Overcoming Challenges in Child Welfare:

Addressing County Recruitment and Retention Struggles & Strategies for Enhancing Outcomes and Timeliness.

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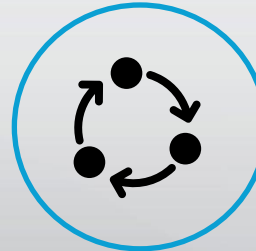**Mark LaVigne, PhD**
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Overview

Introductions & Background

Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff and Potential Solutions to Implement

Operational & Fiscal Impacts of Technology

Policies, Procedures & Protocols

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Introductions/Backgrounds

Josh Bills, Manager

Bonadio Advisory & Consulting

Courtney Handy, Director

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Child Welfare Experience

Together, we have over a decade of experience in comprehensive reviews of child welfare agencies.

- Over a dozen comprehensive child welfare reviews – including urban and rural counties
- Reviews stem from
    - Turnover in leadership,
    - High-profile incidents (e.g. fatality)
    - Concerning state-wide metric or pending OCFS PIP
- Include following elements:
    - One-on-one interviews with staff & management
    - OMA Tool case review
    - Evaluation of policies & procedures, and internal controls
    - Analysis of KPIs and other relevant data
- Focus on operations, program and fiscal elements of CPS, Preventive and Foster Care.
- Period of engagement is approximately 9 months.

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Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff: Current Landscape

- The Child Welfare League of America found that annual average caseworker **turnover is between 20-40%**

  - In challenged districts, this can increase to 50%+

- There is **increased demand** due to
  - Population growth
  - Higher reports of child abuse/neglect
  - Increasingly complex family environments

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Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff: Current Landscape

- Demand for caseworkers has overtaken supply in last 20 years, due to
  - Strong competition from adjacent departments
    - e.g. TA/SNAP, Medicaid
  - Higher wages and less stress in neighboring fields of work
    - e.g: Schools, Hospitals, Nonprofits

- Rural and urban environments both have challenges:
  - Rural areas typically have fewer qualified workers
  - Urban agencies face higher caseloads and increased burnout

Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff: Challenges in Recruitment

- Public Perception: Media often focuses on negative elements

- Competitive Job Market: Entry-level often lower than similar fields

- Educational Requirements: States require four-year degree and/or specialized certification & testing

- Workplace Environment: Overwhelming new workers with cases; caseloads often exceed OCFS recommended amount; safety in the field

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Strategies & Solutions:
Recruitment

- **California's Child Welfare Training Program**: Students receive *stipends and specialized child welfare coursework* in exchange for a commitment to work in public child welfare after graduation.

- **Outcome**: Agencies participating in the program reported a higher proportion of new hires who stayed beyond their first two years compared to those hired from general applicant pools.

- **Why It Worked**: Students enter the workforce with targeted skills and realistic expectations, reducing the learning curve and early-career burnout.

Strategies & Solutions:
Recruitment

- **University of Wisconsin-Madison Child Welfare Field Placement**:

- Offers specialized *internships* within county child welfare agencies, pairing students with experienced mentors.

- **Outcome**: Many interns transition directly into full-time roles upon graduation, boosting retention because of the strong supervisor–mentee relationships already established.

Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff: Factors Contributing to Higher Turnover

- <u>Emotional Toll</u>: Daily exposure to effects of child abuse, neglect or family crisis

- <u>Caseload Volume/Workload</u>: Unsurprisingly, those with highest caseloads indicate greatest dissatisfaction and stress

- <u>Administrative Burden</u>: Paperwork requirements, especially those related to legal duties, visitation and misc. family requests

Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff: Impact of High Turnover

- Service disruptions created when case shifts from one worker to another. This results with

  - County's relationship with family is reset, loss of established trust
  - Delays in service implementation
  - Family Unmonitored, often for extended periods of time
  - Lack of communication with collaterals and service providers

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Critical Issues in Recruiting & Retaining Staff: Impact of High Turnover

- Caseworker morale suffers as turnover creates workplace instability. Results with

  - Remaining caseworkers absorbing more work, often cases that are left in disarray
  - Inexperienced workers are promoted before they are qualified
  - Potential for "snowball effect" – one worker resigning triggers wave of additional exits

Strategies & Solutions:
Retention

- **New Jersey's Caseload Reduction Initiative**:

- The state set *caseload caps* (e.g., 12–15 families per caseworker) and hired additional support staff to alleviate administrative tasks.

- **Outcome**: Within two years, turnover rates dropped from ~ 25% to ~15%. Caseworkers reported higher job satisfaction due to manageable caseloads.

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Strategies & Solutions:
Retention

- **Clark County, Nevada – Administrative Support Specialists**:

- Introduced a pilot program with paraprofessional "*support specialists*" who handle non-clinical tasks (documentation, data entry), freeing up caseworkers to focus on direct client interaction.

