



## **Hot Topic:** **Transform Child Welfare through Support for the Workforce**

### **Congress must:**

- Increase funding for workforce development initiatives in Title IV-B to promote recruitment, training, and retention of high-quality child welfare staff.
- Significantly increase child welfare funding for services that provide families and staff with the tools they need for success.
- Address systemic concerns that negatively impact the child welfare workforce.

### **Child Welfare System Transformation Starts with a Strong Workforce**

A well-trained and well-staffed child welfare workforce is vital to the goals of legislators and the broader community. All the reforms enacted by Congress in recent years, including screening victims of sex trafficking, reducing group home care, expanding kinship care, finding more foster parents, enhancing foster and adoptive parent training, increasing legal permanency through adoptions and guardianships, more direct consulting with youth in foster care, addressing substance abuse and mental health needs within families, and entering new data are all dependent on the caseworker.

Child welfare work is labor-intensive and emotionally taxing. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened preexisting issues within the workforce, with high turnover rates and rising concern over compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma. Increased turnover rates and the resulting higher caseloads perpetuate the caseworker crisis. Studies have found that factors related to workloads such as emotional exhaustion and inadequate supervisory or administrative support also lead to increased levels of turnover.

High caseworker turnover rates negatively impact children and families. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) analysis of 27 available Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) in 2003 showed that staff shortages, high caseloads, and worker turnover were factors impeding progress toward the achievement of federal safety and permanency outcomes. The report noted that staffing shortages and high caseloads disrupt case management by limiting workers' ability to establish and maintain relationships with children and families. Research in Milwaukee and Illinois suggests that children are more likely to achieve permanence if they are assigned fewer workers over the course of their stay in foster care.

Strengthening the workforce and ensuring that caseworkers have manageable workloads will reduce incidents of child abuse, reduce the number of children going into foster care, and increase adoptions for children of all ages. A stronger workforce could also allow agencies to devote more resources to post-adoption and reunification services to strengthen permanency for children and families.

### **Support the Child Welfare Workforce Through Titles IV-E and IV-B**

**Increase funding for workforce development and training.** There is currently \$20M designated for workforce development in Title IV-B, dependent upon caseworkers visiting families on a monthly basis. Once split among all the state, county, and Tribal child welfare programs, this \$20M does not go nearly far enough to truly support the workforce. We recommend substantially increasing this set-aside.

**Promote recruitment and retention.** Recruitment and retention of qualified caseworkers is essential for establishing a well-staffed and well-trained workforce. High vacancy rates and unfilled positions lead to much higher caseloads for frontline staff and stress from high caseloads leads to high rates of turnover and burnout; these problems compound on one another.

There are several promising practices that are helping agencies address these key issues, and Congress should support states and counties in implementing and evaluating the of these practices. Congress should create competitive or formula grants in Title IV-B of the Social Security Act with new funding for states to address recruitment and retention of child welfare caseworkers and investigators.

#### Recommended uses of grant funding for recruitment include:

1. Funds to support child welfare workers with signing bonuses, relocation assistance, and stipends for housing and child care needs;
2. Identification and implementation of enhanced hiring practices, such as screening and interview protocols to select appropriate candidates;
3. Creation and implementation of pathways into the field for qualified students and young people with lived experience through stipends, paid internships, and other solutions, with consideration of potential trauma and necessary supports; and,
4. Development of strategies to promote diversity and enhance language capacity, such as partnerships with learning exchange programs for international students, promotion of programs for rapid language acquisition, and funds to sponsor work visas in areas with significant populations of immigrants.

#### Recommended uses of grant funding for retention include:

1. Promoting psychological safety and wellness practices in child welfare agencies;
2. Compensation for mentors and other leaders within the agency; and,
3. Retention bonuses to reward longevity for high-performing child welfare staff.

