



# **A COMPREHENSIVE WORKFORCE STRATEGY TO ADVANCE CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES**

**Workforce Workgroup March 4-5, 2013**

**National Child Welfare Workforce Institute**

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## Acknowledgements

This publication represents a collaborative effort by the partners of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI)—University at Albany/SUNY, the University of Denver, Fordham University, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, Michigan State University, University of Michigan, Portland State University, and University of Southern Maine.

The NCWWI is funded through a Cooperative Agreement with U.S. DHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Award No. 90CT0145. Special thanks to Randi Walters, Children’s Bureau Project Officer, and to Robert Lindecamp, Child Welfare Program Specialist (CB/ICF), for their support.

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### Recommended citation:

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2013). *A comprehensive workforce strategy to advance child welfare outcomes*. Albany, NY: Author.

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## Executive Summary

For a child welfare agency to achieve its mission, it must attract, develop, and retain a skilled and ready workforce. Yet, child welfare agencies across the country are struggling to recruit, hire, train, support, and retain committed and high-performing staff. To hear key stakeholder concerns about the child welfare workforce, the Children’s Bureau and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute invited 28 state and county agency leaders and 7 university partners, Children’s Bureau staff and national consultants to participate in a Workforce Workgroup on March 4-5, 2013. This report is a compilation of the most pressing child welfare workforce issues they face and recommended strategies for developing the child welfare workforce of the future.

These issues and strategies, however, must be viewed in the context of workforce planning, which is a systematic process for identifying and addressing the gaps between the workforce of today and the human capital needs of tomorrow, with the goal of ensuring that an agency currently has and will continue to have the right people with the right skills in the right jobs who perform competently and effectively. The following table shows the key steps involved in workforce planning:

Comprehensive Workforce Planning Process <sup>1</sup>			
Activity	Input	Output	Participants
<b>Organizational Strategy Assessment</b> to help engage staff in designing a comprehensive workforce plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership commitment</li> <li>Resources</li> <li>Readiness for change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workforce plan and timelines</li> <li>Workforce teams</li> <li>Communication plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Executive management</li> <li>Program managers</li> <li>Supervisors</li> <li>Frontline staff</li> <li>HR staff</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental Scan</b> to look at internal and external conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educational institutions’ enrollments</li> <li>Government influences affecting the workforce</li> <li>Economic conditions (unemployment rates, etc.)</li> <li>Union relations</li> <li>Organizational climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SWOT analysis: internal and external Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats that will affect the short-term and long-term goals of the agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program managers</li> <li>Supervisors</li> <li>Frontline staff</li> <li>HR staff</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from

- Cornerstones for Kids. (2006). *Workforce planning overview*. Washington, DC: CPS Human Resource Services.
- U.S. Department of Transportation. (2008, June). *Human capital management: Guide to workforce planning*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/wfpguide.pdf>

## Comprehensive Workforce Planning Process<sup>1</sup>

Activity	Input	Output	Participants
<p><b>Supply Analysis</b> to create a current workforce profile, review trend data and project future workforce supply</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workforce levels</li> <li>• Demographic information</li> <li>• Hiring and turnover trends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current workforce profile (number of staff, salary, educational level, skill assessment, classification, tenure, supervisory ratio, diversity)</li> <li>• Trends/predictors (turnover, retirement rates, replacement patterns)</li> <li>• Workforce skills inventory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program managers</li> <li>• Supervisors</li> <li>• Frontline staff</li> <li>• HR staff</li> </ul>
<p><b>Demand Analysis</b> to identify the workforce needed to carry out the mission of the agency, focusing on the functions that an agency must perform and not just on the people needed to carry out the functions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of agency program direction and budget plans</li> <li>• Analysis of jobs needed</li> <li>• Analysis of needed skills, knowledge and competencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future workforce profile (types of jobs needed, number of staff needed and workload, staff skills and competencies needed)</li> <li>• Impact of technological advancements on future workforce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive management</li> <li>• Planning and budget staff</li> <li>• Program managers</li> <li>• Supervisors</li> <li>• HR staff</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gap Analysis</b> to understand the difference between the present workforce and future needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summaries of Supply Analysis and Demand Analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TBD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program managers</li> <li>• Supervisors</li> <li>• HR staff</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gap-Closing Strategies</b> to enable the agency to meet its future workforce needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priorities for addressing change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational effectiveness</li> <li>• Recruitment</li> <li>• Competency-based selection</li> <li>• Performance management</li> <li>• Retention</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• University-agency partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive management</li> <li>• Program managers</li> <li>• Supervisors</li> <li>• Frontline staff</li> <li>• Professional development staff</li> <li>• University-agency partners</li> <li>• HR staff</li> <li>• Unions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evaluation</b> to understand the impact of implemented strategies to mitigate workforce gaps</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workforce changes over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TBD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive management</li> <li>• HR staff</li> </ul>

As shown in the table above, **gap-closing strategies** are one element of a systematic workforce planning approach. While the child welfare workforce workgroup was charged with identifying pressing gap-closing workforce issues and strategies, it is important to show the planning process that agencies should use to determine which of the following strategies will advance their mission and help meet future organizational goals of serving children, youth and families. Not all strategies can—or should be—implemented by each child welfare agency. Without this planning process, the following strategies alone may not be sufficient for building the child welfare workforce of the future.

