

ADVOCASEY

DOCUMENTING PROGRAMS THAT WORK FOR KIDS & FAMILIES

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WHO'S TAKING CARE?

ADVOCASEY EXAMINES THE STAFFING CRISIS
IN CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

WHO'S TAKING CARE IN GREENVILLE?

A New South Town Struggles to Staff
Its Human Services Programs

JUST IN TIME:

Michigan Lowers Caseloads and Improves
Services for Needy Children

THE CINCINNATI SOLUTION:

Rewarding Excellence Through
"Pay for Performance"

Douglas W. Nelson:

PERVASIVE NEGLECT OF
FRONTLINE WORKERS

UPGRADING THE WORKFORCE:

Three More Successes

TROUBLE

ON THE HUMAN SERVICES FRONTLINE

BURNOUT AT THE FRONT

Estimated number of frontline human services workers nationwide paid to provide early child care, child protection/foster care, recreational and after-school programs, juvenile justice, and welfare-to-work services for low-income children and their families: **more than 3 million**

Percentage of these human services workers who agree strongly or somewhat that “it is easy to burn out in my job”: **81**

TOO MANY WORKERS LEAVING...

Estimated annual turnover rate among child welfare workers employed by private child-serving agencies (such as group homes, residential treatment centers, and home-based counseling programs): **40 percent**

Estimated range of annual turnover rates among workers in state and local juvenile justice systems nationwide: **40–80 percent**

Estimated annual turnover among staff in U.S. child care centers: **40 percent**

...AND TOO FEW ENTERING

Among college seniors majoring in liberal arts or social work who participated in a 2002 survey, percentage who were seriously considering employment in a human services job: **21**

Among seniors who were interested in pursuing a human services job, number who believe that the hiring process is slow and/or confusing: **71 percent (slow) and 45 percent (confusing)**

Projected change in the occupational demand for social workers between 1998 and 2008: **+36 percent**

Change from 1994 to 1998 in the number of students pursuing bachelor’s degrees in social work and master’s degrees in social work: **–7 percent and –5 percent, respectively**

DANGERS AND FRUSTRATIONS ON THE FRONTLINE

Proportion of child welfare caseworkers nationwide who have been victims of violence or threats of violence in the line of duty: **more than 7 in 10**

Proportion of child welfare workers nationwide whose caseloads exceed the levels recommended by the Child Welfare League of America: **4 in 5**

Amount of time in a typical 8-hour workday that employment and training workers in the Michigan welfare-to-work program spend on paperwork: **almost 6 hours**

LOW PAY

Median hourly wages of “child care workers” and “pre-school teachers (except special education)” in the United States in 2001: **\$7.44 and \$8.57, respectively**

Median hourly wages of “parking lot attendants” and “short order cooks” in 2001: **\$8.66 and \$8.75, respectively**

Average annual salary (and educational requirements) for “child, family and school social workers” in the United States in 2001: **\$29,560 (bachelor’s or master’s degree)**

Average annual salary (and educational requirements) for “licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses” in 2001: **\$30,650 (one year of post-secondary training)**

For information on the sources cited in the ADVOCASEY INDEX, send an e-mail to webmail@aecf.org.

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Cover photo: Toddlers at the YWCA child care center in Greenville, South Carolina, one of the few nonprofit child care centers in Greenville and one of the best. Most Greenville children attend for-profit or church-based child care centers, which pay workers far less than the YWCA and offer a lower quality of care. See story on page 4.

BY DOUGLAS W. NELSON

WHO'S TAKING CARE?

FOCUSING ON THE HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE

In these post-9/11 days, our nation rightly worries about the preparedness of our first responders to a future terrorist attack. For years, blue-ribbon study commissions have regularly examined the quality of the nation's teaching force, our military recruits, our nursing corps.

Yet the women and men tasked with protecting and nurturing vulnerable children receive scant attention.

Who's taking care of infants and toddlers in our nation's child care centers, children at the most critical stage in their mental and physical development?

Who's investigating cases of alleged child abuse and protecting endangered children? And who's helping distressed families ride through domestic crises, overcome personal challenges, and remain intact?

Who is staffing the group homes, psychiatric treatment centers, and juvenile detention facilities where youth are placed when courts decide that the government must preempt parents and serve as surrogate caretaker?

And in this age of welfare time limits, who is standing with financially dependent parents and helping them make the transition to self-sufficiency?

For a conscientious nation concerned for the health, safety, and future success of its most vulnerable children, it's time to ask: WHO'S TAKING CARE?

In other words, what is the preparation, competence, retention, morale, and supervision of the men and women whose day-to-day job performance ultimately determines how successful or unsuccessful our human services systems will be?

While the Annie E. Casey Foundation has long been concerned with the workforce in human services, we have intensified our search for answers over the past three years. We commissioned the first-ever national

telephone survey of human services workers. We examined the academic and professional literature on effective practices in recruiting, hiring, retaining, motivating, and supporting these workers. And we began to conduct site visits and identify exemplary models for improving the staffing of human services agencies.

Here's what we've learned thus far: the workforces this country employs to provide child protection, child welfare, child care, youth services, employment counseling, and juvenile justice are not stable enough, experienced enough, trained enough, paid enough, supervised enough, equipped enough, nor valued enough to do

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their jobs as effectively or efficiently as they should—or as many of them would wish they could.

Perhaps nowhere are these burdens being felt more painfully than in New Jersey, where the near starvation of four adoptees recently embroiled the state's child welfare system in a media firestorm. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is working closely with New Jersey's Child Welfare Panel to address the crisis, but the lessons of the tragedy apply nationwide.

Most citizens, reporters, and policymakers ignore the work of human services professionals—and the trying conditions they toil under. Then, when a system breaks down, critics are quick to convey moral outrage and condemnation. But after the dust settles, after the editorial writers and television cameras turn their gaze elsewhere, the well-being of kids and families remains in the hands of ordinary men and women—usually hired with our tax dollars—who every day make life-and-death decisions under conditions of great uncertainty, often against great odds. We ignore them at our children's peril.

What underlies our inattention to the dire challenges facing the human services frontline? One answer lies in a stunning dearth of information. In fact, there may be no other comparably sized sector of the American labor force about which we know so little.

Despite the dent made by the Foundation's recent research, we still lack important data about the number of people who do these jobs; their backgrounds, aspirations, pay, working conditions, job satisfaction, productivity, and skills; or why they exit the field in large numbers. Meaningful change cannot occur until the state of this workforce is more honestly described and more widely known.

What can be done to strengthen the human services frontline? The Foundation's early reconnaissance reveals that flexible pay scales and career tracks that reward effectiveness and experience can both advance the recruitment, retention, productivity, and morale of frontline workers AND improve life outcomes for the children, youth, and families they serve. So, too, can simplified hiring procedures, workload management, and enhanced training and supervision.

In the coming years, the Casey Foundation will identify the most promising policies and practices from across the country. We will carefully evaluate these models, provide funding to spread the best approaches, and disseminate information about them to policymakers and the public.

In the long run, lasting improvements in the capacity and effectiveness of the 3 million-plus human services workers nationwide will require the political will to demand change in a stubborn status quo and to devote the dollars necessary to make real reforms happen.

Strengthening the preparation and performance of human services professionals is important work. Not simply as a matter of fairness to well-intended and admirable workers...not simply for more competent systems and more efficient government...but most of all, for what it could mean in the lives and futures of the kids and families for whom these systems were created in the first place.

Douglas W. Nelson is the president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother.

Editor: Dick Mendel



Who's Taking Care in

A NEW SOUTH TOWN STRUGGLES WITH A VEXING CHALLENGE — HOW TO



Greenville?

STAFF ITS HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS

High turnover, low wages, excessive caseloads, and sagging morale undermine many services. BY DICK MENDEL

She's still not quite sure how it happened, but for six weeks in the summer of 2003 Jana VanderSchaaf found herself hawking Saturns on the trading floor of a Greenville, South Carolina, auto dealership. She managed to sell six cars before throwing in the towel in early August.

"It's a dirty business," VanderSchaaf reports.

Pictured here with the toddlers she tends each day at the Greenville YWCA, Rezillai Henderson took her first child care job right out of high school in 1997 at a starting wage of just \$5.00 per hour—no benefits. She quit after one year, but returned to the field in 2001 when the YWCA offered her much higher wages. She now earns \$8.25 an hour plus benefits. "Yeah, the pay is great here," she says.

It is also a far cry from the career she trained for and devoted herself to for six years.

VanderSchaaf earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Northwestern University in 1997. She then spent four years counseling emotionally troubled adults in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 2001, she moved down to Greenville and signed on with the child protection division of the South Carolina Department of Social Services' local office.

Then in April 2003, following a path blazed by countless human services workers in

Greenville and nationwide, VanderSchaaf quit.

"I just became frustrated with the situation, not having the time to really work with my clients, not having the tools to affect any real change," she says. "The system really wasn't set up to work... I got burned out."

Recently VanderSchaaf has been working at a local fitness club, but her long-term career plans remain up in the air. Perhaps a master's in gardening, she says, "but right now I have no interest in going back into social work."

Her exodus from social services is emblematic of a troubling trend in America, a quiet staffing crisis that is fraying our nation's safety net and support system for needy children and families.

The troubles are most visible in the child welfare and foster care systems—thanks to recent news headlines trumpeting dead and missing youngsters that have

rocked child protection agencies in Florida, New Jersey, and several other states.

