



National Child Welfare
Workforce Institute

LEARNING, LEADING, CHANGING

SUMMARY REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2020

COMPREHENSIVE ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH
ASSESSMENT (COHA)

Public Workforce Excellence Sites

Cross-Site Summary Report

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) is a five-year federal project (2018-2023) funded by the Children’s Bureau to build the capacity of the nation’s child welfare workforce and promote effective child welfare practice and leadership development. As part of that effort, NCWWI selected four public and three tribal child welfare agencies to be **Workforce Excellence (WE)** sites. **This is a cross-site summary report of results from the four public (two county and two state) WE sites’ Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessments.**

Purpose of Public Workforce Excellence Cross-Site Report

NCWWI conducted a Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) for each of the public WE sites from June to August of 2019 to identify critical workforce strengths and challenges. The COHA includes collection of agency data related to each of NCWWI’s ten [Workforce Development Framework](#) (WDF) domains, which describe the key elements of an effective workforce. This report is a snapshot of organizational health at one point in time and summarizes key areas of organizational health across the four public WE sites. The purpose is to showcase areas of strength and opportunities for growth across the four sites and to shed light on the broader efforts needed to more effectively meet child welfare organizations’ practice objectives, achieve better outcomes for families, and sustain a high-performing, resilient workforce.

Public Workforce Excellence Sites’ Agency Context

County WE Site 1 is an urban, moderately to densely populated county with just over 1.2 million people in 2018. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this site’s racial/ethnic composition is 80.1% White, 13.4% Black/African American, 2.2% Mixed Race, 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 4.1% Asian; and 2.2% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latinx. County WE Site 1 is a county-administered public child welfare agency with almost 700 employees.

County WE Site 2 is a metropolitan center with a population of 919,719 in 2018. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this racial/ethnic composition is 79.5% White, 14%

Black/African American, 0.7% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3.7% Asian, and 2.0% Multiracial; and 5.7% of the population identifies as Hispanic. The county has a significant refugee population and shares borders with two Indian reservations that have a combined population of approximately 2,800 people. County WE Site 2 is a county-administered public child welfare agency with approximately 400 employees.

State WE Site 3 is rural and sparsely populated, with just over 3 million people in 2018. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this site's racial/ethnic composition is 79.3% White, 15.7% Black/African American, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.6% Asian, 0.3% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 2.1% Mixed Race; and 7.6% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latinx. State WE Site 3 is a centralized, state-administered system with around 1200 employees.

State WE Site 4 has large urban areas that are home to more than 8.7 million people and just under 1.8 million people reside in the rural areas of the state. In total, the state's population is more than 10.5 million. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this site's racial/ethnic composition is 60.5% White, 32.4% Black/African American, 9.8% Hispanic or Latino, 4.3% Asian, 0.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 2.2% two or more races. State WE Site 4 is a state-administered, county-run system with over 3400 employees.

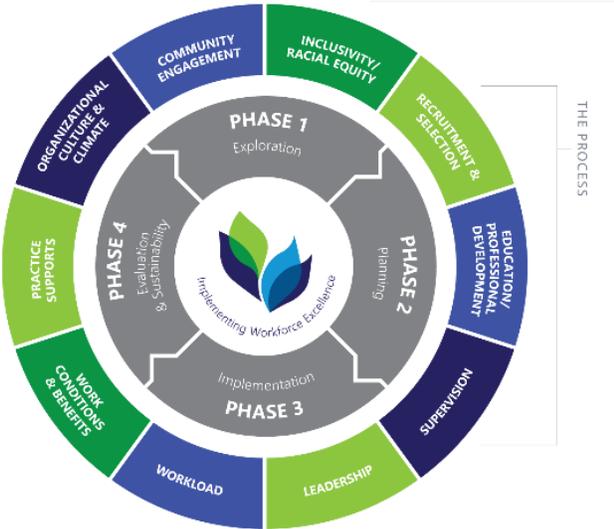
Methodology

The COHA process involved collecting data through multiple methods and from multiple sources, including a review of documents; an online survey administered to all staff; and focus groups or interviews at each WE site that included agency directors, managers, supervisors, frontline staff, support staff, and stakeholders.