## Pressing Workforce Issues and Proposed Strategies

### I. Destructive child welfare agency environment

#### ***Organization effectiveness strategies:***

- Build leadership capacity
- Become a learning organization
- Actively recruit, diligently prepare, and attentively support supervisors
- Reconfigure the work of child welfare
- Implement focused organizational interventions
- Call attention to performance expectations for all classifications
- Implement workforce support systems
- Ensure staff safety
- Reward, recognize, and appreciate staff
- Offer professional development activities to promote greater organizational effectiveness
- Engage university partners for collaboration on organizational effectiveness
- Set a research agenda for organizational effectiveness

### II. Limited pool of qualified and committed applicants for child welfare positions

#### ***Recruitment strategies:***

- Implement active recruitment strategies
- Transform public perceptions of child welfare work
- Stress employee benefits
- Apply fiscal recruitment strategies
- Engage unions, human resources, and civil service in recruitment strategies
- Use professional development activities to advance recruitment efforts
- Partner with universities to assist with the recruitment process
- Craft a research agenda for child welfare recruitment

### III. Ineffective selection processes that result in questionable hires

#### ***Selection strategies:***

- Implement a comprehensive, competency-based selection process
- Address civil services laws and human resource policies that hamper effective selection practices
- Provide fiscal incentives for selection of specialized staff
- Fill vacancies in a timely way
- Enhance professional development strategies to improve implementation of a competency-based selection process
- Engage university partners to assist with the selection process
- Create a research agenda for workforce selection

#### IV. High turnover rates among qualified and experienced staff

##### ***Retention strategies:***

- Support new hires
- Support experienced staff
- Value a diverse workforce
- Understand and welcome generational differences among staff
- Provide equitable and adequate compensation
- Address turnover of pivotal leaders
- Use professional development activities to promote retention
- Engage university partners to contribute to retention of competent, committed and diverse staff
- Advance a research agenda for workforce retention

Hopes and expectations for the child welfare workforce of the future center around the imperative for professional practitioners to become more skilled in data driven practice; have the necessary resources, training and education to perform effectively; be supported by a learning organization; and practice within a community context of respect and accountability. Children, youth, families and communities deserve no less.

#### Workforce Workgroup Members

We are extremely grateful for the contribution of the following workgroup members to the identification of these child welfare workforce issues and the development of realistic and necessary strategies:

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## Introduction

***Effective child welfare systems require a committed, high-performing, and stable workforce and supportive organizational policies and practices.***

***- NCWWI Core Philosophy***

With growing attention to evidence-based and trauma-informed practices, an emphasis on leadership at multiple levels, and a federal commitment to child well-being, there is urgency to strengthen the child welfare workforce. This comprehensive workforce strategy promotes the social and emotional well-being of children, youth, and families by recommending organizational changes necessary to retain expert professional staff, proposing innovative practices for recruiting and selecting a workforce with excellent leadership and practice skills, and promoting academic relationships that prepare high quality child welfare professionals.

On behalf of the Children's Bureau, the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) hosted an invitational ***Child Welfare Workforce Workgroup*** on March 4-5, 2013. Participants included 28 state and county agency leaders, 7 university partners, Children's Bureau staff, and national consultants who offered ideas and guidance about pressing issues they face in supporting an expert workforce that can meet effectively the needs of children, youth and families. The intent of the workgroup was to craft strategies and action steps for workforce interventions to build the desired child welfare workforce of the future.

Workforce Workgroup members identified pressing workforce issues and developed strategies and action steps through thoughtful and critical guided discussions in four small groups representing four different structures: state administered/unionized child welfare systems; state administered/non-unionized child welfare systems; county administered/unionized child welfare systems; and university child welfare training/education partners. This arrangement reflects the belief that agency structure and affiliation affect the lens through which administrators and managers view workforce issues and their perceptions of potential strategies and action steps. University partners also have unique perspectives about the child welfare workforce and their contributions to workforce development. The Comprehensive Workforce Strategy outlined in this document is based on the workforce issues and strategies recommended by the four workgroups.

Each issue is described in the context of research and the experiences of workforce workgroup members. Desired outcomes noted are based on what the situation would be if the issue was resolved. Strategies for resolving each issue were recommended by workforce workgroup members, research, NCWWI experiences and relevant workforce development documents. In addition to unique strategies, there are strategies related to professional development, university partnerships and research for each issue.