But staffing problems pervade other critical child and family services as well.

- Day care and early childhood education programs offer meager pay, and many suffer astronomical turnover.
- After-school and other youth recreation programs get by largely with untrained part-time counselors.
- Substandard and sometimes dangerous conditions persist in some detention centers and group homes for behaviorally disturbed youth—often tied to underqualified or poorly trained staff.
- And in too many cases, welfare-dependent parents face bureaucratic indifference rather than a helping hand from caseworkers in their time-limited quest toward self-sufficiency.

Typically, Americans don't mention child care, after-school programming, child protection, juvenile justice,

Despite holding a bachelor's degree in psychology and spending six years as a social worker, Jana VanderSchaaf quit her job at Greenville County's Department of Social Services office in frustration last year. She spent six weeks selling cars last summer, and lately she's been earning paychecks here at the Curves gym.



and employment training in a single breath—or think of them as a single labor market.

Together, though, the more than 3 million frontline workers in these varied family-serving sectors represent the human face, the physical embodiment, of our nation's commitment to ensuring the safety and success of children.

Every day, these workers tackle urgent problems and make pivotal choices in the lives of needy kids. Yet to an alarming extent, the caretakers are themselves overworked, underpaid, ill trained, hamstrung by excessive regulation, and frustrated by inadequate support.

“There is a vast gulf between what...human services workers are asked to do and how equipped they are to do it,” Paul Light, director of the Brookings Institution's Center for Public Service, explained at a policy briefing last year. “Many work under intense pressure with limited resources and rewards... Workloads often exceed recommended limits, turnover rates among the most-qualified workers are high, and human services workers describe their work as both frustrating and unappreciated.”

Motivated But Troubled

Light offered his assessment in a March 2003 report detailing the results of a first-of-its-kind, nationwide telephone survey. Interviewers sought out and questioned more than 1,200 adults who make their living caring for children or serving parents. The results were at once encouraging and alarming.

Compared with other workforces polled by Brookings—including federal government, business, and the nonprofit sector—human services workers serving low-income children are highly altruistic and motivated. Eighty-seven percent said that helping children and families was a “very important” consideration in taking their jobs, and 66 percent said they are accomplishing “a great deal” that is worthwhile.

However, the Brookings survey detected worrisome fault lines beneath this sunny surface. Eighty-one percent of human services workers said that it was easy to burn out on their jobs, and 70 percent said their workloads were always too heavy. Three-fourths felt that their work is “frustrating,” and more than half felt “unappreciated.” (See chart on page 21.)

Human services workers complained that a sizable proportion of their coworkers—one in six—are not doing their jobs well, and almost half of all frontline workers answered that talent and achievement are not well rewarded on the job.

As for who will replace the human services workers who do leave, the picture is truly grim. A separate survey of 1,000 college seniors majoring in liberal arts and social work revealed that only 21 percent of seniors—and just 17 percent of those in top colleges—were seriously considering work in human services. Few were well informed about how to seek human services jobs and most perceived the process to secure these jobs as slow and confusing.

A former school administrator with a PhD in education, Shi moved to Greenville in 1993 when her husband took over as president of Furman University. Ever since, she has been a full-time volunteer for Greenville's United Way and other civic causes.

"We're not New York, we're not Detroit," says Shi. "We're small enough and prosperous enough to be stellar, and we should be stellar."

Once renowned as the hardscrabble hub of the South's low-wage textiles industry, Greenville has attracted a host of new industries in recent decades and built South Carolina's most dynamic economy. Per capita income has risen to surpass Charleston, traditional

EVERY DAY, HUMAN SERVICES WORKERS TACKLE URGENT PROBLEMS AND MAKE PIVOTAL CHOICES IN THE LIVES OF NEEDY KIDS. YET TO AN ALARMING EXTENT, THE CARETAKERS ARE THEMSELVES OVERWORKED, UNDERPAID, ILL TRAINED, HAMSTRUNG BY EXCESSIVE REGULATION, AND FRUSTRATED BY INADEQUATE SUPPORT.

The surveys leave little doubt that, while highly motivated, the nation's frontline human services workforce has its back to the wall.

But numbers alone cannot demonstrate how workforce problems affect children's day-to-day lives. For that kind of understanding, it's necessary to visit a town like Greenville, South Carolina, and sit down with human services workers as well as their supervisors, clients, and others who observe their work at close hand.

New South Optimism at the Ham House

Leaning over a plate of fried eggs and grits at Tommy's Country Ham House near downtown Greenville, Susan Shi gushes compassion and confidence.

"We're a city of the size that ought to be able to fix things," she says. "We ought to be able to take care of our own."

home of the state's well-heeled aristocracy. New theaters and concert halls now play to packed houses, and Greenville's downtown core has undergone a makeover that would make an aging Hollywood starlet proud.

At the same time, Greenville's civic associations, church congregations, and public agencies have taken impressive strides to combat their community's deep-rooted poverty and to improve the odds for the next generation.

Greenville's technical college won a national award in 2002 from the Association for Continuing Higher Education for its "Quick Jobs with a Future" program, which helps unemployed workers retrain for new jobs in 40 different careers.

Greenville also boasts an enviable volunteer force. The county's "guardian ad litem" program, one of the more

vigorous in the nation, trains and coordinates 229 local residents who donate their time to mentor and monitor the cases of abused, neglected, and emotionally disturbed children.

“Greenville is blessed with exceptional leaders,” says Gary Melton, director of the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University, 30 miles west of Greenville. “Not necessarily the agency heads or the public officials, but a committed group of civic leaders who know each other well and work together exceptionally well.”

That leadership helped convince Melton to locate an ambitious new child abuse prevention initiative in Greenville County. Called “Strong Communities,” the project won a \$4 million grant commitment from the Duke Endowment.

Suspect Care

Even with the yeoman efforts of Greenville’s community leaders and civic volunteers, however, the day-to-day challenge of assisting needy families typically falls to paid human services workers. And here, serious problems are readily apparent. The most visible troubles appear in the care offered to Greenville’s youngest children.

A countywide survey of child care centers released in 2002 found that only 13 of 155 child care centers met national accreditation standards, and the early child care workforce was seriously ill prepared.

Despite national research linking the future success of infants and toddlers to the education levels of their early care providers, just 22 percent of Greenville’s classroom staff had an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. Twenty percent had no education or training beyond high school.

The average hourly wage for early childhood teachers in Greenville was just \$6.90. Three in five teachers received no health benefits, and barely one-fourth of

Greenville’s child care workers received pay or “comp time” for time spent upgrading their skills in training.

Among centers responding to the voluntary survey, the reported annual turnover rate among child care teachers was 26 percent. The actual rate is probably higher. (Nationally, child care staff turnover averages 40 percent.)

In effect, Greenville’s early child care sector has split into two tiers over the past 20 years. School-sponsored pre-kindergarten programs and Head Start employ licensed teachers and provide high-quality care for most high-risk 4-year-olds. Last year the programs served more than 1,600 children—roughly 80 percent of the high-risk children in the county, estimates Rhonda Corley, director of early childhood education for the Greenville public schools. (The program is serving 200 fewer children in 2003–04 due to state budget cuts.)

The school-based pre-K programs have proven especially successful: just one-fourth of 1 percent of the high-risk children attending in the past five years have been held back in first grade—compared to a countywide first-grade retention rate of 8 percent.

For the vast majority of infants and toddlers, however, the quality of care is much lower—due largely to the limited training and experience of care providers.

Within weeks of graduating high school seven years ago, Rezillai Henderson was hired by a for-profit child care center in downtown Greenville. From 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. each day, without any training, she was thrown into a room of 4-year-olds and left to her own devices. Her salary: \$5 per hour. No benefits.

Laurie Rovin, right, directs the United Way’s “Success By Six” project aimed at improving early childhood instruction in Greenville. A licensed social worker, Rovin previously worked at a group home for emotionally disturbed girls in Greenville, but left the job three years ago. “I felt like I was fighting a losing battle,” she says.

THE AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS IN GREENVILLE WAS JUST \$6.90. THREE IN FIVE TEACHERS RECEIVED NO HEALTH BENEFITS.



“I was there for the kids, but it was crazy,” she says. “A lot of what the staff were doing, the way teachers were talking to the kids. I had to report them a few times...”

“I used to ask about training,” Henderson adds, “but they would say ‘It hasn’t come up yet. You’re doing a good job, you’re fine.’”

Somehow Henderson survived, even thrived, controlling the classroom and winning the confidence of parents. As a reward, Henderson was offered a raise to \$5.10 per hour. “I had the highest evaluation, and they gave me a dime,” she recalls. “I thought it was an insult.” She soon quit.

Henderson returned to the child care field three years ago, taking a job at the YWCA—one of the few non-profit child care centers in town and one of the best. “This is heaven,” she says. “The staff is great. We all work together, and it challenges you... Here what’s in me is coming out. I’m learning so much.”

Henderson is taking early childhood classes at Greenville Technical College. And her pay: \$8.25 per hour plus benefits. “Yeah, the pay is great here,” she says.

Unfortunately, the favorable conditions at the YWCA are atypical in Greenville’s child care industry. “We can afford to do it because of the money we receive to

subsidize the program” from the United Way and the Greenville Community Foundation, admits YWCA Director Jill Carroll.

For-profit and church-based centers, which tend to be the vast majority of tots countywide, receive few subsidies. And family-based child care providers—those serving six or fewer children, usually out of the providers’ own homes—receive the least support.

