



# Balancing Head & Heart

## California's Child Welfare Workforce

The overarching goal of the field of social work is to alleviate suffering and empower individuals, groups, and communities to make the most of their own strengths and resources. Child welfare caseworkers hold the complex role of balancing their legally mandated responsibility to protect children from neglect and abuse, with the goal of keeping families together. The work can be further complicated by the fact that many parents are challenged by substance use disorders, mental illness, and a variety of societal inequities that make it difficult for them to care for their children.

The goals of this issue of *insights* are to examine the valuable and complex work performed by California's child welfare workforce and to highlight both the challenges and opportunities to strengthen and support the field.

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- Role of the child welfare caseworker
- Facts and stats on California's child welfare workforce
- Personal stories of challenge, connection and commitment
- Challenges and promising strategies
- Moving forward

“While investigating a referral, I asked a young girl if she knew what a social worker does. She replied, ‘You take kids away from their families.’ Over time, I showed her how I serve families and keep kids safe. I spoke with her several months later, and asked the same question. She exclaimed, ‘You help kids and families!’”

*John Viet, Protective Services Caseworker,  
San Francisco County*

“Our child welfare workforce performs one of the most vital, challenging and complicated roles imaginable by ensuring the safety and success of our vulnerable children and families. We owe them not only deep respect, but also our best thinking on how to remove barriers so they can do their best work.”

*Honorable Karen Bass, Congresswoman*

<sup>1</sup> “A qualitative study of child welfare professionals’ perspectives about factors contributing to retention and turnover.” Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, Dews, 2006. [Abstract here](#)

## Role of the Child Welfare Caseworker



**This job is unfathomably hard and thankless.**

**These are really skilled people with deep knowledge and compassion, and yet there is a massive disconnect between what society expects caseworkers to accomplish and what they are able to do in the complex environment they work in."**

***Frank Mecca, Executive Director, County Welfare Directors Association of California***

Child welfare caseworkers are at the core of the child welfare system, investigating reports of abuse and neglect; developing child and family centered case plans, and making recommendations in court. They are also responsible for coordinating substance use, mental health, or supplemental services to keep families intact and prevent the need for foster care; arranging temporary placements when children must be removed from their homes; and facilitating placement with permanent families when biological parents are unable to safely care for their children. In some agencies, caseworkers perform multiple functions from hotline investigations of abuse or neglect to placement; in others, they specialize in areas such as investigations, reunification/family preservation or adoptions.

Supervisors in a county child welfare agency also play a critical mentorship and leadership role to help caseworkers fulfill their role of meeting the needs of families and carrying out the agency's mission.

While it's important to describe the functional role of a child welfare caseworker, the definitions don't convey the emotional intensity and societal burden that caseworkers experience every day. Imagine going to work wanting nothing more than to help families stay together, while ensuring children are safe and able to thrive in loving homes. Yet there are many factors in communities and families, all of which are out of a caseworker's control, that are at odds with their goal — poverty, homelessness, substance use disorders, mental illness, trauma, historical racism/inequities. Despite their best efforts to ensure a family stays together, they sometimes have to remove a child from the only family he or she has known. They know this will fundamentally change the course of the child's life. This reality is intensified by the knowledge that no matter what they do, someone may question their actions. And in the public's mind, it is not the agency that has done wrong, it is often the individual caseworker.



**There's so much at stake for these families and navigating the principles of child protection requires a cadre of professionals ready to take on the challenge, prepared to embrace complexity, and poised to serve thoughtfully."**

***Jill Duerr Berrick, Zellerbach Family Foundation Professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley***

## By The Numbers

Based on county-reported data from California's fiscal year 2017 Annual Training Survey, the child welfare workforce consists of approximately 12,000 line staff caseworkers and supervisors combined. Comparing this to the total number of California social workers (Table 1), child welfare caseworkers make up nearly half (42%) of the Child, Family and School Social Workers classification, and 18% of total social workers in the state.<sup>2</sup> However, child welfare and school social workers are amongst the lowest paid across social work specialties.

Similar to the national employment growth trend for social workers (see sidebar), the long-term employment outlook overall for social workers in California appears promising with an estimated 14% growth projected in California between 2012 and 2022.<sup>3</sup> The fastest growing social worker sub-field is health care with 24% growth expected during this time period. With growing media attention paid to mental health and substance use disorders, incoming students may gravitate towards that specialty. Acknowledging these trends, in combination with the daily challenges and relatively low pay of a child welfare caseworker role, experts are concerned about attracting and retaining new child welfare caseworkers in the coming years.