# Pressing Workforce Issues and Proposed Strategies

## I. ISSUE: Destructive child welfare agency environment

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A desired workforce of high-performing child welfare professionals will not stay long in organizations that stifle creativity and underutilize expertise. Absent an organization that is enfranchising, person-centered, learning-focused, collaborative, and accountable, the best and brightest simply leave. Retention of qualified and experienced staff was the workforce issue most highly ranked by workforce workgroup members. They cited turnover rates ranging from 5.9% to 32% for cross-agency child welfare staff and 35% to 40% for CPS staff. One state documented a 47% turnover rate among contracted private agency staff that provide 80% of the services.

While acknowledging the many complex issues contributing to high turnover rates, workforce workgroup members identified the following organizational characteristics as primary factors that drive excellent child welfare staff away:

- Lack of staff support, appreciation and recognition of successes
- Compliance-driven, rather than skill-based
- Top-down administrative structure that doesn't allow for distributive leadership
- Punitive, fear-based culture
- Disempowering
- Antagonistic environment within the agency and with the community.

### **DESIRED OUTCOME: Constructive work environment where staff thrive and children, youth and families are well-served**

Effective child welfare service systems are dependent on agency practices that are child-centered, family-focused and community-based. A constructive organizational environment is not beyond reach and, in fact, has been shown in research studies and through practical experiences to be achievable. Workforce workgroup members cited the following strategies which their own and other agencies have taken to advance transformation of the child welfare work environment.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS STRATEGIES**

**1.1 Build leadership capacity.** Child welfare faces exceptional leadership challenges, including looming retirements, high turnover rates among state and agency leaders, and inadequate leadership experience or preparation, resulting in a leadership approach that is compliance-driven, problem-focused and people-processing rather than service-oriented. Agency leaders must be able to set agency vision, chart a course for ongoing development, and hold the workforce accountable for improved outcomes. Organizational strategies for building leadership capacity include the need to:

- Build a leadership pipeline by providing career progression opportunities for frontline staff to be able to move into leadership positions
- Support leadership development at all levels through expert consultation, coaching, mentoring and training
- Provide networking opportunities for leaders in similar positions across agencies and jurisdictions

- Strengthen management through improved selection and training procedures
- Support the role of leadership in providing vision and keeping on course
- Conduct succession planning for anticipated retirements

**1.2 Become a learning organization.** Organizations that value continuous learning provide avenues for professional development, the application of new skills, and continuous improvement in performance. Those who lead learning organizations:

- Stress the importance of developing, using, and sharing knowledge
- Connect learning with organizational goals and performance expectations
- Promote the development of effective skills, learn from other agencies' experiences, and improve training resources to include transfer of learning strategies and procedures
- Explicitly use evidence in decision-making and to inform practice
- Organize learning circles or brown-bags, distribute literature reviews and research syntheses, lead discussions of post-training and post-conference presentations

**1.3 Actively recruit, diligently prepare, and attentively support supervisors.** Supervisors play a critical role in every aspect of workforce development and organizational performance. Yet, supervisors are often poorly prepared—and inadequately supported—for their critical roles in increasingly complex child welfare systems. According to workforce workgroup members, supervisors are major contributors to turnover or retention. Agency leaders are encouraged to:

- Promote those practitioners to supervisors because of their burgeoning supervisory skills, not tenure
- Establish clear screening guidelines for hiring supervisors based on supervisory competencies and job analysis
- Expect and support supervisors to be active recruiters and selectors of staff
- Create a supervisory practice model and associated training program
- Train supervisors in evidence-informed practice skills and teach them how to supervise staff in providing excellent services
- Implement a supervisor/worker ratio of at least 1/5
- Expect frequent and regular case reviews and staffings between supervisors and staff
- Relieve supervisors from carrying caseloads and use floaters or back-fill positions for vacancies
- Implement “Stay Interviews” with supervisors to encourage their retention and collaboratively develop professional development action plans each year

**1.4 Reconfigure the work of child welfare.** At a time when the Children’s Bureau is focusing on evidence-based and trauma-informed practices to support child well-being, agencies are challenged to deliver services shown to be effective in meeting the complex needs of children, youth and families. Recommended strategies to reconfigure child welfare work include the following

- Implement a state-wide practice model
- Establish positions for needed expertise, including youth and infant specialists, forensic interviewing, substance abuse specialists, parenting consultants, developmental experts, motivational interviewing experts, trauma specialists, etc.
- Focus on critical thinking skills at practitioner and supervisor levels
- Use practitioner teaming to share caseload responsibilities and expertise

- Increase staff autonomy and job control
- Increase use of evidence-based interventions
- Provide training, support and coaching of child welfare practitioners to advance best practices
- Implement consultative supervision

**1.5 Implement focused organizational interventions.** Principles of Adaptive Leadership suggest that organizations must be willing to innovate in order to thrive in changing environments. The work is challenging and creates conflict as staff react to loss. The adaptive leader helps staff generate and commit to real-world demonstrations, pilots, experiments and tests of organizational interventions through a collaborative approach to:

- Conduct a SWOT analysis of the agency to assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
- Involve staff in problem-solving through participation on Design Teams
- Conduct staff satisfaction surveys twice a year and respond to suggestions and comments
- Implement supervisory learning circles
- Contract with an organizational effectiveness consultant

**1.6 Call attention to performance expectations for all classifications.** A major child welfare workforce challenge is preparing more system-wide competence and skilled child welfare professionals. Agency leaders usually support training of child welfare staff to improve performance but often overlook the need to establish performance expectations to hold staff accountable for their work, and for the transfer of training competencies to their interventions. In conjunction with human resources, agency leaders should:

- Develop accurate job descriptions and realistic performance standards
- Make performance evaluations regular and meaningful
- Link training and coaching to clear performance standards
- Emphasize Continuous Quality Improvement and tie all elements back to outcomes for children, youth and families
- Hold staff accountable for performance

**1.7 Implement workforce support systems.** Workforce workgroup members stressed the need for agencies to support the ability of staff to work with maximum effectiveness and efficiency without unnecessary limitations and ineffectual policies. Strategies include the need to:

- Provide technological resources
  - E-treatment, tele-coaching
  - Tele-commuting, access expertise, case conferencing, Skyping, electronic paperwork, IT applications, adaptive devices
  - Electronic practice monitoring devices
- Develop alternative work schedules
- Out-station staff in diverse geographic locations and with community partners
- Relieve frontline staff of on-call duties and duties that could move to a central function
- Restrict caseloads to manageable sizes, according to best practice standards (CWLA or COA, etc.)

**1.8 Ensure staff safety.** The work of child welfare is always challenging and at times even life-threatening. Agency leaders must protect staff as much as possible by implementing agency policies and targeting resources to:

- Assess agency security systems and develop risk management systems
- Train staff in safety protocols and ways to deal with threatening behaviors
- Develop on-site programs for self-care, wellness, and dealing with stress and secondary trauma
- Distribute cell phones, pagers and other safety devices
- Develop stronger collaborations with local police departments

**1.9 Reward, recognize, and appreciate staff.** Workforce workgroup members named lack of staff support, appreciation and recognition of successes as characteristics of organizations with high turnover rates and suggested that agencies persist in finding ways to:

- Focus on and acknowledge positive performance
- Tailor recognition to the preferences of the staff member
- Recognize high-performing units
- Provide opportunities to shine

**1.10 Offer professional development activities to promote greater organizational effectiveness.** Organizational effectiveness (OE) can be improved and sustained through a targeted professional development approach to:

- Improve workforce practice expertise for dealing with complex problems (trauma, mental illness, domestic violence, addition, etc.)
- Develop infrastructure to support/reinforce learning on the job outside of the classroom, via transfer of learning (TOL) activities, consultative supervision, mentoring and coaching
- Use OE specialists to conduct organizational assessment and provide support
- Provide leadership development opportunities for staff at all levels

**1.11 Engage university partners for collaboration on organizational effectiveness.** University-agency partnerships that prepare the current and future child welfare workforce not only strengthen child welfare practice but also address specific systems challenges, including an organizational culture impacting the retention of professionally educated staff. According to workforce workgroup members, university social work programs contribute to organizational effectiveness when they:

- Require an organizational practice course for all students, such as: *Living and Leading in an Organization*
- Create additional curricula on supervisory practice
- Include resilience work and prepare students for negativity in agencies, among the workforce and towards/from child welfare-involved families
- Use field placements for child welfare students to gain experience in organizational practice, including how to use supervision
- Use field seminars to discuss organizational issues
- Educate for leadership issues, responsibilities and opportunities

**1.12 Set a research agenda for organizational effectiveness.** Workforce workgroup members support the following actions for a research agenda focused on improving the effectiveness of child welfare organizations:

- Develop measures for studying the impact of organizational effectiveness interventions on client outcomes
- Study workforce characteristics and the impact of organizational culture and climate on workforce and practice outcomes

## II. **ISSUE: Limited pool of qualified and committed applicants for child welfare positions**

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Constructive child welfare organizations are essential for the delivery of effective child welfare services by a qualified and high-performing workforce. Often overlooked, however, is the significance of recruitment, selection and retention strategies needed to build a successful child welfare workforce.

Recruitment of qualified and committed applicants for child welfare positions is a substantial challenge. Agencies increasingly employ innovative marketing strategies to recruit foster and adoptive parents but rarely use similar tools to recruit candidates for child welfare positions. Supervisors and managers often feel that negative job aspects—inadequate salary and benefits, high workloads, unpleasant work environments, liability and safety issues—are too powerful and overshadow marketing strategies. They also feel that they have limited or nonexistent responsibility, time and resources for recruitment. Yet, unless agency personnel at all levels are involved in the recruitment process, the agency misses critical opportunities to find the most talented and best suited applicants for the job.