Using state funds, Greenville hired two outreach workers to help child care centers improve in 2002–03; and it provided \$132,000 for quality improvement grants and for classroom materials to centers whose teachers completed early child care classes.

This year, Greenville hired another five outreach workers—including two to work with home-based providers—after winning a new \$1 million, 18-month federal early learning opportunities grant.

Mary Medlin, who directs a center in northwest Greenville for the Sunshine House child care chain, has worked closely with the outreach staff. “We were all a closed community before we started working together and finding out what each other is doing,” Medlin says. “Just getting support has been wonderful. We’ve learned a lot.”

A National Leader on Personnel Reforms—At Least Until the Budget Crunch

Despite all the challenges facing Greenville's human services workforce, the personnel situation may be far better here than in other parts of the country—at least for the segment of the workforce employed by state government.

In 2001, *Governing Magazine* published a report card rating the performance of the 50 state governments. South Carolina received the nation's only "A" for human resources management.

When it comes to recruiting and retaining a quality workforce, *Governing* declared, "South Carolina stands out as a model for states."

Most human services in Greenville—including all child care providers, group home staffers, after-school recreation workers, and many employment and training providers—do not work for state agencies. But child welfare workers, welfare-to-work counselors, and juvenile probation officers are state employees, and they have benefited from a series of progressive reforms in recent years.

In the mid-1990s, South Carolina's centralized Office of Human Resources reduced the number of state job titles from 2,500 to 452, and it collapsed 50 narrow pay grades into 10 broad salary bands allowing a wide range of salaries under each job title. The changes provide local managers with much-needed flexibility to reassign workers and adjust compensation in line with workers' shifting responsibilities and job performance.

South Carolina also created a new Employee Performance Management System that awards salary increases partly on the basis of workers' achievement of measurable goals they identify jointly with their supervisors.

With the reforms, "the supervisors were happier and most of the workers were happier—at least the good ones," says

University of South Carolina scholar Steven Hays, a national expert on human resources management. "And that, you hope, will result in better performance."

At the same time, South Carolina scrapped its old bureaucratic hiring systems that relied heavily on civil service tests and on slow and complex centralized application procedures. Instead the state granted local offices wide latitude to advertise and fill jobs on their own.

Hays calls the design of the South Carolina system among the very best in the nation—thanks to the tremendous flexibility it provides managers while still safeguarding fairness for workers.

However, Hays laments, "that flexibility has been squeezed out of the system" in the past two years by deep budget cuts, which leave managers without the money

When it comes to recruiting and retaining a quality workforce, *Governing Magazine* declared in 2001, "South Carolina stands out as a model for states."

to offer performance raises even to their best employees. "If at the end of the process you can't give them a raise if they perform really well, then what's the point?"

Greenville County's Department of Social Services illustrates the point precisely. With little money to go around for merit increases, says new county DSS Director Gary Ray, "We haven't had any differential between meets [expectations] and exceeds [expectations] for at least two years."

With more than 150 licensed centers in the county, however, the outreach workers are stretched thin. Moreover, state support for the county's child care programs dropped to just \$1.1 million in 2003–04, down from almost \$3 million two years ago.

"We're barely at the surface of the center-based care," says Laurie Rovin, who directs the local United Way's child care efforts, "and we're not even that far in dealing with family-based child care."

At a Crossroads

As Rovin struggles to upgrade Greenville's early child care workforce, she knows too well that an equally urgent need faces workers in the county's child welfare sector.

A licensed social worker, Rovin used to work at the Crossroads Group Home for sexually abused and emotionally disturbed girls. She took the job in 1994, soon after moving to Greenville, and she spent seven years there developing and monitoring treatment plans.

Rovin remembers vividly the August afternoon in 2001 when she told her husband and daughter that things at work had finally come to a head. She would no longer be working at Crossroads.

"My daughter looked at me and screamed, 'YES!'" Rovin recalls. "And my husband—even though we needed the money for our son's bar mitzvah—he gave me a big thumbs up. I knew I was burned out, but I didn't realize how much it affected them."

As at other facilities, many workers at Crossroads were untrained, earning \$6 to \$8 per hour with few benefits, and employee turnover was epidemic. "Staff were constantly up against it, even though there were some really dedicated staff there," she says.

Rovin grew frustrated. "I felt like I was fighting a losing battle," she says. "I thought we put together excellent treatment plans for the girls, but we often couldn't implement them."



COREY MCDOWELL, after-school program director at the Sterling Hope YMCA Center, spent three years working at a group home before joining the YMCA in 2001. Though he's earning credits toward a degree in communications, McDowell loves working with children. "I wouldn't trade it for anything," he says. "I think I'm gonna end up working with kids the rest of my life."

Crossroads' Director Lorraine Turner defends the care provided by the home, and she says that "we have a good clinical care staff." But Turner readily admits that "among staff who are actually hands-on with the children, the burnout rate is fantastic.

"To be perfectly honest with you," she says, "they can go and earn just as much by going to work at McDonald's."

Scandal Hits Greenville

While the continuing staffing challenge keeps Crossroads struggling to keep its head above water, at least one home for troubled youth in Greenville County has descended into chaos—or worse.



In October 2003, a staff supervisor at the Crain House temporary group home in Greenville received an 18-month prison sentence for criminal sexual conduct with a minor, assault, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. A lawsuit filed on behalf of one victim, a 15-year-old, alleges that this supervisor and other members of the Crain House staff regularly traded cigarettes, shopping trips, and other favors—even helped girls run away from the facility—in exchange for sex.

This type of exploitative behavior remains rare—indeed, surveys find that most child welfare workers

Like Jana VanderSchaaf, Tangenia Fowler also quit her job at the Department of Social Services last spring. Since then she's been working at a private elder care agency in downtown Greenville, but "I am thinking about changing my field completely," she says.

are highly altruistic. And responsibility for preventing abusive behavior rests with facility operators and the South Carolina Department of Social Services, which regulates group home facilities. Nonetheless, the abuses at Crain House highlight the dangers to children when human services staff are not properly screened, trained, and supervised.

John Hagins, the lawyer who filed the lawsuit against Crain House, says he discovered a system where "we have people who are not competent, supervisors who are not competent, record keeping which is not competent."

A Tale of Two Bureaucracies

Clearly, group homes and other residential facilities can have a critical impact on troubled children—for good or ill.

Ultimately, however, responsibility for each child in crisis falls to a state employee—a Department of Social Services (DSS) caseworker in the case of abused or neglected children, or a Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) probation officer in the case of youth who commit crimes or exhibit behavioral problems.

DSS caseworkers and DJJ probation officers perform many similar tasks: assessing risks, counseling children and parents, identifying and monitoring needed services, and making recommendations to the courts on placement and treatment.

These positions have similar entry requirements and pay comparable salaries. Yet according to Greenville Family Court Judge Robert Jenkins, who presides over both neglect and delinquency cases, staff performance in the two agencies differs sharply.

"Whenever I have a delinquency day, I walk into the courtroom calm and relaxed, because I know I'm going to get a clear recommendation, with solid reasoning behind it, and that I'll get clear answers to whatever questions I have," Jenkins says. "But whenever I have a dependency day involving DSS workers, I make certain that my mental mindset is adapted to deal with the most frustrating process.

"The difference is day and night," Jenkins says. "I just don't see the same level of commitment or motivation [with DSS staff] as I see on the DJJ staff."

“AMONG STAFF WHO ARE ACTUALLY HANDS-ON WITH THE CHILDREN, THE BURN-OUT RATE IS FANTASTIC.”

—Lorraine Turner, director of Crossroads Group Home

Weldon Mikulik, a trained social worker and 23-year veteran at the Greenville United Way, echoes Jenkins observation. “For some reason, the juvenile justice system is able to retain and develop staff over the long term,” Mikulik says. “But at DSS they really struggle with quality staff.”

The divergence cannot be traced to stronger leadership at the state level. South Carolina’s juvenile justice agency remained under the supervision of a federal judge for eight years, unable until December 2003 to correct problems that led to widespread violence, overcrowding, and substandard mental health treatment in the late 1980s and early ’90s.

Yet DJJ’s Greenville County staff have initiated several innovative programs in recent years and demonstrated remarkable stability: all 15 of the probation and intake officers in the county office have held their positions for at least two years, County Director Dale Chandler reports. Chandler himself has been with the agency for 31 years, serving as director for the last 21.

“It’s critical that you create a climate that’s as sane as it can possibly be,” Chandler says. “We all deal with problems from the moment we walk in the door in the morning until the moment we stagger out in the afternoon. Our business is to deal with problems, so I don’t need to create any more.”

Troubles at DSS

Such stability has been harder to come by at the Department of Social Services’ Greenville office, which has had three directors since 2001. Turnover has been

more moderate among line staff—21 child welfare caseworkers left the agency between January 2001 and June 2003, from a total of 58—but Jenkins and Mikulik are not alone in questioning the morale and effectiveness of the DSS staff.

“You’ve got some people over at DSS who are qualified and don’t stay very long,” says Chris Allen, another veteran at Greenville’s United Way, “and then some people who are less qualified stay a good long time.”

Judge Jenkins believes that the crux of the problem lies in the “narrow prism” through which DSS caseworkers are pushed to view their clients. “They are programmed to expect the worst out of these families,” Jenkins says. “So they develop their plans to make sure they won’t look bad if the outcome isn’t what they want it to be. They pile on a laundry list of things that need to be accomplished, and often they set the families up to fail.”