**TABLE 1: California Social Worker Workforce by Profession**

Type	Number Employed	Average Annual Salary
Child, Family, and School Social Workers*	28,540	\$51,410
Healthcare Social Workers	13,570	\$67,860
Mental Health and Substance use Social Workers	11,990	\$57,900
Social Workers, All Other	13,870	\$64,390
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67,970</b>	

\*Includes California's child welfare caseworkers.  
Source: The Bureau of Labor Statistics as of May 2014

“California’s availability of on-campus ‘student seats’ in social work programs has decreased in recent years, despite the fact that social work is one of the fastest growing professions nationally. Social work programs are often perceived as too expensive to run.”

*Jeffrey Edleson, Dean in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley*

### Child Welfare Workforce - National Trend

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics classifies child welfare workers under the category of “child and family social workers.” The demand for child and family social workers is expected to increase by 20 percent through 2020.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, [May 2014 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, California](#)

<sup>3</sup> Projections Central: [Long Term Occupational Projections](#)

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics

## A Closer Look

**TABLE 2: California's Child Welfare Workforce**

<b>TOTAL CHILD WELFARE SERVICE STAFF</b>		
	12,009	100%
Line Caseworkers	9,992	83%
Line Supervisors	2,017	17%
<b>AGE</b>		
20 - 30	2,039	17%
31 - 40	3,723	31%
41 - 50	3,247	27%
Over 50	2,528	21%
Unknown	472	4%
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	2,041	17%
Female	9,867	82%
Unknown	101	1%
<b>EDUCATION</b>		
<b>MSW</b>		
Line Caseworkers	2,265	23%
Supervisors	585	29%
<b>BSW</b>		
Line Caseworkers	896	9%
Supervisors	68	3%
<b>Other</b>		
Line Caseworkers	2,139	21%
Supervisors	406	20%
<b>Unknown</b>		
Line Caseworkers	4,692	47%
Supervisors	958	47%

Source: California Fiscal Year 2017 Annual Training Survey Report

Each year, counties are required to report compliance with California's Common Core Curricula, initially developed by California's statewide training system, to ensure newly hired supervisors and line caseworkers receive a standard set of training. The Annual Training Survey report provides one of the most detailed and comprehensive looks at the makeup of California's child welfare workforce.

Although only a snapshot in time, California's 2017 Annual Training Survey report highlights data on workforce composition, qualifications, and needs for retention and recruitment.

- Nearly one-quarter of the workforce is over 50 years of age. The upside is a strong foundation of experience. The downside is potentially losing significant institutional knowledge within the system with a questionable pipeline for new caseworkers.
- There may be signals of a shrinking pipeline of caseworkers. The relatively low percentage (17%) of caseworkers 30 years of age or under, could be an early signal that California's social worker graduates are following national trends and choosing to apply their education in other related fields.
- California has a highly educated workforce. Line caseworkers holding Master of Social Work (MSW) degrees appear to outnumber their Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) colleagues nearly 3:1. For supervisors, the ratio jumps to nearly 9:1. An indicator that California's policy to hire more MSW's is working. It is important to note that education level for nearly half (47%) of line caseworkers and supervisors is not reported. Given that some research shows that retention strategies can differ by level of education, counties could benefit from paying closer attention to this information.
- The workforce is ethnically diverse, but Hispanic representation continues to lag behind. California's Title IV-E Stipend Program has significantly diversified the state's child welfare workforce (see callout on page 5) to more closely match the populations served. However, child welfare workforce recruitment strategies have not kept pace with the rapid growth and needs of California's Hispanic communities.

**TABLE 3: Diversity of Child Welfare Workforce as Compared with Children in Care**

<b>Ethnicity/Race</b>	<b>% of Total Caseworkers</b>	<b>% of Children in Foster Care</b>
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	1%
Asian	6%	1%
Black	20%	19%
Filipino	1%	Not reported
Hispanic	37%	53%
White	28%	20%
Other	2%	5%
Unknown	5%	<.5%

Sources: California Fiscal Year 2017 Annual Training Survey Report  
Kids Count Data Center 2015, [Summary table](#)

### The Impact of California's Title IV-E Stipend Program

The Title IV-E Stipend Program is the nation's largest consortium of schools of social work and public service agencies providing support for the delivery of a specialized public child welfare curriculum, as well as support for students committed to service in public child welfare. Launched in 1993, the Program is managed by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) via a contract with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and delivered in partnership with schools of social work at 22 universities across the state.