Workforce workgroup members expressed the following concerns about the difficulties they experience recruiting appropriate applicants for child welfare positions:

- Passive recruitment strategies (job fairs and newspaper postings) are no longer effective
- There is a shortage of local, qualified candidates in rural areas and for work with tribes
- The urgency to fill or backfill positions often leads to a lower quality applicant pool
- Unrealistic or unpleasant expectations about the work drive away potential applicants

### **DESIRED OUTCOME: Qualified, diverse, and ample applicant pools**

In order to have a high-performing child welfare workforce, organizations are more effective when they use cutting-edge strategies to recruit broadly for potential applicants who are shown by research to be more likely to apply for child welfare positions. These applicants:

- Are well-informed about the job
- Feel they can make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families
- Possess attributes and skills identified in recruitment materials:
  - Desire to help others
  - Persistence in the face of multiple challenges
  - Ability to thrive in a fast-paced work environment

## **RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES**

**2.1 Implement active recruitment strategies.** Active recruitment strategies begin with the development of a consistent recruitment message that permeates the agency's entire recruitment approach. In order to communicate a consistent message, the agency should decide what sets it apart from other community services; develop clear statements of its mission, vision and values; identify important characteristics of the agency's culture to share with recruits; package the agency's image in a distinctive style that is easily

recognizable; and communicate a consistent message about the agency as a potential employer on an ongoing basis. The agency will then use this recruitment message to:

- Increase presence at universities, community colleges, and in middle and high schools
- Encourage high school seniors to select child welfare as a theme of their senior project and mentor interested students
- Recruit from retirees in child welfare and in other fields—teachers, law enforcement—as well as from non-traditional pools, including veterans, flight attendants, etc.
- Recruit through Spanish-speaking newspapers, radio, television and social media, as well as those that serve African-American and tribal communities
- Use diverse recruiting specialists to visit historically black universities, tribal colleges, community colleges, and junior and senior high schools
- Hire a marketing group to develop a specialized recruiting campaign
- Base recruitment messages on feedback from child welfare staff about why they stay and the value of the work they do

**2.2 Transform public perceptions of child welfare work.** Public child welfare agencies were once key employment settings for professional social workers. But changes within the last several decades have made public sector employment unattractive. Such changes include the deprofessionalization of child welfare positions, inadequate salaries, high workloads, unpleasant work environments, and liability and safety issues. At the same time, research has shown that in spite of these difficulties, child welfare appeals to those who want to help others and are attracted to fast-paced and challenging work. In order to recruit these applicants, workgroup members suggested that agencies:

- Revamp the depiction of each child welfare position
- Use a professional marketing firm to re-brand the agency, update PR materials and message the importance of child welfare work
- Tell the “real” story of child welfare—the positive and the negative
- Engage families, youth and foster families to tell their stories and share their experiences
- Respond quickly and clearly to biased media accounts
- Use realistic job previews throughout the area—on agency website, Facebook, YouTube
- Develop and publicize a vision of the value of public sector child welfare services
- Develop strategies to educate the public and respond if there are public concerns about how government employees should be working
- Use “shareholders” rather than “partners” to indicate the idea of a shared role in achieving outcomes
- Allow a newspaper to shadow child welfare practitioners to tell the story of work in child welfare
- Invite legislators to talk with staff and become engaged as champions and advocates

**2.3 Stress employee benefits.** While the reality is that child welfare jobs may offer lower salaries than other sectors, agencies should take steps to advertise complete compensation packages, including base salary, benefits, working conditions and opportunities for development and growth. Specific strategies include the need for agencies to:

- Develop and publicize alternative work schedules, such as a flexible work hours, telecommuting, part-time and job-sharing opportunities

- Advertise comprehensive benefit packages, including health and wellness programs, tuition reimbursement, employee assistance programs, short and long term disability insurance, flexible spending and health spending accounts, among other perks such as restaurant and retail discounts, health club memberships, onsite day care, etc.
- Engage legislators as champions and advocates for better compensation through cost benefit analyses

**2.4 Apply fiscal recruitment strategies.** Workforce workgroup members cited the difficulties of recruiting qualified applicants, especially for positions in rural areas and tribal agencies. They suggest that agencies:

- Provide incentives (such as housing allowances, salary bonuses, two weeks on/off schedules, etc.) to encourage working in rural and tribal areas
- Give staff bonuses for recruiting and retaining high performing staff
- Implement loan forgiveness strategies to support recruitment (e.g., \$10,000/year)
- Develop scholarship programs for BSW and MSW students

**2.5 Engage unions, human resources, and civil service in recruitment strategies.** Workforce workgroup members recognized the critical roles played by unions, human resources, and civil service systems in workforce planning, including the need to:

- Support the creation of a focused, flexible and responsive human resource system for child welfare
- Re-design the recruitment and selection processes, in collaboration with legislators and policy makers.