Tangenia Fowler refused to take such an adversarial stance toward families. Though she came to DSS in the fall of 2002 with a master’s degree in clinical counseling and six years experience working with delinquent and troubled children, Fowler walked away from the job after just six months. “The caseload was completely overwhelming,” Fowler says, and “when you really felt strongly about a case, there was no support.”

In March 2003, Fowler convinced a reluctant mother to place her child in a voluntary 90-day foster care placement while the mother worked out personal problems. The next day Fowler’s superiors made her file an order declaring the mother unfit and removing the child on a more lasting basis.

The mother was livid. “The lady was saying that she was going to harm me physically,” Fowler recalls. “She said this isn’t what we talked about, which was true. She blamed me, but I was only doing what I was ordered to do.

“That was the last straw,” Fowler says. She gave notice that very day and never looked back.

These days, Fowler is supervising caseworkers for a private elder care agency, but “I am thinking about changing my field completely,” she says. “I’m thinking about law school.”

Dick Mendel is the editor of ADVOCASEY.



Who's Taking Care in Greenville?

THE NEXT GENERATION

Who will staff Greenville's child care, child welfare, juvenile justice, and other human services agencies in the years to come?

Labor market economists project that the demand for social services workers and child care providers will grow substantially over the next decade. But luring bright and motivated new recruits into these professions is increasingly problematic.

At Furman University, a top-flight college on the outskirts of Greenville, the Collegiate Educational Service Corps (CESC) engaged 1,000 of the school's 3,000 students in community service in 2002–03. Yet a discussion with three of CESC's student leaders in July 2003 revealed that none plan to pursue a human services career.

Mark Rummel, CESC's hard-charging student director, spent several summers during his high school years traveling to Russia with a local youth group to aid orphans—a "life-changing experience," he says.

But Rummel will not make a career of social work. "I really see that the people who make the most impact in the world are the ones with the resources," he says. "My plan is to be as successful as I can possibly be in the business world so I can have the means to and the time to help out."

So far so good, says Christy Cash, left, pictured with a coworker on horseback. Cash began working for the Crossroads Group Home for emotionally disturbed girls in February 2003 and graduated college with a bachelor's degree in sociology in December. "I certainly hope I stay in this field," Cash says. "You've trained for it. You pray that you've done the right thing. You're not trained for anything else."

Kate Brown and Erin McCormick, assistant directors at CESC, both have mothers who dedicated their careers to human services—Brown's as a Head Start administrator and McCormick's as a social worker.

But neither plans to pursue a human services career. Brown, an art major, isn't sure what profession she'll pursue but describes social work

as a long shot. "I know that those systems don't work very well," she says, "and I know it's really hard to change that."

McCormick, too, believes a career in human services would end in frustration. "It's so government run," she says. "You can run around and want to change things all day long, but in those systems it's just not going to work." She plans to be a teacher.

Unlike her Furman counterparts, recent Lander University graduate Christy Cash has opted for social work. Cash, who completed her bachelor's degree in sociology in December, has been working at Crossroads Group Home since February 2003.

So far, so good, Cash reports. "You never get bored," she says. "It can be really hectic—quite exciting—and it can also be fun. When something good happens to one of the girls, it can really lift you up."

Cash, who plans to continue at Crossroads and pursue a master's degree, is thus far taking a philosophical view toward the limitations of her chosen profession. "The farther along you get in school, you see more and more things you could be doing with the girls—if there was funding for it. But there are no funds, so you make the best of what you have."

Cash has heard about Jana VanderSchaaf's journey from social work to car sales, though.

"I don't want that to be me," she says. "I certainly hope I stay in this field. You've trained for it. You pray that you've done the right thing. You're not trained for anything else."



Sophomore Mark Rummel, student director of Furman University's student volunteer service corps, calls his volunteer work a "life-changing experience." But neither he nor other leaders of the volunteer corps plan to pursue a career in human services. Instead, Rummel is planning a career in business. "I really see that the people who make the most difference in the world are the ones with the resources," he says.

Frontline Human Services Workers



WHO ARE
THEY?

child welfare workers

America's estimated 870,000 child welfare workers are employed by state and local social services agencies or private nonprofit organizations to investigate cases of alleged child abuse and to provide ongoing case management for families whose children have been placed in the foster care system or are at risk of placement. Some child welfare workers are licensed social workers, while others are paraprofessionals with titles such as "case aid," "family advocate," or "family support worker."



youth services workers

An estimated 2 million youth services workers (or 4 million, if you include part-timers) serve as counselors, coaches, activity specialists, and parks/recreation staff for school-age children during their non-school hours. These youth workers nurture and support children and youth by overseeing organized activities in after-school programs, camps, and extracurricular school activities.

employment & training workers

Roughly 500,000 workers are employed as income eligibility staff and caseworkers in income support programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and food stamps, or as employment and training workers in welfare-to-work programs. All provide direct face-to-face assistance to parents seeking to find employment and achieve self-sufficiency.



juvenile justice workers

Approximately 300,000 workers are employed by juvenile justice systems nationwide as probation officers, residential facilities staff, or so-called aftercare workers (supervising the cases of youth who have been released from a youth corrections facility). Some work for state agencies, some for local governments (which oversee many detention facilities and probation departments), and others for private businesses or nonprofit agencies hired to manage correctional facilities or provide correctional programs.

child care workers

The nation's early child care workforce numbers 1.5 million workers employed by licensed child care providers, plus an unknown number of informal care providers (including relatives) who take care of small groups of children but are not subject to state licensing requirements. Of those employed by licensed child care providers, most work as teachers or assistants in child care centers, Head Start programs, or pre-kindergarten classes. The remainder work as self-employed "family care providers" supervising unrelated children in their own homes.

WHAT DO THEY DO?



JUST-IN-TIME HIRING

By hiring social workers in advance, Michigan lowers caseloads and improves services for needy kids.

BY ROCHELLE STANFIELD

Before the reforms, each vacancy took at least four months to fill. Now the average vacancy is filled in two weeks.

Two times last summer, Lori Curry, a foster care worker in Lansing, Michigan, drove 36 miles south to the town of Jackson and picked up a 5-year-old boy, then drove the boy back to Lansing for a behavioral therapy session. She repeated the round trip when each session was done. The boy's father lives in Lansing, the reason Curry has his case. But child protection workers removed him from the home after discovering that the father was molesting another child. Soon the therapist discovered that this boy had been molested as well. Curry placed him with his mother, who had resettled in Jackson, even though she's on welfare and has no car and no money to pay his way back and forth to Lansing.

Given all the boy has been through—sexually abused, moved suddenly to a new home in a new city—and given that he has been acting out at school and at home, the therapy sessions were no luxury. Often, therapists provide the only stable influence in a child's uncertain existence, and they can help redirect behavioral problems that arise in the wake of childhood trauma. In this case, the therapy sessions provided an important bridge until the child could be set up with a new therapist in Jackson.

"He had been going to this therapist for a year and was attached to her. It just wasn't right just to cut him off. The therapist wanted to have a couple of closeout sessions with him, and I was able to arrange my schedule to provide the transportation," Curry says. "They don't have much money, but his behavior has improved so

much and he's doing so well. He's stable and secure with his mom."

In the past, Curry could never have spent the extra time with this child. She can now because her caseload is only 20 children. "Several years ago, they were really shorthanded and caseloads were up to 40. But now, it is very manageable," she says. If she had to juggle a much larger caseload, Curry says, the little boy "would just not have been able to get to his therapy."

Caseloads of 20–25 are now the norm for child welfare workers across Michigan, thanks to an innovative central hiring and training system implemented four years ago by the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA), the state social services agency that handles child welfare, adult services, and public assistance.

George Potter, now a supervisor of foster care workers in Jackson County, remembers what it was like when he started out as a frontline worker a dozen years ago. "It was nothing to carry a caseload of 35 or 40," he recalls. "And you absolutely could not handle that. You didn't have time to ask the parent, 'What do you need to get these kids back?' You just put out fires every day."

In those days, his life was a constant dash from one emergency to another, punctuated by a steadily growing backlog of paperwork. The overload shortchanged the kids, necessitated shortcuts by the caseworkers, and contributed to burnout.

A foster care worker in Ingham County (Lansing), Lori Curry says that the lowered caseloads made possible by Michigan's centrally coordinated hiring pool have allowed her to provide better support to needy children.

RAPID HIRES

The reforms at FIA didn't lower the caseloads directly. Rather, they dramatically reduced the time needed to replace child welfare workers who quit or take leaves of absence.

Before the reforms, each vacancy took at least four months to fill, and during that time the remaining workers had to cover their departed colleague's cases. (See flow chart on pp. 24–25.) The more vacancies and the longer the unfilled slots remained open, the greater the burden on the already harried caseworkers.

Now the average vacancy is filled in two weeks.

“For quite a long time, I had been very frustrated by the length of time it took to replace social workers who left and by the high level of turnover, particularly in our child welfare area,” explains Mike Masternak, who conceived and implemented the reforms when he was FIA's human resources director. “I had an idea of trying to figure out a way to project vacancies, get people hired and trained so they would be ready to move into a vacancy as soon as it occurred.”

Masternak, who has since retired, responded by creating a centrally coordinated hiring pool, a cadre of employees-in-waiting that has enabled FIA to adopt a just-in-time approach to personnel. The results now are hailed by managers throughout the state.

