

By Kelly Harder and Sean Toole



You Can't Hire Your Way Out of the Staff Turnover Crisis: Addressing the Realities of Staff Turnover Through Process

We are seeing signs of hope that the pandemic will soon be behind us. The economy is growing at an impressive pace. Unemployment is nearing historic lows, and job opportunities are plentiful. While these are certainly indicators that things are looking up after a rough few years, the same bright story is not necessarily unfolding in child welfare agencies. As society opens up and children return to in-person schooling, we are finding that the number of families needing services is increasing. This increase in demand is occurring at the same time we are also seeing agency turnover and resignations on the rise. Some agencies are now facing 50 percent vacancy rates in critical functions. In an effort to hire and retain staff, leaders are offering hiring bonuses, renegotiating workplace agreements, and seeking to address compensation issues.

Turnover is an unprecedented challenge that threatens the well-being of children. But staff is hard to find, harder to retain, and we are hiring back into the same systems that haven't addressed fundamental challenges that have existed for decades. The only way to improve this reality is to rethink our approach. It's time to put in place carefully designed processes that address the on-going reality and the underlying cause for why most staff leave.

Unprecedented or Merely Status Quo?

We have seen this challenge for decades. In fact, in a study conducted



in 1960 titled "Staff Losses in Child Welfare and Family Services Agencies," agency directors reported that staff turnover handicaps their efforts to provide effective social services for clients. In 1984, several studies were conducted to explore what could be done regarding turnover rates of 30–60 percent a year in social services. And, in 1992, another study stated that "Employee turnover in human services organizations may also disrupt the continuity and quality of care to those needing services."¹

Turnover is not a new issue. Is it possible that what seems to be an unprecedented challenge is really the norm? We suspect so. While each decade has had its own unique set of specific issues, the theme of high turnover has remained the same.

The Solutions of the Past Have Fallen Short

The other thing that has remained constant over the years is the attempted solutions. Noble and well-intentioned, leadership most likely

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tried them all at some point, even if they were only intended as stop gaps. While the combination of how they were deployed may have varied, the list of solutions will likely seem familiar and include:

- **Training**—Improve training so that staff better understands their responsibilities and comes up to speed more quickly.
- **Studies**—Conduct a staffing study to determine appropriate caseloads or how to improve staff retention. Fill binders with recommendations.
- **Hire**—Hire as many staff as you can, hoping to keep them long enough to stabilize operations.
- **Restructure**—Change the organizational structure, the supervisory ratios, or the assignment of resources to improve retention.
- **Compensation**—Provide bonuses, raises, or other incentives to minimize turnover.
- **Technology**—Provide new tools in the hope they will reduce worker stress.

All of these solutions are valid and can help in the short term, but when the unprecedented happens forever, and the solutions remain the same, there just might be something wrong with the approach.

The Impact of Turnover is Real ... But There Is a Bigger Issue

Turnover—at any level—is harmful and can impact the child welfare system and manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as:

- Kids lingering in care as cases remain open longer than necessary due to turnover;

- Low morale for the staff that remains, as they shoulder more of the burden of the casework left by staff that departs;
- Added cost to taxpayers to accommodate the training of new staff. It generally takes one to two years to achieve a minimal level of competency for a social worker to effectively do their job; and
- Loss of public confidence in government being able to provide necessary services competently.

All of these, however, are symptoms of a bigger, underlying issue. The root cause of this continued fallout—and turnover—is a capacity crisis that undermines the entire system.

The Role of Capacity

Our perspective on the child welfare system is that in nearly every jurisdiction, turnover crisis or not, there is a fundamental lack of capacity in our child welfare agencies to empathetically complete the work required. There is simply not enough time available by all the staff allocated to the work to complete it in a timely manner, and with high quality. Therefore, staff compensates as best they can to do what they, in their professional opinion, is safest for the families they serve. They minimize or delay documentation, keep safe cases open longer than necessary to prioritize high risk cases, exceed administrative deadlines, and complete fewer family visits. These compensations to address the reality of their situation also has impacts on the families, but what choice does staff have when they are trying to adhere to well-intentioned policy and practice

that requires time that just isn't available to them?

Processes Are the Missing Piece

What is missing—and has not been routinely turned to as a solution in the last several decades—is a set of processes that addresses the capacity needs, and the turnover and vacancy realities. Our child welfare system as constructed today requires large numbers of highly skilled caseworkers working in teams of five to seven staff members, with even more highly skilled supervisors, making high-risk decisions, for relatively low pay and with limited support. The caseworkers we know, and admire, care so deeply that they are willing to take on this nearly impossible challenge with the hope that they can help families thrive despite the reality of their situation. It is nothing short of heroism.

So how can processes help? Lots of industries have tackled their own turnover crisis using process. Consulting firms expect a turnover rate of more than 20 percent. The services industry expects turnover rates of more than 50 percent. They structure their efforts with this reality in mind from the bottom up. Good process provides:

- **Consistency**—provides the opportunity for an agency to operate consistently, so that staff can more easily move across an organization and be familiar with how to operate effectively
- **Goal guidance**—organized by segment of case type, provides clear responsibilities and clear steps to follow. It allows staff to get up to speed more quickly and know what to do in unfamiliar situations
- **Visibility**—true workflow visibility allows management to engage when there are bottlenecks or higher risks
- **Allocation of skills**—puts the most experienced staff on the highest risk cases and checkpoints
- **Organization of work**—provides experienced staff with more capacity by using staff with specific skills to minimize administrative work.

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Today, most of the processes used by staff in child welfare are self-directed or are scaled to the size of the supervisory unit. Agencies have visibility to cases being opened and closed, and only see work in process when something exceeds an administrative deadline. Staff asks their peers for advice on what to do when they encounter a new family situation or read the policy manual that tells them what to do, but not how to do it. Through process redesign, work can become more consistent, more visible, and most important, more adaptable to the inevitable turnover.


Conclusion

Orienting the child welfare agency to a situation where turnover is expected,

and capacity needs are understood and visible, is not necessarily an easy transition. It requires agencies to rethink how work is distributed, how it is segmented and managed, and how staff are instructed and supported.

Process redesign, in concert with capacity and workload analysis, and centering the voice of the caseworkers and supervisors, can begin to define a structure that accommodates turnover but not at the sake of the families we seek to support and the children we must keep safe.

We are not saying that asking for new positions, or providing pay increases isn't warranted or necessary, it just isn't sufficient. The turnover isn't going to stop, and you can't solely hire your way out of a crisis that isn't

going anywhere. It is time to adapt to 60 years of reality. It is time to focus on our processes to support our people, policy, and practice. 

Reference Note

1. Mor Barak, M. E., Nissly, J. A., & Levin, A. (2001). Antecedents to retention and turnover among child welfare, social work, and other human service employees: What can we learn from past research? A review and metaanalysis. *Social Service Review*, (75)4, 625–61, <https://doi.org/10.1086/323166>

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