Over the past two decades, California's Title IV-E Stipend Program has made progress toward reaching its two main goals of professionalizing and diversifying California's child welfare workforce as shown by the following:<sup>5</sup>

**9,860**  
students have been supported by the Title IV-E stipend program in California. On average, **95%** are hired into public child welfare, mental health, or Tribal social services agencies.

The number of MSWs in California's public child welfare workforce nearly doubled from **21%-41%** between 1993 and 2015.

**67%** of program graduates are non-Caucasian, compared with **43%** for non-Title IV-E child welfare caseworkers.

**45%** are fluent in a second language. Spanish is spoken by **78%** of the multilingual students and graduates.

National loan forgiveness programs are also helping to attract new populations of students to the field. Student loan debt can be a deterrent for students across many fields, but is particularly challenging when the national median salary for social workers is \$45,500, and the mean amount of loan debt ranged from \$31,880 to \$42,149.<sup>6</sup> It is vital to maintain these programs to ensure the national child welfare workforce represents the families it serves.

**“Our country is moving in a direction of higher education becoming more expensive, which often works against creating a more diverse child welfare workforce. The Title IV-E Stipend Program has helped to mitigate this trend by recruiting and providing support to students who reflect the characteristics of the populations and communities they will serve.”**

**Carolyn Shin, Title IV-E Stipend Program Director, CalSWEC**

<sup>5</sup> The CalSWEC WorkForce Study: Examining Worker Attitudes and Retention Among Child Welfare Workers, 2015.  
<sup>6</sup> National Association of Social Workers (NASW), April 2015, [Article here](#)

# Personal Stories of Challenge, Connection and Commitment

Personal stories from child welfare caseworkers, youth and families highlight the complexity of the role and importance of the relationships.



## YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

### ANGEL

Age 21, newly promoted Education Case Manager at VOICES  
In and out of care from ages 7-17, adopted in final placement

I have had a lot of social workers, probably 8 or 9 total.

I was in care with my grandpa from ages 10 to 12, and probably had 4 or 5 social workers during that time. I tried to get visits with my mom. I'd build a case with a social worker, and when we were almost there, that person would leave and I'd get a different social worker and have to start all over. I think we saw our mom twice during that two-year period.

No one really explained anything to me. One day they said there was a court date and that I was going along into the courtroom. The judge asked me what I wanted and I said, "Well, I'm becoming a woman and I want my mom." So the judge put us back with our mom.

When we were with my mom, social workers came like every 6 months to just look at the house and make sure it was safe. But then I entered care again, at age 15. This time my social workers were awesome.

He went above and beyond for me and my siblings. Some of us were placed out of county and separated from our other siblings. There were so many of us, they ended up giving us two workers, like a team.

They both showed up for my high school graduation, and that had a huge impact on me. I think that's why I decided to work with youth myself.

There are some social workers whose hearts just are not in the work, and that is just how it is. But, there are also some who go above and beyond, and they really are trying to help youth and get them what is needed.



## CHILD WELFARE CASEWORKER PERSPECTIVE

### VICKI: Protective Services Caseworker

More than 20 years of experience in  
San Francisco Child Welfare

I have worked in a number of departments—Emergency Response, Court Dependency Unit, and welfare fraud—which was the least stressful but with very little fulfillment. I made the moves because I burned out twice, but the work was just not who I am and I needed to go back to work with families. When moving to a different department to minimize stress you may lose seniority, so people just burn out and try to keep working.

Now I am back in the Court Dependency Unit. We have ace people working in this department. They try to work closely with families to do the right thing for children and families.

We are a resource-rich county and you would assume that there are far more services available here. But in my experience, the access to necessary services, and the quality of those services, is a huge challenge. I'm talking about really essential treatment programs our families need, for example, to treat their mental illness and addiction disorders. This is one of the hardest parts of my job, not always having quality resources for my families.