“When I submit to the state that I need two or three of these workers, I don't have to sit around and wait. They're here. This system absolutely works,” says Curry's boss, Doug Williams, director of the Ingham County FIA office that covers Lansing. “I would not want to return to a system anything like what we used in the past. This is not just a good system, it is an excellent system.”

THE CENTRAL POOL

Two changes in FIA policy made the new system possible: FIA gained authority to hire and train child welfare workers before a vacancy occurs, and it reassigned responsibility for hiring to state headquarters.

“The key to the whole process was having a centrally managed pool of extra staff that we could hire, put through training, and manage from here in Lansing,” explains Michael P. Downer, director of personnel

services for FIA's human resources office. “So, if we know that someone is needed in Alpena County, we could ship a person to Alpena County.”

Central hiring made sense structurally and procedurally, but it was a delicate maneuver politically. While social services have remained a function of state government in Michigan, unlike other states that delegate these services to county governments, Michigan has long organized program delivery at the county level and allowed county directors considerable autonomy.

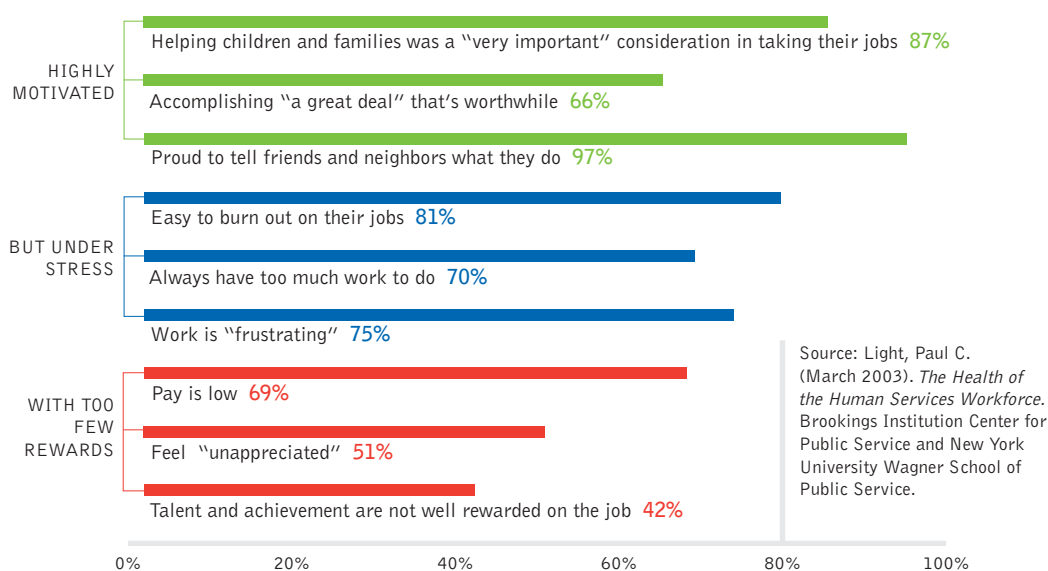
Prior to the reforms, counties hired their own child welfare workers and provided training before plunging the new employees into



Doug Williams, director of the Michigan Family Independence Agency's Ingham County office, says, “This is not just a good system, it is an excellent system.”

A VIEW FROM THE FRONTLINE:

Findings from a National Survey of Human Services Workers



the work. That system was slow, inefficient, and duplicative for everyone involved—local FIA office managers, supervisors, and job applicants alike. “We wasted a lot of energy on the process,” says Williams, who served in Wayne County (Detroit) and Genesee County (Flint) before taking over the Ingham office.

Whenever an employee quit, that county’s FIA office would have to post the vacancy, recruit, interview candidates, check references, make the job offer, order drug tests, and then wait for the prospective employee to serve at least two final weeks with their current employer after giving notice.

The largest county offices had their own human resources staff to do all this, but in most counties the task fell to already overworked supervisors and managers who had to interrupt their regular duties. The managers were not expert in personnel procedures and sometimes took shortcuts—neglecting to check references or wait for drug tests to come back.

“Hiring involved a lot of my time,” recalls Tanda Reynolds, a one-time supervisor in Jackson County who

now supervises the supervisors. “Mistakes can be made if you don’t do it all the time...So to keep current with current hiring practices and to follow the rules was a lot of work.”

The process was no picnic for the applicants either, particularly in metropolitan areas that cover more than one county. Five counties lie within commuting distance of Detroit, for example. A social worker seeking a job in the metropolitan area had to go

When vacancies occurred, the remaining workers had to cover their departed colleague’s cases. The more vacancies and the longer the unfilled slots remained open, the greater the burden on the already harried caseworkers.

through a separate process to apply for the same state job in each county office.

Despite these inefficiencies, county leaders did not cheer when FIA headquarters proposed to take over this onerous task. “Initially there was huge resistance from the field managers,” Masternak acknowledges.

“The county managers said, ‘We want to hire locally. We know local people.

We don’t want this run by the state. We can do it better!’” adds James D. Nye, FIA’s director of field services.

To win over the field managers, Masternak devised a compromise. The human resources office in Lansing would do the recruiting, background checks, and paperwork, but supervisors from the county offices would come to Lansing and conduct the interviews and play a key role in the selection process.

More important, once it became operational, the locals began to see that the new system works. Not

Tanda Reynolds and George Potter, supervisors in FIA’s Jackson County office, both laud the benefits of Michigan’s centrally coordinated hiring system. “Hiring involved a lot of my time,” Reynolds says. “To keep current with current hiring practices and to follow the rules was a lot of work.” Potter recalls that when he started out a dozen years ago, “It was nothing to carry a caseload of 35 or 40, and you absolutely could not handle that.”



only does it fill vacancies quickly, it fills them with well-qualified workers. “I have really liked the people we’ve gotten,” says Potter, the Jackson County foster care supervisor. (For more on the quality of FIA recruits, see sidebar on the next page.)

“You do lose your flexibility to kind of fit people in with the personalities that are on board locally,” says Tanda Reynolds, the Jackson County supervisor. Nonetheless, Reynolds calls the new hiring process “wonderful” and “a good thing.”

JUST IN TIME

Today, FIA carries on a constant recruitment and training program far more sophisticated than any a single county could mount. “We looked at historical data for the larger counties and could see that in the

“When I was hired here there was no training. You were given the manual and told to read through it and talk to other workers and your supervisor about how to do things...Now they come...on board with enough skills to actually start doing the job.”

—George Potter, foster care supervisor in Jackson County

BETTER WORKERS:

AN UNEXPECTED BENEFIT

While the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) created the centrally coordinated hiring pool to address a single urgent challenge—to fill job vacancies faster—experience has shown that the central pool offers a second unanticipated benefit: FIA is attracting far stronger job applicants than ever before.

“Our counties are seeing that they are getting better candidates,” says Michael Downer, director of personnel services in FIA’s central Office of Human Resources. “We have candidates coming in able to hit the ground more quickly and better meeting [the county offices’] needs.”

Historically, FIA county offices acquired new employees by contacting the state Civil Service Department and requesting the names of people who had registered with the state and passed civil service exams.

“People had to take all these silly tests—tests that don’t necessarily tell you whether somebody is going to be successful in a job,” remarks Doug Williams, now director of FIA’s office in Ingham County

(Lansing). That process didn’t work very well. So in the mid-1990s, the counties began doing their own hiring. If they lucked onto some good candidates, counties could pick and choose the applicants who best fit into their office. But that was the fortunate exception, because few county-level managers had the time or expertise to go out and recruit top talent.

With the central hiring pool, the county offices can count on human resources professionals with time and know-how. “They use a common set of criteria and set a single standard, and they make sure that everyone gets the same training regardless of where

“People had to take all these silly tests—tests that don’t necessarily tell you whether somebody is going to be successful in a job.”

—Doug Williams, director of FIA’s office in Ingham County (Lansing)

in the state they come from,” says Tanda Reynolds, who oversees all the child welfare workers in Jackson County.

The hiring pool recruiters cite the Internet—particularly the online connections FIA has developed with college career offices and social work schools—as a crucial tool. And while frontline supervisors from the county offices actually conduct the interviews with potential workers, the questions are drawn up in advance by human resources professionals to elicit the most candid and revealing responses. As follow-up, the human resources professionals conduct background checks much more thoroughly than harried county managers did in the past.

“The central hiring pool really improved the quality of the people coming in,” says Tim Kelly, who supervises training of new child protective services workers. “I’d say the skills seem to be much higher now through central hiring.”

Asked if the new hires are better, Reynolds quickly concurs: “Absolutely. It’s made a big difference in a very positive way. We’ve had really good luck with them.”

THE VACANCY COUNT DOWN

Before and After the Centrally Coordinated Hiring Pool (CCHP)

	WEEK 0	VACANCY WEEK 1	VACANCY WEEKS 2-5	VACANCY WEEKS 6-7
BEFORE CCHP	Employee quits	County office posts vacancy.	County office does recruiting, waits for responses, schedules interviews.	County supervisors interview candidates, conduct background and reference checks of top interviewees.
AFTER CCHP	Employee quits	State assigns worker from central hiring pool (i.e., already hired, screened, and trained) to the county office.	VACANCY WEEK 2	New employee on board, assigned initial cases.

