

## Restorative staffing: stemming the tide of attrition

Child welfare leaders face severe staffing problems. People leave this work in droves. Those who stay consider leaving. Annual attrition runs 25 to 50 percent in some locales. This compares with rates below 10 percent for most government and non-profit services.

High attrition and untenable commitment among those who remain heighten the risk for the children and families served and drive costs up as programs scramble to hire, train and supervise replacements.

Leaders can stem this tide and its cost by giving staffing the same prominence as practice reform, financial management and new technology — creating a **restorative staffing strategy** to attract, develop and retain people fit for this work.<sup>1</sup>

IMPLEXpartners strengthens human services, health care, education and other vital services. Its Director, Allen Kraus, prepared this brief based on the firm's efforts to strengthen work culture in child welfare and other human services.

### Child welfare work

Child welfare jobs rank among the most critical, rewarding and difficult work anywhere — on par with police officers, fire-fighters and other emergency responders.

The work — keeping children safe and strengthening families — attracts people with plentiful caring, respect and commitment. Most know little about the job before they begin, but they soon learn that it offers excitement, independence, growth, fulfilment and great purpose in “*making a difference in the lives of many.*”<sup>2</sup>

They also find that it entails long and unpredictable hours, visits to unfamiliar and unsafe neighborhoods, unrelenting pressure to quickly determine risk and decide how to keep children safe, and deep-set fear of the unpredictable harm or death of a child in care.

Whether they stay or leave, many child welfare staff feel overworked, stressed and unable to balance their work and personal lives.

People who stay say devotion to their clients and commitment to their peers keep them going — “*the good ones stay because of their team.*” They also credit supervisors who support, calm and develop them, and who have their backs. Those who lack this support leave.

### Staffing dynamics

Child welfare leaders can improve these conditions by creating a **restorative staffing strategy** that rests on a thorough understanding of the trends and causes of attrition, gathered through several analytical tasks:

- Use personnel data to assess attrition across time, program, age and tenure group, location, manager and other variables.
- Survey people who resigned to learn why they left, where they went and how their new work compares with the old.

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- Survey the entire workforce to measure the match among the values expressed in the workplace, those staff covet most and those required for the work, and to gather feedback on desired changes.
- Supplement the surveys with interviews and focus groups to drill down on ways to strengthen staff competence and behavior and bolster commitment and retention.

## Restorative strategies

Leaders can use the analytical base as a guide to choose from an array of effective strategies or projects – including the ones listed below and others that **IMPLEX**partners has implemented:

1. **Keep vacancies low.** Excessive workloads and uncontrollable work schedules drive staff away. Build dynamic staffing models to advocate for staff and guide hiring; compress the hiring process and hire in anticipation of attrition to keep the ranks full.
2. **Raise the bar in hiring.** Child welfare staff can literally save children’s lives, but most programs hire and promote based on untrained intuition instead of accurate insight into what the work requires. Create competency models to identify what it really takes (see sample competencies) and use behavioral interviews to assess these competencies.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Strengthen supervisors.** Supervisors make it or break it for staff. Without a strong one, *“You will come in and feel like you are just by yourself. You will leave.”* Define essential supervisor competencies and apply these in hiring, promoting, training and coaching. Spend time and money on this.
4. **Promote productive values and behaviors.** As one worker put it: *“It’s our job to treat people with respect and compassion. Our workers should see this as an honor, a privilege to make a difference for others.”* Strengthen respect, responsibility, accountability, teamwork and other essential behaviors through training and coaching and by modeling these behaviors as leaders.
5. **Recognize staff.** Most staff yearn for basic personal recognition more than higher pay or formal awards – *“A simple thank you for your hard work and long crazy hours.”*<sup>4</sup> Nothing motivates like frequent, specific and personal thanks, using a technique called “ongoing regard.”<sup>5</sup> Teach people to use this.
6. **Provide competitive salaries and benefits.** Salaries and benefits needn’t be the highest to retain and motivate staff – just within range of the competition, not significantly lower. Prepare effective arguments for salary increases, when necessary.
7. **Boost morale.** Every child welfare program needs a morale boost. Design a marketing campaign that lets staff and people in the community see what it takes to handle this work: clear, brave, cool, wise, smart, strong, good, bold, tough, calm, kind and real people – as one program describes it.<sup>6</sup>
8. **Develop effective leaders.** Staff need leaders who understand front-line work; provide information, transportation, safety and other supports; involve staff in change; offer useful feedback and opportunities for growth, and allow more choice over what, when and how staff do their work. Coach leaders to provide all this.

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Leaders can set improvement targets for the strategies they choose and track progress against these targets, creating a scorecard with attrition, vacancy, time-to-hire, employee survey results and other staffing information – to keep strategies on track and adaptive.

Creating a **restorative staffing strategy** is relatively quick work – three to four months. It requires the entire organization's time and attention and the courage of introspection from leaders. It also requires expertise to ensure the quality and confidentiality of analytical work, to facilitate project choice and design and, following adoption, to support implementation.

### Sample child welfare competencies

#### **COMMITMENT and PERSISTENCE**

Goal oriented and driven to do what it takes to improve conditions and situations for a child or family; doesn't give up.

#### **COMPASSION**

Feels and demonstrates empathy and respect for children, families and others and acts to care for people in stress, pain and other difficult conditions.

#### **COMPOSURE**

Stays calm, focused, patient and productive in stressful situations; remains impartial and objective, without personal bias.

#### **ENGAGEMENT**

Forges cooperative and productive relationships with children, families and others by building rapport and establishing personal credibility and trust; remains open and non-judgmental.

#### **PROBLEM-SOLVING and DECISIVENESS**

Effectively diagnoses and responds to problems with sustainable solutions. Makes good decisions about challenging issues based on a mix of analysis, wisdom, experience and judgment.

#### **TEAMWORK**

Works constructively as a member of a team; contributes regularly to build a healthy environment. Enlists help and offers help.

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<sup>1</sup> See **IMPLEX**partners “Restorative Staffing” @ [www.implexpartners.com](http://www.implexpartners.com).

<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent quotes and findings are drawn from interviews, focus groups and surveys conducted with human services staff.

<sup>3</sup> Competencies are defined as the cluster of knowledge, skills, abilities and personal characteristics that determine effective job performance. They enable behavior-based screening for hiring, promotion, assessment and staff development. (See “Competency-based staffing” @ [www.implexpartners.com](http://www.implexpartners.com).)

<sup>4</sup> In surveys, employee recognition ranks near the top among changes sought by staff. Surprisingly (or not), relatively few — four percent of all survey respondents — ask for recognition in the form of raises. The importance of salary in addressing attrition rises in locales with very low salaries.

<sup>5</sup> The term for this practice, “ongoing regard,” was adapted by the Stagen consulting firm from *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transforming Organizations*, Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, Jossey Bass, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> These words come from an advertising campaign designed by Lotas Patton New York for New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services, which included wonderful posters of child protective workers. The campaign was part of a restorative staffing strategy that nearly doubled job applicants, attracted people far more suited for the work, helped cut attrition and strengthened morale. (See “Innovative marketing campaign” @ [www.implexpartners.com](http://www.implexpartners.com).)

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