Of the 5,685 staff invited to participate across the four sites, 4,004 staff members completed the COHA survey for a response rate of 70%.

From June to July 2019, the NCWWI Evaluation Team conducted the onsite qualitative component of the COHA, holding 47 individual interviews and 78 focus groups that resulted in the participation of 626 staff and stakeholders across public WE sites. The questions in the interviews and focus groups were related to the domain areas in the WDF, including: Recruitment and Selection; Education/Professional Development; Work Conditions and Benefits; Workload; Practice Supports; Supervision; Leadership; Organizational Culture and Climate; Inclusivity/Racial Equity; and Community Engagement.

In addition to collecting survey and interview data, evaluators reviewed several key documents in order to contextualize the findings of the COHA within the organizational practice environment of the public WE sites. Documents included WE sites' Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), turnover reports, and NCWWI WE Proposals.



Survey Participant Demographics

Of the 4,004 respondents who completed the survey, 9% self-reported as managers or directors, 13% as supervisors, 50% as caseworkers, 14% as support staff, and 14% as other (see Table 1).

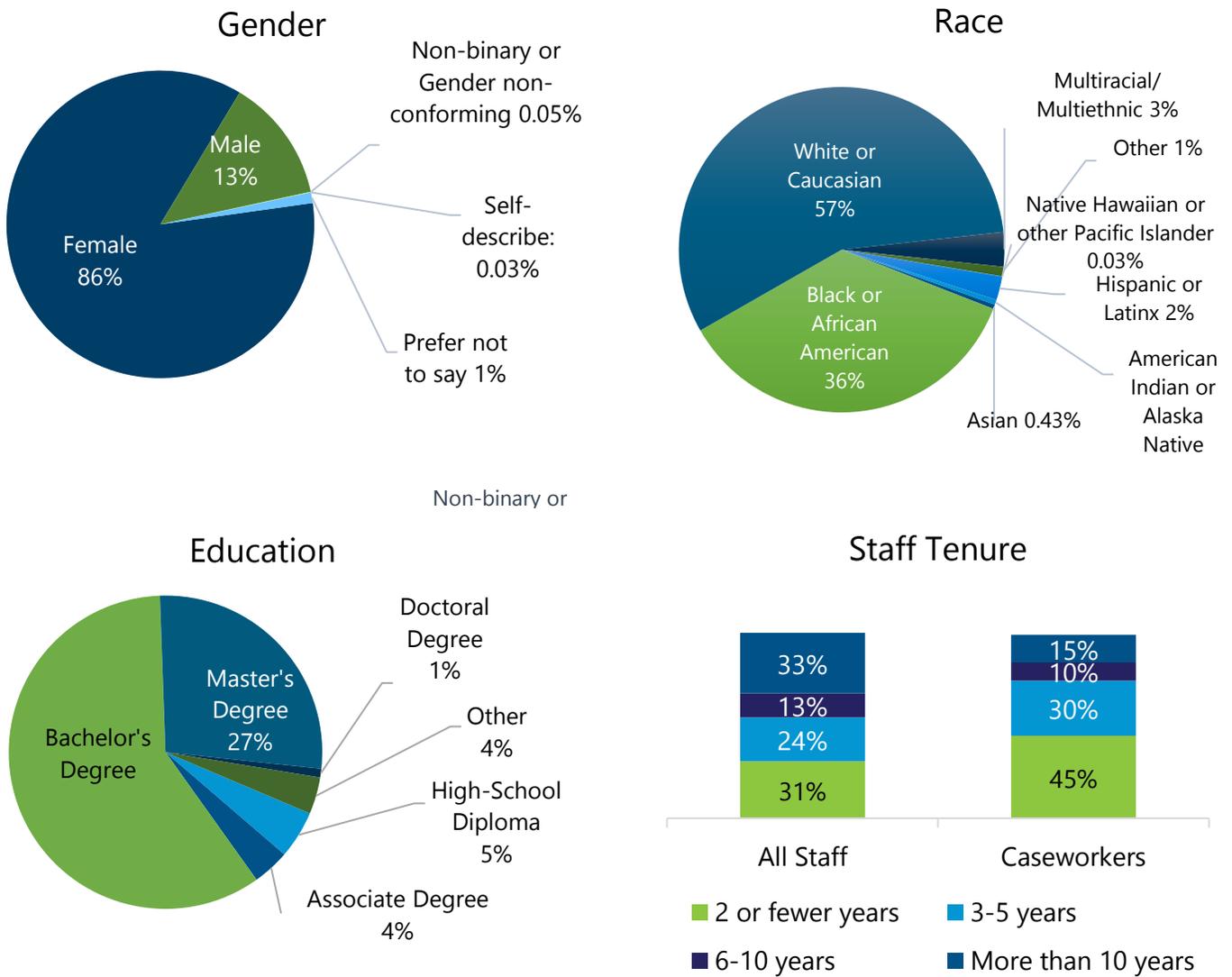
Table 1. COHA Respondents by Position

Participation Format	Caseworker	Supervisor	Support Staff	Administrator: Manager/Director	Stakeholder /Other	Total
Survey	2,000	533	553	371	547	4,004
Interview/Focus Group	192	138	129	134	33	626

Across the public WE sites, 35.9% of survey respondents identified as Black or African American, 0.5% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.4% as Asian, 2.0% as Hispanic or Latinx, 0.03% as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 56.6% as White, 3.4% as Multiracial, and 1% as other. Most staff held a bachelor’s (59%) or master’s (27%) degree. Around 28% of all respondents held a social work degree (BSW, MSW, and/or PhD) and of those, 35% received stipend funding for their BSW or MSW. The length of time respondents had been working in their agencies ranged from less than a year to 44 years, with an average of 9 years. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Survey Participant Demographics (N = 4,004)