Grand Rapids area, for example, we were losing about two people a month. In Flint, we were losing about four people a month,” Masternak explains. On average, FIA hires about 15–20 frontline child welfare workers each month.

FIA now has authority to hire more social workers than it needs just to fill current vacancies. The extra hires are given temporary assignments to fill in for workers on extended leave—so current workers don’t have to assume extra cases left behind when colleagues take leave.

The FIA application form asks candidates to list in order of preference the counties in which they are willing to work, and central office staff try to place employees in their first or second choice.

“I was living in East Lansing, so I wanted this office,” says Robert Paine, a foster care worker in Ingham County. “I listed three counties and got my top choice, so I was really happy.”

Jackson County was the fourth choice of Diane Ross, a child protective services worker there who lives in

Lansing. “They were very concerned about that and asked me repeatedly whether it would be all right,” she says. “But I don’t mind commuting. I like driving and have a real easy commute. So, I said, sure. And here I am.”

PREPARING FOR THE PRESSURE

Once new workers are hired, the next necessary step is training. For years, the state has mandated that all frontline social workers undergo eight weeks of training before taking their first case. Before the hiring pool, that requirement placed a heavy burden on local managers and substantially lengthened the time that vacancies remained open.

“If a vacancy occurred and even if you had somebody you could hire immediately, that person couldn’t start for at least eight weeks,” Masternak says. And because training was provided ad hoc, it forced supervisors and fellow workers to interrupt their own work to walk a new colleague through a procedure.

“When I was hired here there was no training,” George Potter, the Jackson County supervisor, recalls.

VACANCY WEEK 8

County manager decides on candidate, and makes a job offer. Candidate accepts offer, gives current employer two weeks notice.

VACANCY WEEKS 9–10

New employee is hired by agency, takes and passes drug tests.

VACANCY WEEKS 11–18 (best case)

New employee undertakes training at Child Welfare Institute. (Often, new training session doesn't begin for 4–6 weeks after hiring.)

VACANCY WEEK 19

New employee on board, assigned initial cases.

“You were given the manual and told to read through it and talk to other workers and your supervisor about how to do things. It was a very difficult process.

“Now they come in here with the basic understanding,” Potter says. “It still takes a lot of experience to become a good foster care worker, but they come on board with enough skills to actually start doing the job.”

The advance comes thanks to FIA's new central training facility—the Child Welfare Institute—that is closely coordinated with the hiring pool. The eight-week training program alternates between a week in the classroom at the institute in Lansing or Dearborn (outside Detroit) and a week shadowing a social worker in the field. “I did my shadowing here in Jackson,” says Ross. “I got to know people, got to shadow people, and began to learn the area I'd be working in. I think that was an excellent way to train.”

The training not only teaches recruits the policies and procedures of the agency, but also gives them an idea what they are getting themselves into. “We've

had some people quit because they really don't have a full understanding of what the job is,” reports Judith Sieffert, a human resources manager in the FIA state office. “We try to tell them what the job does. We explain it in the interview. They still take the job, but I don't think they fully understand.”

Some people thrive on the work. One child protective services worker in Jackson has been on the job for 25 years, a few others for 10–15 years. But more than half the workers in the Jackson office have been hired in the last three years and don't remember what hiring was like before the central pool.

Diane Ross, 58, came to the social work profession late in life. In July 2003, she had been with the agency for only four months, but she thought she'd last. “You really don't say this is a fun job,” she said. “But I'm really enjoying the work.”

Rochelle Stanfield, formerly a staff correspondent for National Journal, now works as a freelance journalist in the Washington, D.C., area.

THE CINCINNATI

REWARDING EXCELLENCE THROUGH “PAY FOR PERFORMANCE”



BY STAN WELLBORN

SOLUTION:

The Hamilton County Job and Family Services agency has the largest and longest running performance-based pay contract in the nation between a public agency and unionized human services workers. How well is the agreement working?

When Ohio's largest human services agency began crafting a pay-for-performance wage system for its frontline workers in 1996, even proponents were betting that the idea would never fly.

"We went through 19 solid days of union negotiations—morning to night—to get the initial agreement," recalls David E. Helm, labor relations manager for the Hamilton County Job and Family Services (HCJFS) agency in Cincinnati.

Before the agreement, most labor experts—as well as most county executives and public employee union leaders—doubted that the performance-based pay scales used in private industry could succeed in a public human services bureaucracy. And most workers,

Shown together outside the headquarters of the Hamilton County Job and Family Services agency in downtown Cincinnati, union shop steward Barbara Williams and labor relations manager David Helm sit at opposite sides of the table in negotiations over pay-for-performance contracts for 1,100 agency employees.

particularly union members, believed that cronyism runs too rampant in government agencies to risk giving managers free rein over pay raises and bonuses.

"There was—and remains—a deep-seated belief among line workers that supervisors play favorites in handing out pay increases," says Denise Kelley, who was the union shop steward when the agreement was hammered out.

Despite her skepticism, though, Kelley agreed to negotiate. "Above all, we wanted to remove bias and preferential treatment from the equation," recalls Kelley, who is now retired. The union demanded a

direct voice in formulating fair and practical "work objectives" (i.e., performance standards) for every frontline position in the agency, from welfare intake worker and child support enforcement officer to adult income maintenance worker and child care trainer.

The final arrangement, fully implemented in 1998, determines compensation for more than 1,100 agency employees. Under the agreement, the negotiated work objectives determine 80 percent of each employee's salary adjustment. Professional standards and personal objectives make up the remaining 20 percent.

Though the agreement remains controversial, managers and most workers report satisfaction with the results. In an agencywide survey conducted in early 2003, to which more than 500 employees responded, workers complained that the pay-for-performance (PFP) system lacked consistency, was sometimes unfair, required too much paperwork, and resulted in insignificant pay increases. Nonetheless, 65 percent of respondents reported they were "neutral" to "strongly in favor" of policies that public employee pay should be based on work performance.

An Alluring Ideal

"Pay for performance" has an alluring sound to personnel directors in strapped public agencies eager to stretch payroll dollars by applying real-world business practices based on measurable outcomes. Likewise, many employees warm to the idea because they feel they will be fairly gauged against their coworkers, and better on-the-job output will be rewarded. And many manpower experts contend that incentives-based plans reduce turnover and help deserving workers advance.

Howard Risher, a consultant affiliated with the Center for Human Resources at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School who has worked closely with frontline juvenile court workers in Washington, D.C., and other cities, says that public agencies that adopt PFP policies can achieve productivity increases of 30 to 40 percent. "Pay for performance has a negative

connotation in workers' minds, that it will be used in a punitive way," says Risher. "But when done right, it enhances the competencies of workers and encourages them to become stars."

Pay for performance also holds promise to alleviate common frustrations among frontline human services workers that sap morale and contribute to high turnover rates. A national survey conducted in 2002 by the Brookings Institution and supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that half of the human services workers polled believe their work is "unappreciated," and 42 percent said talent and achievement are not rewarded at their workplaces. Moreover, 28 percent said that their best-qualified coworkers leave within two years or less.

"Everybody wants to have their worth recognized, everybody hopes that their employer appreciates them, everybody would like to be known for doing this very necessary work well," says Risher, who has also studied employee compensation issues for the National Academy of Public Administration. Most government agencies do a lackluster job of rewarding and recognizing their employees, Risher argues. "It's a hugely complicated problem," he says, "but it can be done."

To date, however, pay-for-performance schemes that might address these realities remain rare in the public sector. While notions of merit pay and lump-sum bonuses have become popular buzzwords, actually starting and sustaining such systems has proven difficult. Indeed, Hamilton County's is the largest and longest running public PFP arrangement for unionized frontline human services workers in the nation.

The Cincinnati Experience

Based in downtown Cincinnati, Hamilton County Job and Family Services does it all for needy families: temporary cash assistance, child welfare and foster care,

food stamps and Medicaid, subsidized child care, child protection, child support enforcement, employment placement, adult protection, disability assistance, and tuberculosis control.

When agency managers first floated the pay-for-performance proposal, they had no template. In the words of one agency official, a number of "parallel universes" aligned to bring the plan to fruition:

- Even though a prospering economy had filled state coffers to a surplus, there was growing taxpayer sentiment for work accountability by public employees.
- Exempt, or non-bargaining, staff at the agency had gone to a PFP arrangement in 1995, so supervisors and administrators were already eligible for performance-based raises. According to Denise Kelley, line employees wanted some of those rewards for themselves.
- Despite organized labor's traditional suspicion of merit pay and bonus plans, leaders of the county's American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) chapter were willing to explore performance pay. (At HCJFS, only a third of rank-and-file workers are members of the local AFSCME chapter. However, by law in Ohio, unions must negotiate all public labor contracts.)
- Finally, the nation was implementing welfare reform, and Ohio counties were rewarded financially for achieving targeted objectives, such as reductions in caseloads.

"In general, we were lucky that the environment on several fronts was conducive to our need," says Joseph Gagliardo, human resources manager at HCJFS.

To make the opportunity a reality, the county and union followed three key principles in their negotiations:

Though the agreement remains controversial, 65 percent of workers are "neutral" to "strongly in favor" of policies that public employee pay should be based on work performance.