**2.6 Use professional development activities to advance recruitment efforts.** Child welfare staff are not usually expected or trained to participate in recruitment efforts. Yet, they are likely to be some of the more successful recruiters, because they know child welfare work and the characteristics of effective employees. Staff are also integral members of the region where potential candidates reside and could use their contacts for recruitment efforts. Research has shown that staff within agencies (“inside-recruiters”) are effective recruiters of qualified candidates who, if hired, tend to stay on the job longer than staff recruited through other means. To help agency staff become skilled recruiters, the organization’s professional development unit should:

- Use training opportunities to message the importance of each staff person as a representative of the agency’s work and public image
- Include recruitment skills development in pre- and ongoing in-service training for all agency staff
- Conduct focus groups with agency staff to develop the agency’s recruitment message
- Provide customer service training to agency staff to help improve the image of the organization in particular and of public social services in general
- Offer training in presentation skills, such as PowerPoint presentations and “elevator speeches” on recruitment for employees to use during their community outreach activities

**2.7 Partner with universities to assist with the recruitment process.** Social work programs are key recruiting grounds for child welfare, promoting child welfare courses and placement opportunities to potential and existing students, advising students on child welfare employment opportunities, and using field liaison opportunities to encourage



effective recruitment efforts. According to workforce workgroup members, university social work programs contribute to recruitment strategies when they:

- Assure university students, including athletes, that social work, and child welfare in particular, is a good major
- Ensure the child welfare curriculum contains realistic portrayals of the challenges and opportunities of child welfare work
- Invite child welfare agency human resources personnel to university job fairs
- Network with educational professionals to bolster a recruitment pipeline from junior and senior high schools through community colleges
- Promote child welfare work with current, retired or part-time faculty

**2.8 Craft a research agenda for child welfare recruitment.** Workforce workgroup members support the following actions for a research agenda focused on improving the effectiveness of child welfare recruitment:

- Compare targeted recruitment outcomes with recruitment as usual, measuring increases in numbers, aptitudes, and diversity of the applicant pool
- Compare recruitment outcomes for printed versus social media recruitment approaches
- Measure impact of unfilled positions on agency culture, climate and outcomes

### III. **ISSUE: Ineffective selection processes resulting in questionable hires**

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Some studies estimate that nearly 80% of turnover is due to hiring mistakes and that if agencies are able to select and hire the right people for open positions, turnover would be substantially reduced. Workforce workgroup members identified the following factors that impede an effective selection process:

- Lack of professionalized workforce due to state classification structures and low entry-level compensation
- Time and urgency to fill/backfill positions leading to poor hiring practices and outcomes
- Lack adequate selection process
- Complex human resource processes that are too generic and not targeted for child welfare

#### **DESIRED OUTCOME: High performing and committed workforce**

When an applicant has a clear understanding of the characteristics of the job for which he or she is applying and when the agency selection team can be sure they are selecting the applicant who is the best match for that job, there is a greater likelihood that the applicant will become an employee who will remain on the job and succeed in it. Workforce workgroup members identified the following applicant characteristics that a selection process should be able to detect:

- Commitment to the agency's mission
- Possessing the right attributes and competencies

#### **SELECTION STRATEGIES**

**3.1 Implement a comprehensive, competency-based selection process.** Many supervisors and managers have little understanding of how to translate the complexities of child welfare work into a competency-based selection process that would match the best candidate with the job. Job analyses, selection testing and competency-based interviewing approaches are not familiar processes, and yet they are investments that save the agency money in the long run. Workforce workgroup members recommend that agencies:

- Develop web-based self-screening for anonymous use, using realistic job preview videos, job-related interactive information/assessments, and screening interviews to explore self-knowledge
- Conduct initial screenings with groups of applicants
- Conduct comprehensive competency-based standardized interviews using a variety of tools, including case analysis, computer-based writing samples, and scenarios to test for critical thinking skills
- Increase the number and type of interactions with candidates

**3.2 Address civil service laws and human resource policies that hamper effective selection practices.** County and state child welfare agencies are tied to state personnel systems that are often cumbersome and inefficient. Workforce workgroup members suggested that agencies work more collaboratively to:

- Promote screening and hiring flexibility with human resources

- Address human resource concerns about competency-based selection processes
- Develop a civil service process that reflects the proficiencies needed for each position
- Establish a “ready employee” list of people who have been fully screened and are on a waitlist to shorten time to hire

**3.3 Provide fiscal incentives for selection of specialized staff.** In order to ensure effective services for all eligible children, youth and families, organizations may need to consider:

- Extra pay or stipends for new hires who are bilingual, have specialized practice expertise, are willing to work in remote areas, etc.
- Partnerships with businesses to offer incentives to new-hires, such as restaurant and retail discounts, health club memberships, onsite day care, etc.

**3.4 Fill vacancies in a timely way.** Workforce workgroup members acknowledged the psychological and physical toll that unfilled vacancies take on staff who must carry inflated caseloads and on children, youth and families who are underserved during this period. They recommended efforts to:

- Establish staffing standards and base funding levels on them
- Analyze the cost of leaving positions vacant and document the time taken to fill vacancies, using data to convince politicians and community boards
- Establish substitute pools of trained staff ready for vacancies, including retirees and prior successful employees to fill positions on a temporary and part-time basis for vacations, sick leave, maternity leave, etc.