- **Outcome**: Caseworkers reported less burnout; the county estimated cost savings on overtime and a lower first-year turnover rate by approximately 10%.

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Strategies & Solutions:
Retention

- **Oklahoma's Secondary Traumatic Stress Initiative**:

- Instituted monthly *group debriefings* led by mental health professionals and encouraged use of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).

- **Outcome**: Staff reported increased job satisfaction and "feeling supported," leading to an uptick in average tenure.

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Strategies & Solutions:
Retention

- **Michigan DHHS Child Welfare Training Institute (CWTI)**:

- Offers robust onboarding and ongoing professional development, including *mentorship and leadership tracks* for experienced workers.

- **Outcome**: New hires who completed the training and mentoring program had lower rates of early departure (first-year turnover dropped from 25% to 15%).

Critical Issues in Recruiting and Retaining Staff:
Progression & Leadership

- The structure of child welfare departments contribute to turnover through

  - Unclear paths to advancement
  - Few formal reviews of employee performance
  - No financial incentive to perform at high-level
  - Inadequate training once next-level achieved
    - Often filling position of someone already left
    - Little formal training for mid-level management

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Strategies & Solutions:
Progression & Leadership

- **Ohio County's Training Program for Supervisory Positions:**

- *Internal classes* for staff who are promoted to mid-level management; focus on detailed understanding of duties and expectations as supervisors

- **Outcome:** Employees learned best practices of new position; reported that they felt well-equipped for transition to new role; less mid-level management turnover

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Strategies & Solutions:
Retention

- **Kentucky's Internal Leadership Development Program**:

- Provides a *structured route for advancement*: caseworkers can move into supervisory roles after achieving certain benchmarks in performance and education.

- **Outcome**: Workers felt their career goals were recognized, improving morale and reducing voluntary resignations among mid-level caseworkers.

Strategies & Solutions:
Progression & Leadership

- **Massachusetts' Department of Children & Families:** Implemented a *360-degree feedback model,* where feedback is gathered not only from supervisors but also from peers, subordinates and in some cases, partner agencies.

- Balanced this feedback with supervisory input to create a comprehensive performance profile.

- **Outcome:** Provided holistic perspective of worker's strengths and weaknesses

- This fostered culture of continuous improvement and peer-driven collaboration

- Morale improved as strengths were celebrated and weaknesses became areas of focus for improvement

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Strategies & Solutions:
Progression & Leadership

- **Michigan DHHS:** Designed *tiered career ladder that directly ties positive performance* evaluations to promotional paths; integrated clear performance benchmarks into evaluation criteria (e.g. job knowledge, collaboration, client outcomes)

- **Outcome:** Workers were motivated to meet performance standards; high performers identified early in careers guided toward supervisory roles; lower mid-management turnover

Strategies & Solutions:
Progression & Leadership

- **Tennessee's Coaching and Reflective Supervision Project**: Trained supervisors in *coaching techniques*, emphasizing strength-based feedback and collaborative problem-solving.

- **Outcome**: Supervisors reported being better equipped to handle staff concerns, and frontline workers cited a more positive work environment, resulting in a marked decrease in turnover among first-year employees.

Fiscal & Operational Implications of Technology

Fiscal & Operational Implications of Technology

- Challenges with generational gaps and limitations of required child welfare system

- Common Opportunities to Leverage Technology:
  - *Paper forms* (visitation, triage, foster care child movements)
  - *Inter-office Messaging (e.g., Teams)*
  - *Methods of Retaining and Sharing Critical Information Needed by Multiple Departments*

Fiscal & Operational Implications of Technology: Areas with the Largest Impact

Document Management applications to compliment functionality of Connections (e.g., file sharing, searchable case notes)

Fiscal & Operational Implications of Technology: Areas with the Largest Impact

Applications to Automate Workflows/Send Worker and Supervisor Updates (e.g., overdue visits and assessments)

Fiscal & Operational Implications of Technology: Areas with the Largest Impact

Methods of Tracking and Reconciling Critical Points in Foster Care Processes

- *Multiple people involved in the end-to-end process with lack of a centralized platform*
- *Most costly area for child welfare agencies*
- *Area susceptible to error and inefficiencies that impact federal reimbursement dollars and cause vendor overpayments*

Policies, Procedures & Protocols

- "Three Ps" in the following child welfare areas should be established, documented, reviewed by leadership, available in an easy-to-locate shared space and updated on an as-needed basis.
  - *Intake & Screening:* Guidelines for receiving & distributing new SCR hotline reports as well as determining which cases qualify as CPS vs FAR
  - *Accepting & Closing Preventive Cases* (especially for non-court ordered/voluntary)
  - *Case Transitions* (from Investigations to Preventive and/or Foster Care)
  - *Removals (Emergency & Non-Emergency) with legal department*
  - *Visitation & Transportation*

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Questions?

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