# Personal Stories of Challenge, Connection and Commitment

Personal stories from child welfare caseworkers, youth and families highlight the complexity of the role and importance of the relationships.



## PERSPECTIVE FROM A FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AND HER ADVOCATE

### HAYDÉE CUZA

Executive Director, California Youth Connection and former Foster Youth, commenting on her time in foster care

### ZACHERY JENKINS

Child Welfare Caseworker, Department of Children & Family Services, Los Angeles County, and Haydée’s former child welfare caseworker, commenting on his relationship with Haydée

Social workers have so much autonomy and power to impact a young person’s life.

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Zach saved my life. He could have criminalized me. I was homeless and had several traumas, but he never allowed those things to hold me back.

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One of the gifts that I got from Zach was absolutely no judgment!

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He always said, “We all believe in you. We want you to believe in you.”

Haydée did it herself. I just laid the groundwork.

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I came up in the system myself in Oklahoma. I had the same worker from 7th grade through college. She was always there for me.

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Youth know what they need, but don’t know how to communicate it. We just have to be smart enough to watch for their signals and not judge them.



“Research shows that retention improves once child welfare workers get past the 3 year mark. Supervisor support and mentoring are essential to get caseworkers to that point.”

*David Chenot, Associate Professor & Chair of the Department of Social Work, Cal State Fullerton*

## Turnover Rates and Retention Strategies

### NATIONAL

The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimates national annual turnover rates of 20% in public agencies and 40% in private agencies.<sup>7</sup> A study by the U.S. General Assembly Office (GAO) found significant evidence that child welfare workforce instability and high turnover result in overburdened workers with less time to:<sup>8</sup>

- Conduct frequent and meaningful home visits in order to assess children’s safety;
- Establish relationships with children and families; and
- Make thoughtful and well-supported decisions regarding safe and stable permanent placements.

Every time a caseworker leaves, the cost to the child welfare agency is 30-200% of the exiting employee’s annual salary.<sup>9</sup> These figures reflect an array of both fiscal costs (for example: overtime, hiring and training new staff), as well as human costs (for example: emotional exhaustion for workers who take on the additional work, increased time in foster care, potential loss of funding for failure to meet performance standards).

In the past decade, there have been a number of studies relating to child welfare caseworker turnover; however, gaps in the research remain due to small sample sizes, selection biases, error of measurement, and reporting errors. In an attempt to fill in these data gaps, Dennis Kao from the Department of Social Work at California State University Fullerton, and Hyosu Kim from the Department of Child Welfare at Chung-Ang University in the Republic of Korea, conducted a meta-analysis of 22 studies that identified 36 variables, across 4 categories, that most impacted caseworkers’ intention to leave (see Table 4).<sup>10</sup>

7 [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#). (2003). The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce. Baltimore

8 United States General Accounting Office. (2003). Child Welfare: HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff. GAO-03-357. [Article here](#)

9 [CPS Human Resource Services](#)

10 “A meta-analysis of turnover intention predictors among U.S. child welfare workers.” Kim and Kao, 2014. [Abstract here](#)



**TABLE 4: Variables that impact caseworkers’ intention to leave**

Low Effect	Low/Medium Effect	Medium/High Effect	High Effect
Low Effect	Age	Well-being	Stress
Racial group	Tenure	Safety concerns	Emotional exhaustion
Gender	Education level	Depersonalization	Organizational commitment
Social Work degree	Job demand	Role conflict	Job satisfaction
Other degrees	Coping	Inclusion	
Caseload Size	Autonomy	Role ambiguity	
Spouse/other support	Financial reward	Organizational support	
	Coworker support	Perceptions of fairness	
	Professionalism	Organizational culture	
	Salary	Policy	
	Career development	Supervisor support	
	Work self-efficacy	Professional	

Source: A meta-analysis of turnover intention predictors among U.S. child welfare workers.” Kim and Kao, 2014. [Abstract here](#)