Results

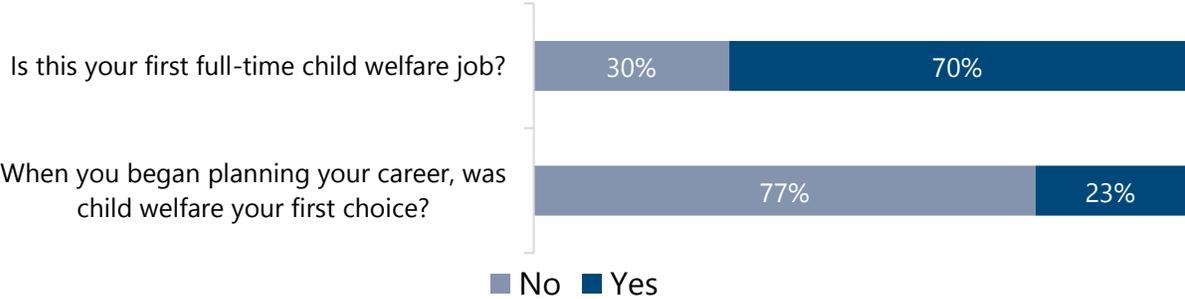
Recruitment & Selection

WDF Description: A broad range of activities associated with recruitment practices to attract a large, diverse pool of candidates and then selecting the best people using standard and inclusive protocols.

Recruitment and hiring of qualified workers is an ongoing challenge across the public WE sites. While issues related to geography are present (e.g., challenges related to recruiting staff to serve rural communities), staff mostly discussed the challenges related to civil service/human resources hiring and screening processes, which were seen as cumbersome. This contributes to positions remaining unfilled for long periods of time.

Across public WE sites, most staff indicated that their current position is their first full-time child welfare job, and that child welfare was not their first-choice career (see Figure 3). In regard to staff perception of how prepared they were to work in their organization, staff mostly agreed the information given in the interview was enough to make an informed decision about the reality of the job. However, fewer staff agreed that their agency hires people whose experience/education prepared them for their jobs. Given that 70% of respondents reported that their current job was their first full-time child welfare job, it seems that most staff do not come in with child welfare experience.

Figure 3. Child Welfare as Career Choice



Education/Professional Development

WDF Description: Education at universities and colleges generates a pool of workforce candidates with entry-level knowledge, while professional development prepares newly hired staff with the knowledge and skills to do the job and seasoned staff with ongoing skill development and potential for advancement.

