

# INVENTORY OF INNOVATIONS: Workforce Development



Child welfare professionals play a critical role in keeping vulnerable children safe and supporting their families. Today, throughout most states and jurisdictions, there is a significant demand for child welfare workers and the services they provide, since child welfare outcomes depend largely on the stability and competence of the child welfare workforce (Caringi et al., 2007). Child welfare work is complex—it involves knowledge and skills in the areas of child safety, domestic violence prevention, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, and other complex problems (Ellett, Ellis, Wesbrook, & Dews, 2007).

Dealing with these challenges requires a trained and dedicated child welfare workforce that is committed to improving the lives of children and families. Child welfare workers face numerous job-related challenges that have been linked with job stress and burnout and continue to impact recruitment and retention (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Research estimates that “as many as 50 percent of child welfare workers report compassion fatigue and burnout” (Boyas & Wind, 2010, p. 380). Additional reasons for high child welfare worker turnover include:

- ▶ Poor supervision
- ▶ Job complexity
- ▶ Negative portrayal of child welfare services and workers in the media
- ▶ Lack of organizational support
- ▶ Poor job preparation
- ▶ Burnout and secondary trauma

To address workforce-related challenges, states and jurisdictions have begun implementing innovative programs that focus on improving workforce recruitment, job satisfaction, and retention. Innovation can be defined as the creation and/or adoption of new ideas and practices to improve organizational outcomes (Borins, 2006). Innovative approaches to addressing these issues are surfacing from within child welfare and from aligned providers in the public and private sectors. The discussion below outlines recent research on child welfare workforce management, recommendations for recruitment and retention of workers, and innovative examples.













Because the general public's view of the child welfare system and its workforce is significantly influenced by news stories, which often focus on the relatively small number of tragic cases (Chenot, 2010), public opinion of the child welfare system is often negative. Negative perceptions can adversely impact qualified child welfare worker recruitment, as well as child welfare practice, and can contribute to work-related stress, secondary trauma, and staff turnover (Chenot, 2010; National Association of Social Workers, 2004). Furthermore, when tragic cases are automatically portrayed as resulting from systemic failure, negative perceptions of child welfare professionals are reinforced, which can impact families' trust and willingness to engage with workers (Schreiber, Fuller, & Pacey, 2013).

As a result, some states are choosing to proactively champion the positive impact that child welfare professionals have on children and families by structuring internal systems to support job satisfaction and commitment, as well as working to engage the public in a deeper and more positive understanding of the child welfare system. By publicly portraying the work of child welfare professionals in a positive light, states can help to attract and retain more qualified professionals in the child welfare field. Some additional strategies for mitigating the effects of negative media portrayal include:

- ▶ Developing a strategic communication plan to establish effective, two-way communication between the agency and media representatives, as well as the agency and its stakeholders (American Public Human Services Association, 2012)
- ▶ Responding to any media reports with an educational press release (Cooper, 2005)
- ▶ Providing a forthright, public explanation regarding the scope and limitations of the agency's work (Cooper, 2005)
- ▶ Organizing a meeting between media representatives and agency administrators to increase the level of public understanding of the agency's work and the challenges inherent to the field (Cooper, 2005)
- ▶ Finding ways to engage proactively with the media, such as sharing weekly positive news stories with local outlets and holding press conferences or distributing press releases about new child welfare initiatives (Briar-Lawson et al., 2011)

## Organizational Culture

A healthy organizational culture is crucial to maintaining child welfare worker job satisfaction. Organizational culture encompasses many aspects, including norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence behavior—for example, shared vision, goals, morale and motivation, attitudes, openness, and buy-in for new programs and practices (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016). In child welfare agencies, organizational culture certainly includes the quality of supervision, supervisory support, peer support, and access to education and training, all described above. It also encompasses the availability of social capital, defined as “multidimensional resources reflecting the moral fiber of social relations within an organization” (Boyas & Wind, 2010, p. 381). Social capital involves cultural components like trust, the quality of social relationships within an organization, organizational commitment, effective communication, having influence or autonomy over some of one's work, and organizational fairness. While the correlation of some of these factors with child welfare worker stress and job satisfaction is not direct, a recent study points to the importance of social capital on workers' overall degree of job satisfaction or job stress/burnout. For example, research shows that perception of lack of internal advancement opportunities and lack of work-related recognition are major causes of job dissatisfaction among child welfare workers (Barth et al., 2008).

## Work-Life Balance and Flexible Scheduling

Work-life balance is a crucial component of agency culture for child welfare worker engagement and retention. Recent findings show that employees who have greater control over their time are more easily able to balance work and family responsibilities and are able to take advantage of educational opportunities and career development, as well as volunteer activities, that support their effectiveness. Thus, it is a useful strategy for child welfare worker retention. In addition, “staff who telecommute report greater productivity,” and the ability to telecommute is a powerful recruitment tool for child welfare agencies (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2013, slide 30).





[REDACTED]