- The system had to be as objective as possible, so that peak performance could be fairly well defined and wasn't based purely on subjective judgments by management.
- The arrangement had to primarily reward better performers, rather than penalize underachievers. A grievance process also had to allow pay decisions to be reviewed if employees felt unfairly slighted.
- Though the agreement did not increase overall spending for staff salaries, Hamilton County had to reallocate its budget annually to ensure that sufficient resources remain available for merit increases to make the new pay plan meaningful. "The fact is," says a long-time social worker in the agency, "if you are going to make it work, you have to get off your wallet."

Colleen Gerwe, a clinical section manager, believes that HCJFS' performance-based contract provides a "fair and objective" basis for measuring job performance. "It's a misnomer to say that social workers can't be held accountable," she says.



Today, the agency generates an elaborate spreadsheet for every employee that yields a ranking based on professional standards and major work objectives. In the five years that the plan has been in place, pay increases have followed an almost perfect bell curve, with the bulk of workers clumped in the middle. Grievance filings are rare—fewer than half a dozen per year—and are rarely upheld.

Workers say managers try to evaluate work fairly—although many insist that they still see signs of bias. "We are human and we tend to have favorites, knowingly or unknowingly, when evaluating others," says one veteran of the agency.

Show Us the Money

Workers also contend that annual raises are often inadequate, sometimes too small to keep pace with the cost of living. "A 2 percent increase is not a motivator. The reason work gets accomplished here is that we are professionals and we care about other people. If the motivation was money, a job at Home Depot would fare better for a new children's services worker as a career choice," said one employee in response to the agency's own survey.

Before pay for performance, employees got automatic salary bumps—based on seniority, pay grade, and cost-of-living adjustments—which often totaled 6 or 7 percent annually. "It was considered an entitlement," says one agency veteran.

Today, across-the-board raises are more modest, and subpar workers get no boosts in their paychecks at all. But some of the best frontline employees have seen income spikes as high as 10 to 15 percent, often including a hefty bonus. Such standout work requires effort well above the call of duty, such as helping out with uncovered caseloads, taking a larger caseload when coworkers are on family or medical leave, or finding innovative and workable solutions to service delivery problems.

One worker, praising performance evaluations as "extremely fair," adds this: "A small or no bonus helps

"Pay for performance has a negative connotation in workers' minds, that it will be used in a punitive way. But when done right, it enhances the competencies of workers and encourages them to become stars."

—Howard Risher, Wharton School of Business

a supervisor reinforce the idea that only quality work which exceeds goals will be rewarded. Too often the squeaky, lazy, loud wheel gets the oil and this is one time it doesn't."

Tempering Turnover

Retaining talented frontline workers is a cardinal motive of those who promote pay-for-performance policies. In Hamilton County, training a new entrant to the agency "costs dearly in time, dollars, and client service," says Human Resources Manager Gagliardo. And indeed, job turnover has dropped dramatically among frontline workers since pay for performance began in the county—from more than 40 percent before the system began to less than 25 percent today.

Social worker Gaja Karyala conducts a home visit with 12-year-old foster child, Katie Williamson.



County officials believe pay for performance is a key reason for the progress, though they are careful to warn that a number of other factors also influence turnover rates in the field. "It's a lot harder to recruit, reward, and retain people in a booming economy, when they can go seek more money in the private sector," says Helm. "When the economy tightens, our retention rate goes up."

Replicating the Rewards?

Given its success thus far in Cincinnati, why hasn't the pay-for-performance mantra spread to other public agencies? In fact, many jurisdictions have tried to make compensation more of a motivator for their workers. Only a handful have succeeded.

In Indiana in the mid-1990s, the Division of Family and Children—concerned about its last-place status among states in food stamp error rates—awarded hefty bonuses to frontline employees to curb the errors. The effort dropped error rates to 5 percent from more than 12 percent. In North Dakota, a right-to-work state, city employees in Bismarck have applauded an overhauled pay system based on performance measures. In heavily unionized Douglas County, Colorado, just outside Denver, a bonus system for teachers was set up in the early 1990s for employees who achieve any of a number of performance criteria.

But many efforts are undermined when the money for performance pay dries up. Both Georgia and Colorado began ambitious statewide plans in the late 1990s, and both collapsed when the legislatures could not sustain the allocation of funds for merit increases. That frustrates everyone involved, says one DeKalb County, Georgia, personnel manager who believes in pay for performance. "It becomes an uphill battle," she says. "Managers spend a lot of their time doing employee evaluations and they really don't enjoy having to mete out limited compensation funds."

Overcoming Tensions

In Hamilton County, pay for performance has continued to thrive—though not without some tensions. Colleen Gerwe, a clinical section manager at HCJFS, is convinced that the agency's performance goals provide a fair and objective basis to evaluate job performance. For example, the agency requires that 90 percent of client investigations be written up within a certain number of days, and that children should remain in foster care for specific time limits. "Good social work has to be timely and it has to be tracked," says Gerwe, who started as a caseworker at the agency 20 years ago. "It's a misnomer to say that social workers can't be held accountable."

Gaja Karyala, a foster care support specialist who has been at the agency almost three years, also supports pay

for performance. But she notes that it is possible to abuse the work standards. Social workers, for example, have to make a certain number of visits to homes of clients within a defined time frame, but Karyala says a caseworker can “make a drive-by” of a client’s residence and call it a visit. “Eventually, that kind of behavior would be found out, but it does allow for some playing of the system,” she says.

Karyala and her frontline colleagues say that while pay is important, it is valued less than a workplace culture that respects employees. Indeed, in the survey of

agency workers that asked what most motivated employees, “good wages” came in at 29 percent, but “appreciation and loyalty from management” scored highest at 41 percent.

In the survey, many workers complained that HCJFS is not “worker friendly” and that pay for performance is a way to save the county money rather than improve productivity. Many agree with the assessment of Barbara Williams, the current AFSCME shop steward at HCJFS, who says, “I think management uses it as a way to keep wages down, and pour more work on

PROMISING APPROACHES:

What Works in Upgrading the Frontline Human Services Workforce?

While the research is in its infancy, several strategies show substantial promise to improve the staffing of human services agencies.

HIRE BETTER WORKERS

- Publicize job openings and recruit aggressively through the Internet and other means.
- Simplify and shorten the hiring process by scrapping civil service tests, eliminating cumbersome hiring regulations, and speeding the interviewing/selection process.

REWARD VALUED EMPLOYEES (AND REDUCE TURNOVER)

- Allow supervisors to provide merit raises and adjust compensation in line with workers’ changing responsibilities and job performance.
- Collapse narrow job classifications into broad job categories with wide salary ranges (i.e., “broadbanding”).

- Develop career ladders and add new rungs to job ladders that recognize seniority and performance.

HEIGHTEN WORKERS’ SKILLS

- Provide relevant and high-quality pre-service and in-service training.
- Link compensation to increased training.

BOOST MORALE

- Allow flextime or swing shifts that better accommodate family life.
- Develop detailed, outcome-related performance evaluation instruments that employees agree are fair and relevant.
- Reduce unnecessary paperwork and allow workers reasonable autonomy in carrying out their jobs.

Source: Taken from *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003.

employees. Our workloads have increased far more than our paychecks have.”

Williams, who was not involved in developing the initial plan, says if the original proposal were made today, she would oppose it.

But neither Williams nor anyone else in Hamilton County is predicting the demise of pay for performance. Indeed, Williams remains sympathetic to the pay-for-performance concept “because it gives workers a place at the table in defining [the work objectives].”

But she complains that management frequently issues directives that allow no input by workers. “They just toss a new work objective at us and say, in effect, take it or else,” she says. “That isn’t the way we thought this would be.”

David Helm responds that employees must understand that on some matters, the county has no choice but to demand changes to the bargaining agreement. “When we have to conform to a new state or federal regulation, we may have to agree to disagree,” he says.

“The key to making this work,” says Helm, “is to build enough flexibility into the bargaining agreement so that it can accommodate changing work requirements, staff levels, and budget allowances—particularly when they create impasses between the union and management. The need for constant revision, updating, and renegotiation never ends.”

Stan Wellborn is a communications consultant with nonprofit organizations and public policy institutions and a long-time Washington, D.C., journalist.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Human Services Workforce Initiative

As part of its efforts to improve the fortunes of America’s neediest children, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched a new endeavor in 2001, the Human Services Workforce Initiative, aimed at shoring up the 3 million-plus employees nationwide who work directly with disadvantaged youngsters and their families.

Without skilled, experienced, and committed workers, efforts to reform or substantially upgrade care for fragile children and families cannot succeed, the Foundation concluded. But historically, policymakers have paid scarce attention to this crucial workforce.

In the initiative’s first two years, the Foundation conducted in-depth research on staffing challenges in the child welfare, juvenile justice, early child care, youth development, and employment and training sectors—including a first-ever national telephone survey of human services workers. In March 2003, the Foundation released a publication, *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform*, detailing troubling conditions in the frontline workforce: low pay, high turnover, inadequate training and preparation, unrealistic workloads, and needless paperwork.

In the coming years, the Foundation will continue this work by under-

taking further research on the problems and challenges facing human services workers; identifying, documenting, and promoting promising personnel reforms; building public awareness of the challenge; and securing policymakers’ commitment to needed personnel reforms.

“Frontline workers provide the crucial link—often the only link—between vulnerable kids and families and the services and resources they need to move forward in their lives,” says initiative director Janice Nittoli. “Their role is crucial, and we’re determined to focus America’s attention on making sure they’re as qualified and well trained and productive as can be.”

