

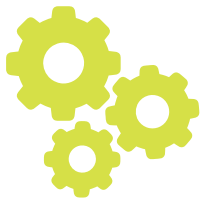
Unacknowledged Protectors: Consequences and Costs of Turnover in the Child Welfare Workforce



What a Child Welfare Caseworker Experiences Daily

Child welfare caseworkers investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, ensure the safety of children, provide services to keep families intact, and oversee cases when placement outside of the home is necessary. On a daily basis, these essential workers are exposed to significant traumatic experiences, including threats to their own safety, and routinely face public scrutiny and criticism.

Front-line workers, those we think of as essential in our communities and across the Commonwealth, include the child welfare caseworkers who hold high-stress, low-reward jobs to help the children and families they serve. However, high rates of turnover in this field create long-term consequences in practice, policy and state and county budgets.



- *High stress and trauma with minimal ability for self-care.* Caseworkers are exposed to significant abuse and neglect of children and youth and are required to attempt to stabilize the family unit and prevent unnecessary placement. Unfortunately, they do not have adequate outlets to express and process the various forms of trauma they personally experience through daily practice. Additionally, they are exposed to high scrutiny in their decision-making, including from county administration, regional offices, county providers, the media, state policymakers, and the public.



- *Making life or death decisions.* Every decision that a caseworker makes for a child has the potential to be life or death. And while caseworkers do not contribute to the harm of a child, if a tragedy occurs in their caseload, they are blamed for what they did or did not do to prevent it - often in a very public and negative way.



- *Unmanageable caseloads.* The Title 55, Chapter 3130 regulations define child welfare caseload requirements as the caseworker-to-client family ratio as no greater than one caseworker to 30 families. However, the regulations fail to specify if this is the total number of cases, total number of children on a caseload, or differentiate caseload sizes for specialized departments such as intake, placement, or family finding. Often, caseload size is determined by the organization's staffing capacity, with seasoned and tenured workers taking on much higher case sizes due to experience. This leads to uneven distribution of workload and caseworkers handling more than the maximum of 30. The Child Welfare League of America has conducted several workforce studies and recommends a child welfare caseworker hold a caseload of no more than 12 to 15 children at one time.

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- *Too much paperwork and less interaction with families.* Caseworkers enter the field of child welfare and social work practice for the primary purpose of positively impacting the lives of children and families and working directly with them. However, a majority of their time is dedicated to completing paperwork for regulatory and statutory requirements, including administrative functions such as preparing for licensing reviews, time in court, and other non-direct service functions.



- *Inadequate compensation packages to attract and retain staff.* Since Pennsylvania is a county-administered child welfare system, salaries are set by county commissioners and agencies. While geographical variance can be expected to some degree in the state, this has created a total lack of standards for the workforce. Salary and benefit packages are often not commensurate to the education and work experience that caseworkers bring to their employment. Some employees' annual income is so low that they qualify for public benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). This overall lack of competitiveness in compensation leads to higher turnover in the field.



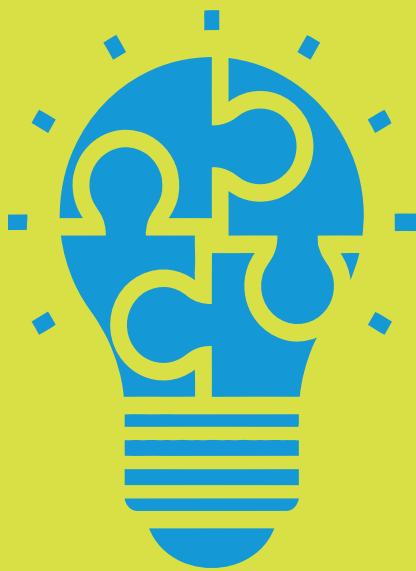
- *Lack of support from unprepared supervisors or managers.* One of the biggest contributors to staff turnover is the lack of adequate support from their supervisors or managers to help with decision-making, professional and even personal guidance, and keeping track of required timeframes on things like case reporting. While supervisors and managers have access to enhanced training through the Child Welfare Resource Center for building leadership skills, they do not always have individualized mentorship opportunities to ensure they are meeting the needs of their employees. Additionally, current regulation outlines that supervisors can have up to 5 caseworker staff to oversee at one time, with a high number of individual families that those employees oversee.

Costs to Families, the System and the State

This environment has created turnover in the workforce – not only is it difficult to attract highly-qualified employees into the field, it is even harder to keep them once they are hired. This issue of poor retention has negative impacts in a multitude of ways.

- Increased costs and time lost frequently recruiting new workers.
- More time spent onboarding and training new employees.
- Added responsibility and increased stress on tenured workers, as newer employees cannot manage the same level of casework responsibilities.
- Cases transferring between workers, resulting in the loss of historical knowledge, hampering relationship building with families, and ultimately slowing completion or ability of workers to complete duties at all.
- Poorer outcomes for children and families, with timely reunification or permanency for children in placement being less likely, resulting in higher rates of children remaining under an agency's jurisdiction.

Solutions to Consider in Improving the Child Welfare Workforce



Investing in the child welfare workforce is an investment in the children, youth, and families they serve. Having seen a glimpse of the challenges faced on a daily basis by child welfare workers, there are a multitude of options of how policymakers can address the issues impacting this sector and improve the workforce, especially around recruitment and retention. **However, these solutions will require time, resources and a commitment from stakeholders.**

- Make compensation packages – including salary and benefits – cost-of-living, and other factors consistent across counties with similar demographics. Pennsylvania is a diverse state and while what works in Lehigh County might be different in Greene County, there is still an ability to provide some level of consistency.
- Lower caseload sizes so that they are more manageable by finally enacting revisions to the Chapter 3130 regulations. This will also address lowering supervisor to caseworker ratios.
- Implement better onboarding practices including increased mentorship for new caseworkers and supervisors.
- Improve efforts to diversify the child welfare workforce to better represent the communities they serve and reduce bias.
- Consider a redesign of education and training requirements for caseworkers and examine practices around promotions to leadership positions in the field.
- Promote legislation allowing for loan forgiveness for child welfare workers.
- Increase support to expand, recruit for and invest in the Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB) and Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL) programs.
- Investigate further maximization of federal funding streams for workforce initiatives in Pennsylvania.

What Do We Do Next?

- A fuller fiscal analysis is necessary to understand how federal funding can be used to invest in the workforce in Pennsylvania.
- A companion analysis on state and county-specific funding is needed to implement policy changes to improve recruitment and retention issues.
 - We must partner with colleagues in the field to collect critical up-to-date data reflecting the reality of the workforce situation in order for this analysis to accurately reflect expected costs but also lift up the voices and stories of those it will impact.
 - This work has also been successfully done in other states that can serve as a model for our work.
- Understand how our advocacy can collaboratively interface with other workforce sectors: this is a multi-faceted issue where there is competition for attention and resources across other human services professions facing similar challenges.



200 North Third Street, 13th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1589

717-236-5680 | www.papartnerships.org