Overall, professional development is an area for potential growth across the public WE sites. Staff mostly reported that ongoing trainings are relevant to their jobs, improve their ability to do their jobs, and teach them how to work with families of diverse cultures/ethnicities. However, staff struggle to balance training opportunities with workload demands and reported that workloads and time constraints were barriers to taking advantage of training opportunities. Additionally, staff expressed the need for training and professional development that is more reflective of the day-to-day realities of the job such as making sound case decisions and interacting with the courts. Further, two out of five staff expressed the need for more training and professional development opportunities geared toward experienced staff and supervisors.

Work Conditions & Benefits

WDF Description: Staff at all levels must receive competitive and equitable salary, compensation, and benefits and have the necessary tools and resources in the office and field to feel safe, supported, and valued as professionals and individuals.

Safety in the Field

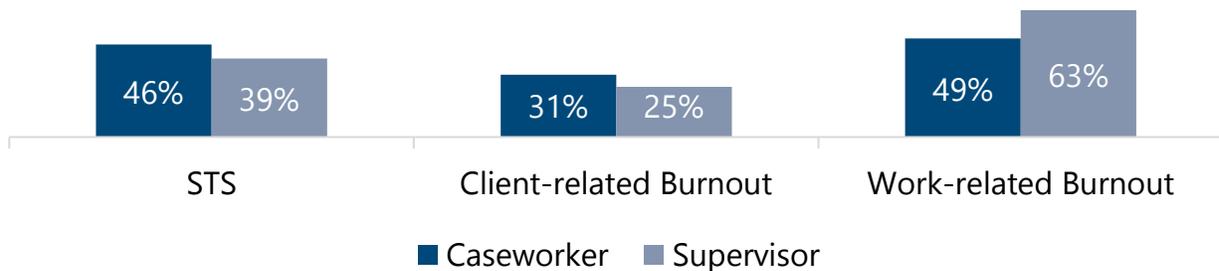
Staff across all public WE sites acknowledged the potentially dangerous nature of their work and discussed safety concerns while working in the field. An average of 73% of staff who work directly with families indicated they had been yelled at, shouted at, or sworn at by a client or other household member; 37% had been threatened by a client without physical contact.

Secondary Traumatic Stress and Burnout

Across the public WE sites, staff's experiences of secondary traumatic stress and burnout are concerning. For example, 46% of staff reported PTSD-level symptoms due to

secondary traumatic stress, such as having trouble sleeping, concentrating, and intrusive thoughts (thinking about work with clients when they didn't intend to). All staff reported experiencing some amount of work-related burnout; in particular, feeling worn out at the end of the work day and being emotionally exhausted from work. Staff who work directly with families reported more work-related burnout (e.g., "Do you feel worn out at the end of a working day?") than client-related burnout (e.g., "Does it drain your energy to work with clients?"). Figure 4 shows the percentage of caseworkers and supervisors who meet the threshold (score of 38 out of 85 possible) indicating they were experiencing "moderate" or higher levels of secondary traumatic stress. Burnout is measured on a 100-point scale and Figure 4 shows the percent of individuals who scored greater than 50, indicating relatively high levels of client- and/or work-related burnout.

Figure 4. Percentage of Caseworkers and Supervisors Meeting Threshold for STS and Burnout



