



2022 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Advancing Excellence in Practice & Policy

HOT TOPIC

Strengthen the Child Welfare Workforce

ACTION

- Expand workforce development funds in Title IV-B reauthorization to provide necessary support for the child welfare workforce.

Information

Title IV-B of the Social Security Act contains a \$20 million allotment for child welfare workforce development, with a particular focus on activities designed to increase retention, recruitment, and training of caseworkers to improve monthly visits with families. States must first provide data on monthly caseworker visits.

At a time when caseworker turnover and vacancies are reaching crisis levels, these workforce development funds are more necessary than ever. However, when divided among the 50 states and limited to the portion of the caseload that receives monthly visits, these funds do not stretch far enough to meaningfully invest in the activities needed to support the child welfare workforce. Therefore, it is necessary to expand this critical funding.

A Workforce in Crisis

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the child welfare workforce faced serious concerns. The nature of child welfare work leads to high levels of turnover. Caseworkers are required to make complex decisions and are exposed to stressful situations, as they are on the front lines in dealing with the aftermath of societal issues, such as poverty, addiction, and domestic violence, often without necessary support from supervisors and agency leadership.

Now, the pandemic has worsened preexisting issues within the workforce, with high turnover rates and rising concern over compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma. A study of Ohio counties found that 53% of caseworkers demonstrated levels of secondary traumatic stress that met the threshold for PTSD. Anecdotal evidence suggests caseworkers are unable to keep up with their own mental health needs, much less those present within the community. This has contributed to rising burnout and vacancy rates, increasing the burden on the caseworkers who remain.

The Nature Public Health Emergency Collection conducted a study to measure posttraumatic stress, grief, burnout, and secondary trauma experienced by social workers in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that “Over a quarter (26.21%) of social workers met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD and 16.22% reported severe grief symptoms. While 99.19% of the sample reported average to high compassion satisfaction, 63.71% reported average burnout and 49.59% reported average secondary trauma.”

Increased turnover rates and the resulting higher caseloads result in perpetuating the caseworker crisis. A 2004 survey of state public child welfare administrators found that high caseloads were one of the top reasons for preventable turnover. Studies have also found that factors related to workloads such as emotional exhaustion and a lack of supervisory or administrative support also led to increased levels of turnover.

The Impact on Children and Families

High turnover rates negatively impacted children and families. According to the New York City-based Fostering Change for Children, up to 40% of child welfare caseworkers leave their jobs every year. More importantly, they tell us: “Children with one caseworker achieve permanency

in 74.5 percent of cases. But the more caseworkers involved in a child's life, the less chance that a child has to achieve permanency, ranging from 17.5% for children with two caseworkers, to the low rate of 0.1% for children who had six or seven caseworkers during their time in care."

That alone should make those who care about children and families sit up and pay attention to the need to strengthen the child welfare workforce. Strengthening the workforce and ensuring they have manageable workloads will achieve a reduction in child abuse, reduce the number of children going into foster care, and increase adoptions for children of all ages.

The Need for Training and Support

A well-trained and well-staffed child welfare workforce is vital to all the goals we all agree are important. All the reforms enacted by Congress in recent years, including screening victims of sex trafficking, reducing group home care, expanding kinship care, finding more foster parents, enhancing foster parent training, increasing adoptions, more direct consulting with youth in foster care, addressing substance abuse and mental health needs within the families, and entering new data are all dependent on the caseworker.

Child welfare work is labor intensive. Workers must engage families through face-to-face contact, assess children's safety and well-being through physical visits, monitor progress, ensure families receive essential services and supports, help with problems that develop, coordinate care and services across systems, and fulfill data collection and reporting requirements.

The work of addressing child abuse and neglect, foster care, kinship care, and adoption is difficult and challenging work, but it is vital to the 407,000 children in foster care and the more than 117,000 waiting to be adopted. This work gets even more challenging if staff is not well-trained and supported. Lack of support and training only increases turnover, which makes work more difficult and in turn makes better outcomes for children—less time in care, fewer youth aging out, more permanence, and more adoptions—all less likely.

Key Facts

- According to an in-depth survey of New York City cases, 18% of children had one consistent case planner during a two-year period, 23% had two case planners and 51% of children had three or more case planners.
- According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II baseline report, 75% of caseworkers earned an annual salary between \$30,000 and \$49,999.
- Child welfare workforce turnover rates are estimated to be between 23% and 60% annually across private and public child welfare agencies.
- In one New York State study, caseworkers spend under half of their time in direct contact with families and children. Nearly one third of time was spent in documentation such as the automated child welfare information systems. More than 12% of the time was spent in travel, and the remaining time was spent in case-supportive activities.

Conclusion

A quality child welfare workforce is essential to ensure good outcomes for children in the child welfare system. No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to serve children and families who are at-risk and vulnerable than the shortage of a competent, stable workforce.

This shortage affects agencies in every service field including foster care, adoption, child protective services, child and youth care, social work, and support and supervision. The timely review of child abuse complaints, the monitoring and case management of children in foster care, the recruitment of qualified adoptive and foster families, and the management and updating of a modern, effective data collection system all depend on a fully staffed and qualified child welfare workforce.

Better and increased retention, recruitment, and training is vital to developing and maintaining a quality child welfare workforce.



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