

Child Welfare Caseworker Retention

Research Brief

Prepared at the Request of New York County Leaders
Compiled by: Elizabeth Day and Abbie Sanders
Cornell University and University of Oregon

THE PROBLEM

Caseworker workloads and rates of turnover are increasing at an alarming rate.

30% turnover rate in
New York in 2017.

Annual turnover rates below 10–12% are considered optimal or healthy. For the past 15 years, child welfare turnover rates across the U.S. have been estimated at 20–40%.¹

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

There is a plethora of options that may work to reduce turnover. Specific initiatives are outlined below, but three common themes emerged across the approaches that likely support caseworkers and reduce turnover.²

Overarching Themes

Invest in strong leadership	Involve employees in decision-making	Maintain open lines of communication
A good supervisor supports staff development, helps staff thrive, and helps staff feel more in control of their work and the organization.	Whenever possible, help employees feel connected and heard regarding decisions being made. Include front-line workers and administrative staff in these efforts.	This could include weekly staff meetings or regularly scheduled formal feedback mechanisms. For example, implement “Stay” interviews to hear feedback on what keeps employees motivated and satisfied.

Promising Initiatives

1

Self-Care Plan Development and Support

Studies have shown that self-care and inspiring hope in caseworkers may be linked to decreased burnout for caseworkers.^{3,4} Self-care plans that incorporate strategies for both physical health (exercise, proper nutrition, adequate sleep) and emotional well-being (creative endeavors such as art or cooking, spiritual activities such as meditation or church, and seeking the social support of family and friends) may provide the greatest benefit.⁵

While self-care is important, it's important to recognize that it puts the onus on the individual. What kinds of system changes could be made to support caseworkers in practicing selfcare? Perhaps flex schedules or more PTO?

2

Employee Recognition Programs

Caseworkers may appreciate personal recognition for their achievements, such as recognition for completing an MSW, small gifts or certificates for work or points for a rewards program (tickets to movies or theme parks, gym membership, or a day off).⁶

3

Peer Support

One study of over 1,700 caseworkers found evidence that peer support – both social-emotional and operational or work-related support – may be related to job satisfaction and intent to stay. Fifty-eight percent of caseworkers cited “coworkers” as a key reason they planned to stay.⁷

- Establish formal peer-support groups. These might include weekly drop-in support groups for caseworkers to share their experiences and solicit feedback from colleagues
- Train senior staff to provide peer support. These might include formal roles that are compensated or otherwise incentivized for senior staff to participate.

4

Casework Teaming

While not studied in the research literature, this approach was cited across other resources as a top option for reducing workloads.^{8,9}

Casework teaming is a child welfare staffing model and organizational approach in which multiple caseworkers share casework functions on certain cases.

Casework Teaming across New York Counties

- OCFS began pilot in 2007 (Albany, Columbia, Orange, Rockland, Schenectady, and possibly others)
- Key components include group supervision and a sense of shared responsibility, frequent and open communication between team members, and shared responsibility for cases.
- Over a three-year period, staff participating in teaming reported greater cohesion, a greater sense of self-efficacy, and greater ability to help children and families due to shared decision-making and workload responsibilities, when compared to staff in a similar unit from the same county not using casework teaming

Resources

- Guidebook: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/cfsr/assets/docs/Teaming-in-CW-Guidebook.pdf>
- OCFS Teaming webpage: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/cfsr/teaming.php>

5

Other Strategies

- Think strategically about how to use staff. Is there someone suited to provide transportation to families to free up time for experienced frontline workers? Is it possible to hire or fill vacancies to specifically do jobs such as paperwork?
- Collaborate with other community groups. Are there community partners who can help fill the gaps with roles such as scheduling appointments, transportation, and other paperwork?

A SUCCESS STORY: NEW JERSEY

In New Jersey, across all categories of child welfare staff and supervisors, the vacancy rate is consistently **less than 2.5%**.¹⁰

Many of their efforts have been at the state level, but some at the county level include: a central resource for caseworkers to access peer support, field training units for onboarding new caseworkers, and county-based job fests.



From 2005 to 2020, caseworker turnover rates in New Jersey dropped from 14.7% to just 4.3%.

<p>Peer Support Resource</p>	<p>An online portal – Worker2Worker – provides confidential peer-counseling and help staff. The peers who work in the program are retired employees with extensive experience in the agency. A psychologist leads the team, which provides real-time mental health support and connects caseworkers to therapeutic supports.</p>
<p>Field Training Units</p>	<p>Caseworkers participate in a learning cohort and other structured supports to ease their entry into the workforce. In addition to teaching job-specific skills, the onboarding process includes development of coping skills.</p>
<p>County-Based Job Fests</p>	<p>Invited applicants are selected from the larger pool of candidates, typically ranked by degree. Candidates spend approximately three hours at a Job Fest, during which they submit paperwork and attend a realistic job preview with local staff. Candidates who decide to move forward must submit a writing sample and participate in an additional interview with two agency representatives from different offices.</p>

For more details on New Jersey’s approach, visit: <https://www.casey.org/new-jersey-staff-turnover/>

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METHODS

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as a review of research and findings from non-partisan think tanks, foundations, and organizations. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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