### Some highlights from the meta-analysis on turnover:

- Contrary to expectations, caseload in and of itself is not considered a leading factor for turnover. However, caseload sizes are no doubt a driver of stress and emotional exhaustion, two factors highly linked to turnover. Table 5 summarizes SB2030 caseload standards and may suggest that there are critical cut-off points that support caseworker success.
- Traditional assumptions would also predict salary as a key cause of turnover, which, similarly, does not seem to be the case.
- “Depersonalization” and “Role Conflict,” two factors that are considered significant in turnover intention, speak directly to the disconnect between what caseworkers want to be doing (connecting with people and helping families to be successful), and what the job too often mandates (administrative work). This suggests that high workloads and specifically work that takes staff away from directly connecting to, and assisting, youth and families, is a factor in intent to leave one’s position.
- Given the intensity and often traumatic nature of their work, child welfare caseworkers may require even greater levels of organizational support than most professions in order to re-energize and heal. Recent research and attention has also focused on secondary traumatic stress (STS)—traumatic stress as a result of exposure to others’ experiences. Given the populations served, child welfare caseworkers are particularly vulnerable. Left untreated, STS can lead to decreased effectiveness and morale and high rates of burnout and turnover.

“Secondary trauma management has not been a big part of the state’s standardized core training that the RTAs have developed; however the incoming, younger workforce is starting to talk about it a lot, and is starting to push for more help in managing it. I think this is a good and important shift.”

*David Foster, Director, Bay Area Regional Training Academy & Central California Regional Training Academy*

# Challenges and Promising Strategies

“California’s high turnover and vacancy rates across many child welfare agencies, both county and private providers, will continue to sabotage implementation of the important reforms that are underway. We must ensure our workforce has the support and training needed to be successful.”

*Yali Lincroft, Program Director, Walter S. Johnson Foundation*

## CALIFORNIA

Workforce turnover research specific to California is limited, although available studies show consistency with the national data. For example, while a small sample, the 2016 CalSWEC Workforce Study had participation from 10 California counties with a mix of large and small counties, and participation of 502 respondents. Participants were predominantly between the ages of 31 - 49 (56%), line workers (78%), and held an MSW degree. Although respondents were positive about their professional contributions, reporting they felt efficacious (41%) and adaptable (38%); they were unfavorable about their agencies’ culture and climate, with the three lowest ranked factors being communication (72% unfavorable), openness to change (69% unfavorable), and autonomy (69% unfavorable). The study concluded that potential actions to address caseworker concerns could include management making communications more transparent, acknowledging staff for work well done, and being more accessible.<sup>11</sup>

### California Caseloads

In California, SB2030 remains the gold standard for setting optimum caseload sizes. Although counties do not report caseloads by unit (Emergency Removal (ER), Family Maintenance (FM), etc.), for the first time, the 2017 CA Realignment Report shows detailed caseload levels for Title IV-E Well-Being Project counties. Table 5 shows ER and FM units, two areas of work that are already inherently more stressful, still struggle with keeping caseloads in line with SB2030 recommended levels.

“When we did the workload study, there were a lot of people thinking that reducing caseloads was the answer. Rich counties reduced their caseloads, but they still had the same issues. It’s not the singular answer, because caseworkers will still be exposed to the same system stuff and need lots of support to be successful.”

*Howard Himes, Director of Health & Human Services, Napa County*

11 The CalSWEC WorkForce Study: Examining Worker Attitudes and Retention Among Child Welfare Workers, 2015.

**TABLE 5: Caseload comparisons to SB2030 for Title IV-E Well-Being Project counties**

	Emergency Removal	Family Maintenance	Family Reunification	Permanent Placement
SB 2030 Minimum Standards	13.03	14.17	15.58	23.67
SB 2030 Optimum Standards	9.88	10.15	11.94	16.42

**Cases Per Social Worker**

Alameda	22.20	16.90	14.74	18.28
Butte	26.86	16.94	15.06	21.53
Los Angeles	9.61	19.96	20.24	19.70
Lake	35.31	8.73	14.74	15.86
Sacramento	14.80	17.77	15.32	30.66
Santa Clara	8.09	16.77	9.22	14.31
San Diego	15.80	16.24	12.94	14.21
San Francisco	6.81	13.58	12.72	15.11
Sonoma	12.15	15.40	15.49	16.36

- Highlights the Minimum Standard for average monthly caseloads per caseworker, and shows the counties that are meeting this standard
- Highlights the Optimum Standard for average monthly caseloads per caseworker, and shows the counties that are meeting this standard

Source: [Child Welfare Services & Adult Protective Services Realignment Report: Outcome & Expenditure Data Summary](#)

County data was extracted in January 2017 using Safe Measures and reflects any open case and assigned caseworker at that time.