Self-Care

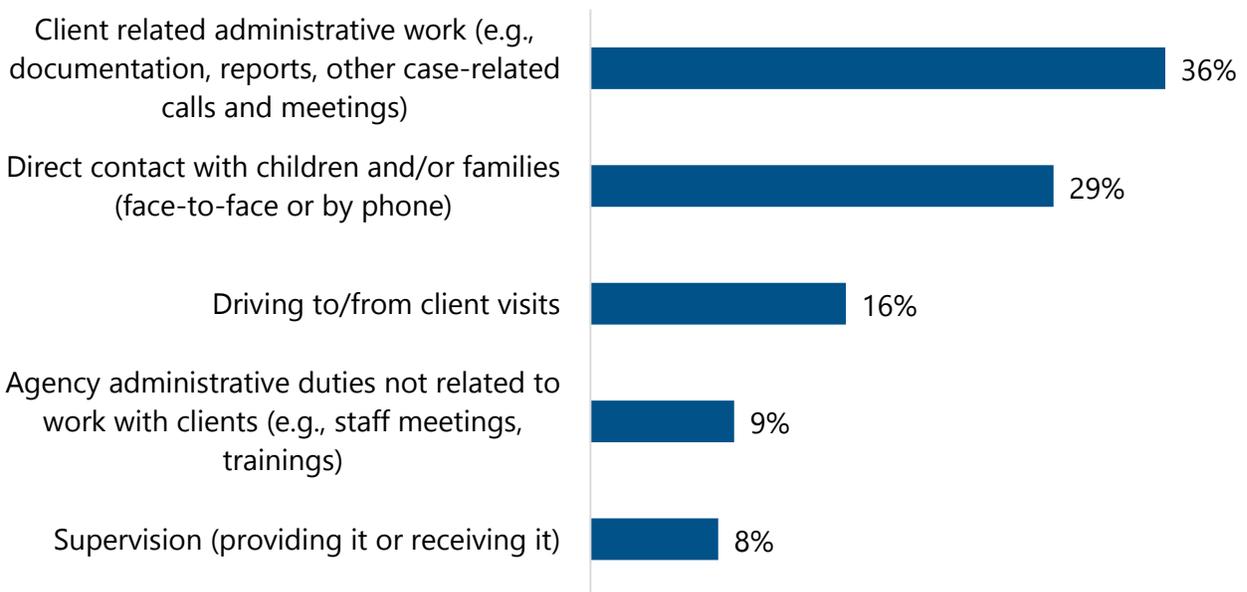
Overall, self-care is strong across the public WE sites, with staff reporting that they usually engage in self-care activities such as spending time with family and friends. However, they are less likely to engage in self-care activities during their work day. While staff expressed valuing and knowing about the benefits of self-care, especially to cope with stress, burnout, and secondary trauma, they find it hard to take time off for self-care (e.g., vacation, comp time, or sick time) due to the overwhelming amount of work that would accumulate during their absence.

Workload

WDF Description: Staff often feel burdened by stress and time pressure that result from a heavy workload. Workload goes beyond the number of cases or the people to supervise and looks at the totality of job requirements, including professional development and internal organizational responsibilities.

Although staff across the public WE sites reported seeing organizational efforts to reduce their caseload sizes, time pressure and job stress remain very high, with 94% of staff agreeing that staff often show signs of stress and strain. Additionally, around 50% of staff reported that their workload is too high and that they have a lot of time pressure in their work. Staff expressed having compliance-driven cultures that contribute to job stress and not having the time to do all that is required. In fact, when asked what percentage of their time they spend on average on various tasks, frontline staff across the public WE sites reported spending more time on client-related administrative work than on direct contact with children and families. See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Caseworkers' Average Time Spent on Tasks



Practice Supports

WDF Description: Practice supports provide a way to sustain effective provision of services, regardless of the specific practices an organization implements.

Staff from the public WE sites described how their organizations are dedicated to improving practice with children and families and strive to adopt and implement practices and initiatives that meet the needs of children and families. However, staff reported that readiness for change and change implementation is often a barrier to improving practice within their organizations. For example, staff expressed that the reasons for change are often unclear and that staff are seldom included in decision-making around new initiatives or changes that impact their work and practice with families. Challenges with implementing new initiatives with fidelity and consistency also contribute to initiative fatigue among staff.

On the other hand, having strong peer support is an area of strength among all public WE sites, with almost all staff agreeing they share work experiences with colleagues to improve the effectiveness of client services and that they count on each other to resolve difficult work problems and gets things done.

Supervision

WDF Description: Supervision plays a role in how staff experience the organization. Supervisors build clinical skills, offer emotional and social support, provide coaching and feedback, and promote a healthy team culture and climate.

Overall, supervisor support is strong across the public WE sites, with most staff agreeing their supervisor genuinely cares about them and supports them in difficult case situations. Staff also reported high satisfaction with the quality and frequency of individual and group supervision. However, frontline staff indicated a need for supervisors to help address issues around vicarious trauma and burnout and use supervision to teach new skills.