AT A GLANCE: THE HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE

	NUMBER OF WORKERS	AVERAGE SALARY	TURNOVER RATES	TYPICAL WORKLOADS	LEADING SOURCES OF WORKER DISSATISFACTION
CHILD CARE	1.5 million in centers and licensed family care homes	\$7.86 / hr	40%		Extremely low pay
YOUTH SERVICES/ AFTER SCHOOL	2 million (excluding seasonal workers) 4 million (including part-time workers)	\$21,628			
CHILD WELFARE	870,000	\$30,590 (social workers) \$21,360 (paraprofessionals)	20% in public agencies 40% in private agencies	24 cases per protective services worker 31 cases per foster care worker Nationally, caseloads average twice the recommended levels	Heavy caseloads Low pay (vis-à-vis education levels) Poor supervision
JUVENILE JUSTICE	300,000	\$30,000	40%–80% (lower in non-profits)	Probation: 41 cases per officer Recommended: 30 cases per officer	Inability to impact life chances of youth Long hours High stress Inadequate pay
EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING	500,000	\$30,800			Unhappiness over combining eligibility determination and case management roles under TANF

Source: Taken from *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, updated as appropriate.

UPGRADING
the
WORKFORCE:

Three More Successes

BY CAITLIN JOHNSON

NORTHWEST YOUTH SERVICES, BELLINGHAM, WA

Reducing Turnover Through Higher Pay and More Manageable Caseloads

“We have to stop the bleeding.” That was Judy Heinemann’s reaction when she took over as associate director of Northwest Youth Services, a multiservice agency in Bellingham, Washington, that offers foster care, youth depression screenings, emergency shelters, mentoring, and parenting communication programs for more than 2,500 vulnerable children and teens a year.

With outdated salary scales, high caseloads, and turnover rates that reached 72 percent among front-line workers, the agency and its workers were nearing a crisis.

Now, just four years later, Northwest Youth Services is faring far better, with turnover rates stabilized below 15 percent for full-time workers and 30 percent for part-timers. Staff have greater access to training, enhanced salaries, and benefit packages, and they carry more manageable caseloads.

It began with a clearly defined “Turnover and Morale Plan” to tackle problems identified in staff surveys—chiefly, poor interoffice communication, limited training, high workloads, and incommensurate salaries. Staff and management worked together on task groups to recommend specific strategies.

One of the biggest innovations was in foster care caseload management. To counter burnout and ensure that workloads were distributed evenly across staff, Northwest Youth Services designed a point system that assigns higher points to cases requiring the most intense management, and lower points to more stable families that require less direct intervention.

Salary changes were also significant. After a yearlong analysis, a new scale was adopted and the salary for every position was updated to reflect the current market. To cover the cost of these adjustments, the organization—which is supported by state, federal, and private funds—opted not to replace positions vacated during the reorganization period, provided it wouldn’t compromise services.

“For the amount of stress, responsibility, and sleepless nights that staff have to endure to do this kind of work, the salary just didn’t compensate them well enough,” says Heinemann. “Now, we pay the highest of all other agencies in the area for every position.” Most case managers with master’s degrees earn above \$30,000 a year, plus benefits.

Heinemann says these changes, together with more formal supervision, greater internal promotion, and monthly training in areas relevant to staff work, have made a clear difference.

“The proof is in the number of ideas and creative thinking that staff now bring forward,” she says. “I have managers who are chasing down exciting new things on their own because there’s a sense of belonging and commitment to the agency. When you have stability, you have consistent practices and quality—and, as a result, better, more consistent care.”

YOUTH VILLAGES: A COMPREHENSIVE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CAMPAIGN

Intensive Recruitment, Close Supervision, and Generous Education Benefits Bring Turnover Down to Manageable Levels

When Patrick Lawler took over Dogwood Village residential treatment center 23 years ago, the agency ran three Memphis group homes with a grand total of 25 troubled boys.

Today, the agency serves 5,000 emotionally disturbed boys and girls throughout Tennessee and in four other states. And rather than offering only residential treatment, Lawler’s agency—now called Youth Villages—has also become a national leader in home-based therapy and therapeutic foster care.

Staffing Youth Villages’ operations has always been a challenge, however.

“If you had come to me five years ago or even three years ago and asked me ‘What’s your number one problem?’ I would have said recruiting and retaining good staff,” Lawler says. “That’s not true today.”

“If you had come to me five years ago or even three years ago and asked me ‘What’s your number one problem?’ I would have said recruiting and retaining good staff. That’s not true today.”

—Patrick Lawler, administrator of Youth Villages

It’s no longer true because the agency—which relies heavily on recent college graduates to fill its 900-plus counseling, teaching, and support staff positions—has devised several strategies to attract qualified candidates and reduce turnover.

A five-person recruitment team now markets Youth Villages on college campuses and over the Internet, providing internships for 80 social work students every summer. “We go out and recruit like a college football team recruits,” Lawler says.

Once on the job, each new worker is given a weekly development plan (similar to a treatment plan for youth in care) that establishes goals and objectives for the week. They have weekly one-on-one meetings with their supervisors, plus a weekly staff team meeting. “We place a big emphasis on the supervisors,” says Youth Villages Regional Director Lee Rone. “We believe that staff stay with programs when they feel like they’re part of a well-oiled machine.”

Youth Villages allows new workers to apply for a modest promotion (and a 10–15 percent pay hike) after just six months on the job, and it covers tuition for up to two classes per semester toward a bachelor’s or master’s degree; more than 100 employees are currently enrolled. “That’s one of our best draws in the hiring process,” says Rone.

Together, these strategies have reduced Youth Villages’ annual turnover rate from an alarming 60 percent three years ago to 40 percent last year—about average for private child welfare agencies nationwide.

Given the agency’s treatment and staffing philosophies, reducing turnover much further is unlikely, Rone says.

Counselors in Youth Villages’ home-based treatment programs are constantly on call, and they are frequently called on to confront volatile crises. “When you’re on call 24–7, when you’re dealing all the time with really intense situations, it’s just not realistic to expect counselors to stay longer than a couple of years,” Rone says.

Youth Villages’ heavy reliance on recent college graduates also elevates turnover.

“Almost all of our staff are degreed,” says Rone. “If a person has that college degree, they’re going to want to go further, either to move up to a more responsible position or get a higher degree. Other agencies that pay a little more to non-degreed staff, they might have a bit lower turnover. But we want that kind of ambitious degreed person, even if it means we might lose them after a year or two.”

SMART START AND WAGES IN NORTH CAROLINA

Upgrading the Child Care Workforce with Training and Incentives

In 1993, North Carolina launched the opening salvo in a national movement to expand the quantity, quality, and affordability of early child care for working families.

New research was showing that quality child care was crucial to the future success of tots and preschoolers, yet surveys revealed that most of North Carolina’s child care workers had only a high school diploma and earned less than \$6.25 an hour. More than 40 percent left their jobs every year.

So North Carolina created Smart Start, the nation's first comprehensive state child care improvement initiative, offering counties \$20 million in 1994 to subsidize their child care services and bolster the quality of care. (The Smart Start budget rose rapidly in succeeding years, and stands at \$192 million in 2003–04.) Through a separate “Teacher Education and Compensation Helps” project, the state began offering scholarships to child care staffers who enroll in early childhood education classes.

Together, these state programs made training more accessible to child care providers. But officials in Orange County recognized that for low-wage child care staff, access alone was not enough; real-world incentives were needed to encourage education, correct low earnings, and reward high-quality teachers. So the county tapped its Smart Start funds to launch the Child Care WAGE\$ project, which offers salary supplements for child care staffers who have taken college classes or earned credentials in early childhood education.

This WAGE\$ approach proved a big hit with child care workers, and has since been adopted in 59 North Carolina counties. The North Carolina Division of Child Development uses federal Child Care and Development block grant funds to pick up the administrative tab, while participating counties use Smart Start funds to compensate teachers who have completed approved courses. The project was created and is run by the nonprofit Child Care Services Association.

North Carolina is seeing improvement in the preparation and retention of child care workers. Statewide, the percentage of child care workers who have earned college degrees or early childhood education credits leapt from 41 percent in 1993 to 82 percent in 2001. Meanwhile, annual staff turnover declined from 41 percent of child care workers statewide in 1993 to 31 percent in 2001. (A new workforce study is under way.)

Among those who participate in WAGE\$, turnover is just 16 percent, and 81 percent of respondents to a 2003 participant satisfaction survey said that WAGE\$

made it possible to either earn extra education or stay in their child care setting.

In the fiscal year ending July 2003, WAGE\$ served 8,146 workers in 2,449 different child care programs (serving 83,061 children). Their average annual earnings rose by slightly more than \$1,000.

“The education outcomes are significant,” says Allison Miller, vice president of the Child Care Services Association’s compensation initiatives. “Last year, 18

North Carolina’s WAGE\$ Project, which offers salary supplements for child care staffers who take college classes or earn credentials in early childhood education, has proved a big hit with child care workers. Last year, WAGE\$ served 8,146 workers in 2,449 different child care programs (serving 83,061 children).

percent of the active program population—more than 1,100 people—moved up a level on the salary supplement scale [by earning early childhood education credits]. WAGE\$ is really contributing to a movement in the right direction in our child care workforce.”

Based on this success, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Florida have adopted the WAGE\$ model.

Caitlin Johnson is a freelance writer specializing in issues affecting families and communities. She has written for the McAuley Institute, the National League of Cities, Connect for Kids, and others.



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