As a result of the implementation of the Extended Foster Care program, a new service category of Supportive Transitions (ST) was created. Since that service component was not established when the SB 2030 study was published, those cases in ST have been redistributed to the PP service component.

## Challenges and Promising Strategies



Because turnover is such a significant issue for us, I hired a contractor to do detailed exit interviews with everyone who leaves. We already knew we had a salary issue, but what we are confirming through the interviews is the vital role supervisors play, especially for new workers who say they need much more hands-on support and training. With a shortage of supervisors we are struggling to keep young workers from leaving.”

*Kathy Gallagher, Director, Employment & Human Services Department, Contra Costa County*

### Retention Strategies

Analyzing the causes of turnover is the essential first step, but using data to figure out how to increase retention in a large and complicated system is challenging.

Over the past decade, considerable research has been done on the topic of child welfare caseworker retention with findings consistently showing two interrelated factors as having the biggest impact on caseworkers staying in their roles: 1) organizational culture and climate, and 2) supervisory support.

Organizational culture is composed of the shared assumptions, beliefs, values, and behavioral expectations of organizational members, and has the greatest impact on caseworkers who are three or less years into their career.

Supervisor support is the extent to which caseworkers believe their supervisors offer them instrumental (knowledge/skill) and affective (emotional) support. Unlike organizational culture, supervisor support appears to have an impact on caseworkers across their career.<sup>12</sup>

According to the research, retention strategies are not necessarily about making the work environment less stressful, but rather creating an organizational culture and climate, along with strong supervisory support, that makes the stress more manageable. The 2016 CalSWEC Workforce Study (see p. 10) presents a similar conclusion, and discusses tactics such as open communication with managers, employee recognition, and mentoring as ways to make stress more manageable. Although increased research on caseworker turnover is uncovering promising practices, the complexity of the caseworker role precludes a quick or simple fix.



One of the biggest issues we need to address when it comes to retention is how we as a field build public will and inform public perception. The public knows about our old model of child rescue, but not enough about our commitments to strengthening families, working across service sectors, and supporting communities. We are also held to a standard of perfection that is different from how we look at doctors, police, and other helping professions”

*Sara Munson, Senior Director of Knowledge Management, Casey Family Programs*

<sup>12</sup> [“Reducing turnover is not enough: The need for proficient organizational cultures to support positive youth outcomes in child welfare.” Williams and Glisson, 2013](#)

## Public Perception Impacts Retention

Somewhat unique to child welfare, is something often referred to as the vicious cycle.<sup>13</sup> It starts when a particularly grievous case of child abuse or neglect hits the news. The tragedy becomes public and media attention fuels the fire and stirs public outrage. Agency leadership takes action, policy makers express concerns, and caseworkers become extremely conservative, which often leads to a spike in the number of children placed in out-of-home care. This is referred to as foster care panic. Eventually the media reports die down, but the damage has been done, and child welfare caseworkers become demoralized and may leave the profession.

Even if not related to “a cycle,” media coverage of the services offered by child welfare agencies to their clients is often unbalanced and portrays caseworkers as incompetent and unreliable.<sup>14</sup> What is seldom communicated to the public is that despite the best efforts of competent child welfare caseworkers and other professionals and community members, some people are going to neglect or abuse their children.

The media is also less likely to report any positive system changes that have resulted from heightened public attention, or from proactive efforts to improve child and family outcomes. The absence of good news contributes to the public’s negative perception of the system. A notable example of how media can support a more balanced look at child welfare is the [Chronicle of Social Change](#).

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“The stigma associated with the child welfare caseworker role promotes burnout. If it is always assumed that you are the bad guy, it hurts your heart.”

*Amber Twitchell, Director, VOICES*

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“When you think about other first responders—police, firefighters, etc.— they have a strong internal culture and public recognition that their work is challenging and dangerous, which helps them to rise above the negative public perceptions. That just hasn’t been built within most child welfare agencies, and that’s why caseworker recognition and respect within a worker’s own agency is so important.