**Increase child welfare funding.** One of the key issues in both recruiting and retaining qualified caseworkers is low wages. Child welfare staff consistently point out that in many states and localities, entry-level child welfare positions pay no better than the local Target or Starbucks. According to the *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II* baseline report published in 2012, 75% of caseworkers earned an annual salary between \$30,000 and \$49,999. Better compensation and benefits for staff is a critical component

in addressing vacancies and turnover rates, but adequate funding for child welfare agencies is necessary to accomplish this goal. Without adequate funding, dollars are stretched much too thin across the array of child welfare services and agencies are not able to offer competitive salaries to fairly compensate the hard work of frontline child welfare staff. Congress should delink Title IV-E foster care eligibility from the 1996 AFDC standards and increase funding for Title IV-B programs to address the chronic underfunding of child welfare services and free up funds to increase wages for frontline staff.

**Prioritize funding for prevention and family preservation.** Programs and funding that focus on preventing child abuse and neglect before it happens and keeping children safely in their homes help to reduce the number of children entering the child welfare system. Congress has rightly shifted to supporting upstream prevention through the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA); however, some families need concrete and economic support and peer support, not evidence-based programs, to keep their children safely in the home. Congress should increase the availability of flexible funding for child welfare agencies to address primary prevention and family preservation in Title IV-B Promoting Safe and Stable Families to reduce caseloads for workers by keeping families together.

**Create taskforces to compile and disseminate best practices.** States, counties, and nonprofit agencies have long been engaged in the difficult work of addressing the workforce crisis, and many best and promising practices have emerged through their efforts. However, there are concerns that continue to plague agencies across the nation. Congress should create taskforces or working groups to compile and disseminate best practices on these nationwide issues, such as:

1. Creating psychological safety and wellness for staff;
2. Addressing racial disparities in child welfare and promoting a diverse workforce; and,
3. Reducing barriers to social work licensure.

### Address Systemic Concerns that Negatively Impact the Child Welfare Workforce

Solving the child welfare workforce crisis cannot be done through child welfare legislation alone. There are broad

systemic issues that contribute to the pressure on child welfare staff, such as the rising cost of education, lack of access to supportive services for staff and families, and lack of investment in prevention. Congress can provide support for the workforce by alleviating these issues.

**Student loan forgiveness.** The human services sector relies on a professionalized, well-educated workforce to address some of the most difficult issues facing our country today. However, entry-level and even management positions are often unable to provide competitive compensation in comparison to corporate positions with similar requirements. Higher education is expensive, and loan forgiveness strategies would help offset these costs and attract high-quality staff.

In 2008, as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Congress created a loan forgiveness program that covers many human services workers who are employed by public or private agencies, including child welfare. This program could provide up to \$2,000 of loan forgiveness for each of the first five years a social worker remains at an agency. However, the program has never been funded. Congress should fund this program to better support the human services workforce.

**Address basic needs in high-priority areas.** Many public and private agencies struggle with recruitment of qualified staff. This can be particularly true in rural and urban communities, where lack of basic needs in combination with low wages can make it difficult to live. Congress should invest in addressing these needs by creating more affordable housing and supporting low-cost, high-quality child care, including child care with flexible hours in evenings and weekends for caseworkers who don't work traditional hours.

**Fund and promote primary prevention.** FFPSA marked an incredible shift and investment in preventing child welfare involvement for children identified as candidates for foster care. True primary prevention, however, begins much earlier, focusing on preventing child maltreatment before it occurs. Primary prevention programs operate entirely outside of the child welfare system and include approaches like evidence-based and prevention-focused home visiting programs, high-quality child care and early education, and economic supports for families such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. Congress must invest in primary prevention efforts outside of the child welfare system to reduce the number of children coming to the attention of and entering into this system.

**Fund poverty reduction, mental and behavioral health, and housing services.** Without proper supports and services, many families come to the attention of the child welfare system who otherwise would not have. This added number of clients thus inflates already-overburdened caseload counts of child welfare workers. It has also become increasingly difficult for caseworkers to close cases because of lack of access to supportive services for the families they are helping. Congress must invest in these programs and services to better preserve and support families outside of the child welfare system.

## Conclusion

A quality child welfare workforce is essential to ensure good outcomes for children in the child welfare system. No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to serve children and families who are vulnerable than the shortage of a competent, stable workforce. Congress must make critical investments in our workforce to improve outcomes for children, families, and communities.

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