**3.5 Enhance professional development strategies to improve implementation of a competency-based selection process.** A competency-based approach to selection gathers purposeful information from an applicant that will predict as accurately as possible how the applicant will behave on the job. This approach requires specific implementation skills and activities that can be learned through an agency’s professional development program that should:

- With child welfare staff, determine what competencies will be the basis of the selection process
- Develop or adapt a comprehensive selection process that measures each competency in more than one way
- Train interview teams on use of the selection process

**3.6 Engage university partners to assist with the selection process.** Not all graduates of social work education programs are prepared or qualified for work in child welfare. University partners that want to increase the ability of agencies to hire social work graduates should:

- Prepare university graduates to meet selection criteria for child welfare work by integrating child welfare learning and competencies into the curriculum
- Offer a seminar on how to best prepare for the child welfare selection process
- Devise a competency-based educational program supported by scholarships and targeting first generation and minority students for child welfare education, as well as those from rural settings, immigrants and potential students in low income neighborhoods and single-parent families
- Develop national child welfare competencies

**3.7 Create a research agenda for workforce selection.** Workforce competency-based selection approaches have rarely been the object of research, but child welfare agencies that can document the effectiveness of the approach could justify its cost and time commitment. Useful research would:

- Test a method for determining competencies to use in a competency-based selection process
- Compare outcomes of a competency-based selection process with selection as usual, focusing on performance and retention, as well as child and family outcomes

## IV. ISSUE: High turnover rates among qualified and experienced staff

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Children, youth and families served by child welfare systems deserve the most qualified and committed staff capable of providing rigorous, comprehensive services for families to ensure their children's safety, permanence and well-being. Yet, those most committed to helping children, youth and families do not always continue working in child welfare. With an estimated national turnover rate between 20% and 40%, undesired exits of significant numbers of child welfare practitioners are a serious problem that hampers the ability of agencies to provide essential services. In addition to the toxic work environment discussed earlier, workforce workgroup members identified other factors related to turnover, including:

- Unrealistic job expectations, whereby job duties are more complex and demanding than expected or advertised
- Lack of support for learning and applying essential skills
- No attractive career ladder
- Generational differences

### DESIRED OUTCOME: Competent staff that stay

Research has shown that, among other factors, child welfare staff are less likely to leave their jobs if they have realistic expectations about the nature of their jobs, feel their job assignments are congruent with their skills and perceive supervisors as being able to provide practice guidance and support. Staff perceptions are amenable to change when supervisors implement specific retention strategies. With these strategies, supervisors have significant influence on the retention of practitioners in their units and, in collaboration with other supervisors, on the agency's climate as a whole.

## RETENTION STRATEGIES

**4.1 Support new hires.** While the newcomer stage is marked by high anxiety, new practitioners are also enthusiastic about the challenges and opportunities of their jobs. Supervisors and managers should build on that enthusiasm to support retention with deliberate strategies to:

- Provide a welcoming orientation to all newly hired staff that includes the participation of ongoing staff
- Introduce new hires to coworkers and support staff, including lunch reservations for the new hire with different coworkers each day during the first week or two
- Conduct a Newcomer Interview within the first 2 weeks of employment to share mutual expectations and identify staff learning and career development needs to develop a Career Pathways Plan
- Implement comprehensive and meaningful new-hire training with reduced caseloads and on-the-job learning activities
- Have lead unit workers be mentors, coaches and guides for new practitioners
- Spend the first year in a socialization process with new hires to:
  - Provide realistic information about job disappointments and stresses
  - Provide general support and reassurance
  - Help newcomers learn coping skills
  - Teach practice skills and monitor learning and performance

**4.2 Support experienced staff.** Experienced staff are also subject to turnover, unless supervisors respond appropriately to their strong sense of independence and autonomy and appreciate and use their advanced skills and practice experiences. Retention-focused supervisors should:

- Identify early signs of disengagement that lead to tuning out, disengaging or leaving
- Conduct annual Stay Interviews with each practitioner in order to delay or prevent resignations and learn more about what will increase job satisfaction
- Complete a yearly professional development action plan with the experienced staff member to implement during the following year
- Use coaching to encourage career development and provide opportunities for development and implementation of new or emerging leadership skills
- Use the experienced practitioner's knowledge and skills to increase supervisor's and other staff members' competencies
- Offer career ladders to encourage skilled staff to practice in specialized areas, such as coaching, training, field work supervision and clinical consultation
- Support worker teaming as a way to integrate expertise and special knowledge in the workplace

**4.3 Value a diverse workforce.** Staff diverse in ethnicity, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability bring differences in knowledge, skills, experiences and perspectives that agencies can leverage for effective services if they:

