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Strategies to Improve Child Welfare Worker Retention (Blog Post)

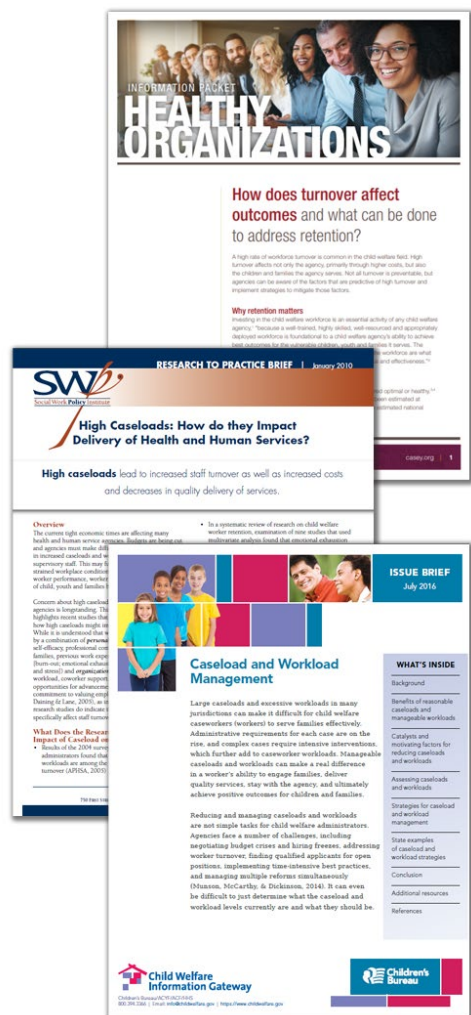
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High turnover among child welfare workers affects child welfare agencies and the families and children they serve. The challenges of high turnover rates are compounded by a lack of research on effective strategies to attract and retain child welfare workers. The primary goal of the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) is to build the evidence base regarding strategies to strengthen the child welfare workforce. We also strive to understand how improving an agency's workforce impacts the children and families served. The QIC-WD is implementing various workforce strategies within eight sites across the country, carefully evaluating the impacts, and preparing to use the results to inform the larger field of child welfare.

In a 2017 publication, [How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention?](#), Casey Family Programs explored the variables that contribute to high rates of child welfare workforce turnover and strategies that child welfare agencies can consider to help reduce worker turnover. Based on data available at the time the publication was written, the estimated national average turnover rate for child welfare workers was approximately 30% with individual agency rates ranging from 6.1% to 65%. A 2014 meta-analysis by [Kim and Kao](#), highlighted in the Casey publication, identifies the following variables (in addition to others) as having a medium or high effect on a caseworker's intent to leave:

- Well-being
- Safety concerns
- Organizational support and commitment
- Organizational culture and climate
- Supervisor support
- Job satisfaction

Additional research cited in the Casey publication indicated that the stress and emotional exhaustion that frequently accompanies high caseloads and high workloads were also reasons for high turnover among child welfare staff. (See [Caseload and Workload Management Issue Brief](#) and the [High Caseloads Research to Practice Brief](#).)



This blog post describes the strategies the QIC-WD is testing to strengthen the child welfare workforce. The QIC-WD used a [comprehensive process](#) to determine which strategies to implement and evaluate in each site. Each of the following strategies were highlighted in the Casey publication and are currently being implemented and tested in a real-world setting by the QIC-WD.

- **Prioritizing Inquiry and Assessment:** The QIC-WD developed and used a comprehensive needs assessment approach in all 8 sites, which included examination of human resources data, survey measures such as the [Organizational Social Context \(OSC\)](#), review of existing agency data/reports, and other data collection strategies such as focus groups; and root cause analysis techniques with each site to collaboratively determine the causes of agency turnover and potential interventions to implement and test.
- **Leading and Elevating Comprehensive Workforce Development:** The QIC-WD worked with each site to establish a workforce implementation team that met regularly throughout the needs assessment, workforce intervention selection, implementation, and evaluation processes. These teams included agency leadership, human resources representatives, frontline staff, and other key stakeholders.
- **Finding and Hiring the Best Applicants:** The QIC-WD and staff from [Oklahoma](#) conducted a job analysis to identify the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics necessary for successful performance of child welfare jobs. Based on this, the QIC-WD designed a competency-based selection process for child welfare positions, which will be implemented and rigorously evaluated across the state.
- **Onboarding and Welcoming New Staff:** The [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians](#) and the QIC-WD team, in collaboration with respected cultural experts and partners, developed an onboarding process to ensure new child welfare staff are familiar with expectations, are able to function within the culture, and are adequately prepared to succeed in their new roles.
- **Providing Incentives and Case Management Supports:**
 - The [Virginia](#) site is testing how two technology innovations can better support the case management functions of the child welfare worker.
 1. Transcription services for all Family Services Specialists who manage caseloads in child welfare and adult protective services in the state.
 2. A mobile app connected to the case management system for all Family Services Specialists to maximize their time away from the office. The app can be used in both online and offline mode to enter and review case information and assessments. All workers participating in the intervention received an iPad to increase their ability to complete their work outside the office.
 - After conducting a comprehensive job analysis, [Louisiana](#) and the QIC-WD implemented a job redesign strategy that included the creation of a new professional position, Child Welfare Team Specialist (CWTS). The CWTS performs those duties generally categorized as administrative, so the child welfare worker can focus on more clinical tasks. The intervention

includes a focus on teaming and a restructuring of the child welfare work process and work units to better support the workforce and achieve desired child and family outcomes.

- The [Washington](#) site and the QIC-WD created a system where workers could apply and be approved to telework one to two days per week. Early feedback indicates that this allows for fewer interruptions and less travel for workers, which means more time to complete case work in a timely manner.
- **Managing and Supervising Effectively:** [Ohio](#) and the QIC-WD created Coach Ohio which is a supportive supervision intervention that pairs the [Resilience Alliance \(RA\)](#) strategy with the [Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center \(ACCWIC\) Coaching model](#). Supervisors utilize Coach Ohio to help staff prevent and mitigate the effects of burnout, secondary trauma, employee disengagement, and disengagement from families and children served.
- **Nurturing a Healthy Agency Climate and Culture:**
 - The [Milwaukee](#) site is working with the QIC-WD to address the culture and climate of their child welfare agency, using the [Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity \(ARC\)](#) process. They create teams to explore problems and identify barriers, envision improvements, develop proposals to address those improvements, implement the proposal, and monitor the implementation of the proposal.
 - The QIC-WD and the states of [Ohio](#) and [Nebraska](#) addressed secondary traumatic stress (STS) as part of the agency's culture and climate. Each site is using RA to mitigate the effects of STS among child welfare staff, and in turn increase resilience, job satisfaction, self-care and social support. In Nebraska, RA is supplemented with weekly tips sent via text message and a 6-month Peer Support Group. In addition, Nebraska is planning to implement the [Restoring Resiliency Response Model](#) by the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to offer support to workers following a traumatic event, such as the death of a child or co-worker. The combination of RA, peer support, and debriefings are intended to help staff manage stress reactions and better cope with trauma.

The QIC-WD-supported workforce interventions are in various stages of implementation and undergoing rigorous program evaluation. When the data are available, findings will be shared broadly to continue the conversation about what the field of child welfare can do to address worker retention and to strengthen the workforce.