Supervisors themselves reported feeling overwhelmed with the expectations and responsibilities placed on them and expressed the need for more structured and consistent support from leadership. They also shared they sometimes lack supervisory

training when they first become supervisors and do not always have the skills and time to help staff develop their own skills/professionalism and provide emotional support around the difficult issues staff face on a regular basis.

Leadership

WDF Description: Effective leadership at all levels enables an organization to identify and operationalize the components of workforce development, engaging the whole organization in the work.

Overall, staff across the public WE sites acknowledged that leadership is making positive changes to help the agency be more family-focused with clients and responsive to the needs of their workforce. They also indicated that their leaders demonstrate a commitment to racial equity and behave in an honest, fair, and ethical manner, and they encourage new ideas and innovation and encourage staff to take initiative. However, one key area for growth related to leadership across the public WE sites is communication. Staff expressed that communication flow is an ongoing challenge and that they feel a strong sense of disconnect with leadership's decision-making process. Staff reported the need for greater cohesion and more consistent communication from managers, directors, and agency leaders.

Organizational Culture & Climate

WDF Description: Positive organizational climate occurs when an individual perceives that they have input in organizational decision-making, problem solving, and processes; have access to information and resources; and have positive views of the agency's value of diversity.

Staff of the public WE sites overwhelmingly recognize the importance of their work and are proud of the work they do with children and families. They expressed how their organizational climate strengths include an overall sense of commitment and dedication to helping families and a culture of teamwork where staff support and help each other. However, organizational climate challenges such as inconsistent communication and

implementation and initiative fatigue contribute to a culture where staff are unsure what to prioritize and fear making mistakes. In addition, staff expressed not feeling acknowledged for the work they do, which contributes to staff not feeling valued or supported by their organization. For example, staff expressed feeling role conflict challenges, with almost half of the staff reporting they were held accountable for things over which they have no control.

Retention

As with most child welfare agencies, staff turnover is a concern in the public WE sites (21% to 40%). Turnover and subsequent vacancies (which often go unfilled for long periods of time) create burdens for frontline staff and administrators alike, as they are all accountable for making sure the work is done and families are safe. Overall, key factors staff identified that contribute to turnover include a lack of job preparation and unrealistic job expectations, unmanageable workloads (especially related to administrative work), and the need for work-life balance.

Inclusivity/Racial Equity

WDF Description: A diverse and inclusive workplace strengthens the workforce and positively impacts an organization's ability to provide effective services and supports. Addressing issues of inclusivity and racial equity occurs as an independent effort as well as within all other components.

A diverse workforce and efforts to improve racial equity and inclusion dynamics in the work with children and families are strengths of many of the public WE sites. However, while there has been training on understanding biases in working with families, staff reported witnessing several areas of bias toward clients (e.g., race, socioeconomic, disability). Consequently, despite the availability of training, staff expressed a desire for more policies, procedures, and training related to equitable and bias reduction practices that apply to the workplace as well as the work with children and families.

In regard to workplace prejudice and discrimination, staff perceptions were mixed, with some staff agreeing there is workplace prejudice and discrimination and other staff agreeing that people respect coworkers who are from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. It is notable that, across all the public WE sites, perceptions of prejudice and discrimination are significantly different between staff of color and white staff,

especially as they relate to perspectives and experiences regarding race and ethnicity dynamics at their workplace. Additional analyses also revealed that staff of color reported significantly lower intent to stay in their agencies compared to white staff.

Community Engagement

Efforts to improve community engagement and relationships with community partners are strengths staff noted across the public WE sites. Still, while the availability of community resources was perceived as having improved over time, staff discussed the need to assess for the quality and availability of the resources. Staff expressed concern about the unevenness of resources and services available to children and families in different neighborhoods or in more rural communities, noting that there are often not enough services and resources to appropriately meet needs of children and families.

In regard to public perception, most staff believe that the public views child welfare work as important. However, some staff feel that people look down on them for being a child welfare worker, and most feel that the public blames the child welfare worker when something goes wrong with a case.

