



NCWWI



Rethinking Child Welfare Recruitment

Recruiting talented people to work within public and tribal child welfare programs has always been a challenge and is now a *crisis*. Attracting employees to child welfare requires new approaches and strategies in the context of an ongoing pandemic and rapid societal change.

Effective workforce development consists of multiple components, from recruitment and selection to training, retention, and professional development. It involves attending to racial equity and inclusivity as well as organizational culture (see NCWWI's [Workforce Development Framework](#)). Leaders must focus energy and resources on identifying and implementing new practice approaches at all levels - micro, mezzo, and macro. How an organization is structured and the policies it implements greatly impact worker practice, work climate, work satisfaction, and worker retention.

While workforce challenges are many and diverse, this brief focuses on new ways to recruit a child welfare workforce who can best meet the needs of children and families.

Focus on Recruitment

Bringing in the right employees at the right time is the first step in developing a skilled and effective workforce. Racial and social justice issues are increasingly important for child welfare workers. Building effective relationships, especially when families feel distrust for and reluctance to engage with professionals, requires a diverse workforce with lived experience, cross-cultural skills, and a focus on equity. This workforce then contributes to, displays, and shapes a program's organizational culture. A program with a positive organizational culture will attract and support diverse employees and encourage best practices, including cross-cultural and social justice best practices. The need built upon our tal-



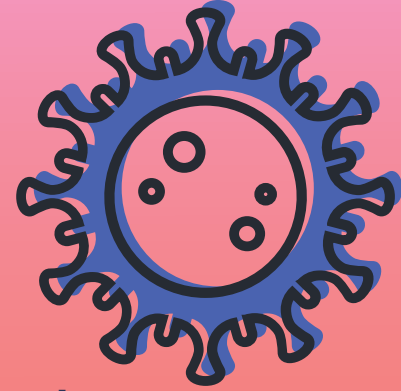
ented workforce is even greater now. New federal legislation, with an emphasis on evidence-based practice and family engagement, requires the workforce to have deeper skills.

Ineffective recruiting contributes to turnover and undermines the charge of child welfare. Constant recruiting and training is expensive. When people leave and positions remain unfilled, the existing workforce can become overwhelmed and ineffective in supporting and serving children and their families.

Impact of Systemic Issues

Research on workforce [recruitment](#) and [retention](#) has identified common problem areas in child welfare work, including:

- **High workloads** due to more mandated referrals and accepted reports involving neglect allegations, historically the most common child maltreatment concern.
- **Documentation requirements**, their complexity (including technological requirements), and the bureaucratic nature of the work. According to the George Washington University Health Institute (2018), up to 70% of a worker's time can be spent doing paperwork and documenting their efforts.
- Noncompetitive **salaries**. Other fields or kinds of work, such as in the retail or hospitality industries, may come with less stress, less complexity, and increased flexibility but pay similar or higher salaries.
- Child welfare workers feel and potential employees (including students) fear **moral distress** from implementing policies and practices that do not align with their commitment to anti-racism actions and their beliefs in what is best for the families they are serving. Growing awareness of racial and social injustice has led to public scrutiny and criticism of child welfare systems as biased, resulting in racial inequality and over-representation of Indigenous families and children and families and children of color in public child welfare systems.
- Lack of sufficient program and community **resources** for families to be successful.



The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified challenges to child welfare recruitment at a time when there is an increased need for skilled professionals, calls for social justice, and competition for social workers.

These challenges are also magnified by societal and demographic dynamics including reductions in the number of high school and college graduates and differences in generational work styles, expectations, and commitment to long-term job tenure. Since the pandemic, the workforce is changing in unprecedented ways with workers seeking increased flexibility and telecommuting options and many social workers and new job seekers finding employment opportunities outside of child welfare (e.g., positions in behavioral health, law enforcement, health care, private practice, and telehealth).

Workforce issues resulting from the pandemic include:

- **Anxiety about home visits and exposure to people with COVID-19.**
- **Difficulty finding child care and support for elder care.**
- **Overall accumulated stress; increased isolation, anxiety, and depression.**
- **Increased burnout and exhaustion leading to resignations.**

A new child welfare worker must have an increased understanding of mental health and community challenges at all levels: individual, family, and societal. Child welfare is not alone in this crisis. Other professions, such as nursing, teaching, and child care are facing similar recruitment challenges intensified by the pandemic. While time-tested approaches to recruitment may still work, the changing work landscape also requires innovative approaches.

- Child welfare workers experience **exhaustion** from working in a profession with inadequate family supports, policies and practices that often cause additional trauma to children and families, and personal safety concerns and discomfort with intrusive in-home practice expectations.
- Many child welfare workers lack quality **supervision**, licensure supervision, or advancement options.

Effective Recruitment

Some recruitment considerations have not changed: mission and meaning, flexibility, and money. Leaders are encouraged to strengthen their commitment to:



Culture. A positive culture that values staff is employee-centered and focused on learning rather than punishment and blame. Positive cultures attract employees through resilience, collaboration, and inclusion.



Flexibility. Flexible workplaces offer:

- Telework and remote work
- Part-time employment
- Job sharing
- Rotation models
- Flex time and flexible work schedules
- Short-term sabbaticals
- Promotional ladders with opportunities for advancement in the organization



Fair compensation. Providing a livable and fair salary with benefits is essential. Programs need to think broadly about financial incentives.

Potential recruits want to see evidence that the workplace offers:

- A livable and fair salary with strong benefits. Consider other financial incentives such as education stipends; tuition reimbursement; loan forgiveness; loan repayment support; bonuses for new hires, anniversary, performance, recruitment; caregiver/child care support; and generous sick and vacation days.
- Positive stories of family, child, or youth successes.
- Inspiring role models and mentors. This underscores the value of being visible in the community through things like guest lecturing in schools and community organizations, telling positive stories, and the role of all employees as recruiters.
- Opportunities for professional development and growth and attention to well-being.
- Positive organizational climate and culture.
- High-quality supervision and peer support.
- A positive and strong mission with a foundation of racial and social justice, family preservation, and family-centered strengths-based practices.
- Alignment between organizational and personal values.
- Adaptability in the workplace including job sharing, telecommuting, leveraging technology, and flexible hours.



Programs can enhance their recruitment efforts and attract new workers by:

Considering innovative strategies to recruit new people such as:

- Reworking job descriptions to make them clear and compelling.
- Rebranding and retitling jobs to attract attention and match the position's positive elements.
- Employing a comprehensive media and social media strategy to share positive stories.
- Reaching out to strategic populations (such as those with lived experience).
- Updating branding to appeal to potential recruits.
- Streamlining the hiring process.

Engage in strategies to build a pathway for a future workforce through:

- Partnerships with community colleges, universities, and community agencies.
- Internships and field placements with paid stipends for people who commit to work at the child welfare program after graduation.
- Summer internships.
- Employing paraprofessionals and specialized support staff.

Prioritize professional and leadership development by:

- Having an explicit career ladder.
- Providing supervision for licensure.
- Using a team-building approach.
- Providing peer support, coaching, and mentoring.
- Offering training and leadership opportunities.

The Leadership Challenge

No single strategy will bring potential new recruits to a program; it's the accumulated recruitment efforts and actions that will make the difference and attract the best candidates.

The *leadership challenge* is to make recruitment a central theme of organizational practice and to develop an organizational culture where the new recruits will thrive.



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