- Foster an inclusive working environment where differences are valued and promoted as a way to maximize the collective potential
- Recognize and use skills of people with diverse backgrounds to benefit the agency, clients and coworkers
- Ensure that units, teams, and working groups reflect the diversity of the workforce, and the children and families served
- Find ways for diverse staff to learn about and engage each other
- Address and correct the use of inappropriate language or actions which deride diversity and erode teamwork

**4.4 Understand and welcome generational differences among staff.**

Demographers have identified several generational groups most prevalent in the workforce today with different values and assumptions in terms of work/life balance, loyalty, and authority, among other factors. In response to those generational differences, workforce workgroup members suggest that, in order to retain a multigenerational workforce, agency supervisors and managers should:

- Balance the needs and strengths that staff from different generations have in order to maximize agency performance
- Find ways for staff from different generations to learn about and engage each other
- Assign work and other activities differently, according to the strengths and values of each employee

**4.5 Provide equitable and adequate compensation.** Child welfare salaries are not keeping up with inflation or with other similar public service jobs. Workforce workgroup members urged agencies to:

- Implement competitive compensation between private and state agencies
- Compensate for increased competency (e.g., education, experience, and special expertise, such as bilingual)

- Apply salary structures that create incentives for moving up in the agency or increasing practice expertise, and equalize compensation across all child welfare positions

**4.6 Address turnover of pivotal leaders.** Workforce workgroup members identified turnover of leaders as a significant workforce issue and suggested that in order to ensure ongoing maintenance of effective agency policies and practices, strategies should be in place to:

- Instill in the culture and climate of the agency the vision, mission and goals of child welfare work so that the workforce can carry on after the loss of a leader
- Advocate for the leader's salary retention bonus or other enticements for her or his retention
- Document the leader's activities and evaluate their outcomes to ensure that good work continues

**4.7 Use professional development activities to promote retention.** The agency's professional development team plays a key role in supporting a retention environment and training staff in retention skills. They are encouraged to:

- Include retention as a topic in preservice training for staff to increase awareness of signs of discouragement and disengagement that may prompt turnover
- Teach retention skills that supervisors and managers can implement to stem turnover and encourage retention
- Include leveraging diversity as a training topic for all staff

**4.8 Engage university partners to contribute to retention of competent, committed and diverse staff.** Workforce workgroup members suggested that social work programs:

- Provide continuing education for child welfare practitioners and supervisors that focus on building clinical skills
- Strengthen cultural responsiveness in social work schools and agencies
- Examine existing curriculum to determine extent of coverage related to effective clinical practices, including trauma-informed work and evidence-based practices
- Advocate with licensure boards to define child welfare work as clinical work
- Use the advanced-practice behaviors group at CSWE to create child welfare practice behaviors that include clinical language

**4.9 Advance a research agenda for workforce retention.** Child welfare agencies exist within a data rich environment regarding service outputs and outcomes. Collection of workforce data should be collected by research through partnerships with universities that will:

- Collect turnover rates in jurisdictions across the country
- Describe and compare turnover rates in rural and urban areas, tribal agencies, county and state administered states, private and public child welfare agencies, as well as across differences in workforce characteristics
- Study the impact of workforce intervention strategies on retention and organizational climate
- Collect accurate and accessible workforce data and develop leadership capacity for using data for workforce planning

## Conclusion

The Workforce Workgroup ended with members sharing their expectations and hopes for a professional child welfare workforce of the future that is prepared to be effective in achieving positive child and family outcomes, supported by learning organizations, and working in partnership with unions, community agencies, universities, and families for the greatest collective impact. Specific characteristics of the child welfare workforce of the future include the following:

Child Welfare Workforce of the Future	
Expectations	Hopes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use social media and leverage technology for practice and training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primarily BSW and MSW workforce</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative with other professions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respected professional career ladder and pay reflective of high status position</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional peer networks and job flexibility and mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workforce better reflects the families served and is culturally responsive</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community-based services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manageable caseloads</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focused on outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work-life balance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skilled in data driven practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff feel valued</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More competent in clinical skills such as evidence-based and trauma-informed practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media portray child welfare more positively</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater focus on prevention and trauma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Well educated in evidence and best practices</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changing expectations of documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective models of supervision consistently implemented</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider broader view of the workforce to include public, private, tribal, foster parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child welfare leaders with cost-benefit analysis expertise</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations for private agency performance aligned with state agency performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of sophisticated technology for work activities, work approaches, and learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High touch—want more nurturing and expect higher level of agency responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pay attention to individualized needs of workforce</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creative thinkers and willing to think “out of the box” while frustrated when bumping against rigid policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Readiness of system to accept workforce development</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tolerant of differences and less judgmental</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resource network of partners, including HR, community, universities, unions, foster parents, families</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenge rules, ask why, ask for explanation and rationale for decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public awareness of what good child welfare is</li> </ul>