Inter-Professional Collaboration

Inter-professional collaboration is a strength across the public WE sites, with staff reporting strong relationships with service providers, particularly in regard to collaborating well, communicating frequently, and respecting each other's expertise. Additionally, staff have generally favorable views of their collaboration with court professionals, though staff expressed a need to build a common understanding of what is best for children and families among child welfare staff and courts, state partners (staff attorneys, hotline, etc.), and other external judicial partners. Still, there are clear strengths in relationships with court professionals, including frequency of communication and understanding each other's job responsibilities.

Summary

In many ways, the 2019 COHA cross-site results show that the four public WE sites are building organizations that have strong and consistent commitments to developing a quality child welfare workforce that provides best-practice services to children and families. Findings demonstrated workforce challenges and strengths that impact the health of the workforce across the public WE sites and highlighted issues that may be affecting child welfare organizations on a national level. Areas identified as workforce challenges through the cross-site COHA results can be strengthened by implementing workforce reforms and strategies framed by NCWWI's Workforce Development Framework. Finally, public WE cross-site findings can help inform broader efforts to meet child welfare organizations' practice objectives, achieve better outcomes for families, and sustain a high-performing, resilient, and healthy workforce.

Appendix A: COHA Summary Table of Scale-Level Descriptives

“Ribbons” colors provide a quick visual interpretation of whether the sites’ results were, on average: an *area of concern* (red ribbon ) , a *watch area* (yellow ribbon ) , or a *strength* (green ribbon ) , based on survey data.

COHA Scale or Subscale	Ribbons
Recruitment and Selection	
Professional Development and Preparation for Work	
<i>Preparation for Work Subscale</i>	
<i>Professional Development Subscale</i>	
<i>Training Values Subscale</i>	
Education and Professional Development	
Self-Care	
<i>Professional Support and Self-Care Subscale</i>	
<i>Cognitive Strategies Subscale</i>	
<i>Life Balance Subscale</i>	
Work Conditions & Benefits	
Secondary Traumatic Stress	
Client-related Burnout	
Work-related Burnout	
Physical Environment	
Exposure to Violence	N/A
Workload	
Time Pressure	
Job Stress	
Learning Culture	
<i>Open Learning Subscale</i>	
<i>Culture of Shared Learning Subscale</i>	
Readiness for Change	
Practice Supports	
Peer Support	
Supervision	
Supervision for Caseworkers/Frontline Staff	
Supervision for Supervisors	
Supervision for Mid-level Managers	
Satisfaction with Supervision Quality and Frequency	
Leadership	
Agency Leadership	
<i>Inclusive Leadership Subscale</i>	

COHA Scale or Subscale	Ribbons
<i>Value for Staff Initiative and Development Subscale</i>	
<i>Results Orientation and Change Management Subscale</i>	
Local Leadership	
<i>Inclusive Leadership Subscale</i>	
<i>Value for Staff Initiative and Development Subscale</i>	
<i>Results Orientation and Change Management Subscale</i>	
Organizational Culture and Climate	
Organizational Climate	
<i>Role Clarity Subscale</i>	
<i>Role Conflict Subscale</i>	
<i>Job Importance Subscale</i>	
<i>Job Autonomy Subscale</i>	
<i>Job is Challenging Subscale</i>	
<i>Organizational Innovation Subscale</i>	
<i>Organizational Justice (fairness) Subscale</i>	
<i>Organizational Support Subscale</i>	
Psychological Safety	
Job Satisfaction	
<i>General Job Satisfaction Subscale</i>	
<i>Job Engagement Subscale</i>	
<i>Life Satisfaction Subscale</i>	
Intent to Stay at Agency	
<i>Commitment to Stay at Agency Subscale</i>	
<i>Constraints for Staying at Agency Subscale</i>	
Inclusivity/Racial Equity	
Workplace Prejudice and Discrimination Inventory	N/A
Experienced Organizational Bias	N/A
Witnessed Organizational Bias	N/A
Witnessed Bias towards Clients	N/A
Community Engagement	
Public Perceptions of Child Welfare	
<i>Respect Subscale</i>	
<i>Stigma Subscale</i>	
<i>Blame Subscale</i>	
Inter-Professional Collaboration with Service Providers	
Inter-Professional Collaboration with Court Professionals	
Availability of Resources in the Community	