*Mary McCarthy, Co-Principal Investigator, National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI)*

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<sup>13</sup> “The Vicious Cycle: Recurrent interactions among the media, politicians, the public, and child welfare service organizations.” David Chenot, 2010. [Abstract here](#)

<sup>14</sup> “Child Protection and the Media: Lessons from the Last Three Decades.” Patrick Ayre, 2001. [Abstract here](#)



One of the biggest challenges caseworkers face—both in public and private agencies, is that society doesn't value their work to the degree it is merited, and that is reflected in their compensation. If society had a better understanding of the challenges faced by youth in care, and the potential of these youth to be productive community members, maybe people would also place more value on the important role of caseworkers in helping youth realize their full potential."

*Liz Bender, Chief Finance and Growth Officer, First Place for Youth*

### **Proactive media and public education**

Much more needs to be done to communicate with the public about their role in protecting and supporting foster youth, which would help the workforce build the community partnerships they desire. This could range from a national campaign, to local child welfare agencies doing community presentations or distributing communication materials through local schools, hospitals and nonprofit partners.

### **Innovate and update recruitment strategies**

Best practices show that there is an opportunity to "fix the problem before it becomes a problem". Good recruiting techniques help in hiring best-fit candidates, and work to minimize role conflict once they are in the job. Recruitment practices that have proven successful in other work sectors are starting to show promise within child welfare, including:

- Behavioral interview techniques where candidates roleplay answers to difficult work scenarios.
- Day-in-the-life videos that help candidates proactively decide if the work is a good fit.
- Job shadowing which gives candidates and agencies the chance to "test drive" the fit.



One key consideration in the hiring process should include methods to assess the potential for social workers to demonstrate cultural humility, individual respect, and family engagement. There is a lot of work we need to do to get there; an important first step is to engage Human Resources around the current system of recruitment, selection, and onboarding."

*Dr. Marie Brown-Mercadel, Assistant Director, DPSS, Riverside County*

## Allow caseworkers to focus on the relationships and family support

Caseload does not tell the full story as case complexity increases, and caseworkers strive to bring greater levels of engagement, critical thinking, and creative problem solving to their work. Important to job satisfaction and improved child and family outcomes is finding new ways to relieve caseworkers from the burden of paperwork without compromising compliance and child safety. Increased administrative support, caseworker teaming, and equipping caseworkers with mobile devices so they can multitask while in the field, are practices that are showing promise.

Professional mentoring and coaching are proving to be essential to encouraging individual creative thinking and promoting autonomy, two elements shown to improve organizational culture. To build an environment where caseworkers feel supported and valued, and a climate of camaraderie and peer support, supervisors must be trained to go beyond functional expertise and provide emotional support and consistency in how they treat team members.

A promising technological fix on the horizon is the Child Welfare Digital Services project which has the potential to simplify the reporting burden through data sharing and smart forms.

### Partnering to improve organizational culture

Four years ago, San Francisco County's Family & Children's Services applied for a Title IV-E Stipend grant to partner with UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare, Seneca and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) with a goal of improving the organizational culture and climate of the agency, while helping staff feel like leaders at all levels. The theory of change was, *if we change the culture of the agency to be more data-informed, performance-oriented and team-focused, then our services will become more responsive to families and children's needs, our staff at all levels will improve their services, and outcomes will improve.* Change is slow, but supervisors are using the logic model they were trained on to evaluate and pursue their ideas for improvement. New units have been developed, staff has had the opportunity to try new roles and grow their skills. The results are still being evaluated, but turnover is around 9%, which is low compared to many counties.

**“ In bargaining, we asked for a 20% reduction of bureaucratic mandates because some of these things were just checklists and forms. We're really trying to enable workers to spend more time with their clients to deliver services, and less time filling out paperwork.”**

**David Green, Child Welfare Worker, Los Angeles County & Treasurer SEIU Local 721**

**“ Ultimately how we are treated is how we tend to treat others. If we're listening to our workforce and creating an environment where they can thrive professionally, then that will show up in how they treat our families.”**

**Sylvia Deporto, Deputy Director, San Francisco County Family & Children's Services**





## California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership

The California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership is a collaboration of private and public organizations working to improve outcomes in the child welfare system. The Partnership comprises five philanthropic organizations (Casey Family Programs, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and Zellerbach Family Foundation) and the California Department of Social Services, the Judicial Council of California's Center for Families, Children & the Courts, and County Welfare Directors Association. *insights* is an ongoing publication of the Partnership that examines the links between data, policy, and outcomes for our state's most vulnerable children and families. Download previous editions of *insights* and find out more about the Partnership at [co-invest.org](http://co-invest.org).

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