and to interpreter services for a variety of languages.

- **RESOURCE**
- For more information, contact:  
 Dolores Nelson  
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 719-444-5529 (p)  
[doloresnelson@elpasoco.com](mailto:doloresnelson@elpasoco.com) (email)

## Conclusion

Despite enormous challenges, many organizations and individuals are taking steps to strengthen the child welfare workforce. The examples highlighted here are just a sampling of the efforts underway. Many strong partnerships and determined leaders are putting good ideas into practice. This report acknowledges the practices that have been identified and hopes to encourage all of the others who are undertaking their own efforts.

Along with monitoring and encouraging these relatively immediate steps, longer term workforce improvements will require the support of policy solutions incorporating strategies for reinvesting the resources currently spent responding to unwanted staff turnover into building a stronger workforce. Ambitious strategies, such as effective use of workforce data, workforce planning, higher compensation, and caseload reduction, will have to be pursued while taking the steps that are possible today.

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- <sup>9</sup> American Public Human Services Association, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey*; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *The Unsolved Challenge*; Center for the Study of Social Policy *Improving the Quality of Human Services*.