

MIM



JOURNAL

*illuminate your work*

Made in Millersville Journal | [www.mimjournal.com](http://www.mimjournal.com)

# Addressing the Child Welfare Workforce Crisis in Pennsylvania

Evelyn Morales

## Abstract

*The child welfare workforce shortage has been a significant concern for agencies across Pennsylvania. Vacant positions, high overturn, and a shrinking talent pool negatively impacts agencies, the remaining workforce, children, youth, and families. To address this growing concern, the Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth, and Families (PCCYFS) conducted a survey in 2021 to examine the prevalence and impacts of this issue. This paper examines the data from that survey as well as reports from the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI), The Bureau of Labor Statistics, and The U.S. Department of Labor. The findings revealed a 45% average vacancy rate; mental health challenges on the remaining workforce; significant financial cost to agencies, and alarming impacts on permanency and reunification for children, youth, and families. While these findings were significant, there were limitations in data due to the inconsistency of workforce titles, licensure, qualifications, and education. Further research is needed to examine these gaps and limitations.*

---

The current shortage of child welfare workers in the United States is a significant issue that has manifested in Pennsylvania. A stable workforce is essential to have a successful child welfare system that protects children from abuse and neglect and works toward the permanency and well-being of children, youth, and families. Understanding this issue and the impacts this shortage has on clients, agencies, existing workforce, and the child-welfare system is of great importance to social workers and the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. If left

unaddressed, this shortage will create instability in the quality and availability of services and create rippling effects on the social welfare system and community at large. This paper will examine the factors that create and perpetuate this workforce shortage as well as the impacts on the workforce, agency, service delivery, and gaps in existing research.

Child welfare workers serve children and families for the purpose of ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and improving the well-being of children and

families. On any given day, child welfare workers complete a variety of tasks such as assessments, home visits, in-take appointments, progress notes, attending court hearings, and care coordination (CWLA, 2022). This work is difficult due to the high demands, low wages, exposure to traumatic situations, uncertainty, difficult decision making, and the social stigma (PCCYFS, 2022). Given the challenging nature of this work, agencies are facing a great deal of difficulty in recruiting and retaining child welfare workers.

The Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth, and Family Services (PCCYFS) is a statewide membership organization that serves as a unified voice to achieve brighter futures for children, youth, and families (PCCYFS, 2022). There are nearly 100 members of PCCYFS that represent approximately 12,000 child welfare workers in Pennsylvania (PCCYFS, 2022). In 2022, PCCYFS surveyed their members to explore those workforce challenges. The report from that survey revealed a 45% average turnover rate, while an optimal and healthy turnover ranges from 10-12% (PCCYFS, 2022; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). In addition to the high turnover rates, there has also been an 18.23% decline in the number of students entering social work baccalaureate programs over the last five years, creating an even smaller applicant pool (Council of Social Work Education, 2021). This is significant because the social work field is expected to grow by 7% by 2032 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

The workforce shortage creates impacts that can be felt by the agency, the remaining workforce, clients, the community, and the system at large. Strained agency budgets limit the salaries of child welfare workers. In 2022, the average salary of a child welfare caseworker in Pennsylvania was \$46,000 (PCCYFS,

2022). The shortage of workers creates higher demands on the remaining workforce as employees struggle to keep up, resulting in compassion fatigue and burnout. In 2023, 86% of social workers in the United States reported at least one mental health challenge while only 33% reported receiving treatment or support for mental health challenges (NCWWI, 2023). In 2022, it was found that 70% of social workers in the United States reported at least one symptom of secondary traumatic stress (STS) (NCWWI, 2023). This issue is further compounded by the economic strains placed on the agency. Each time an employee needs to be replaced, the recruitment and training costs an agency an average of 21% of the employee's salary and benefits (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). When a position remains vacant, the agency is unable to provide services, which causes providers to lose \$12,000 - \$88,000 per case manager (PCCYFS, 2022). The transition between caseworkers causes disruptions and delays in services which negatively impacts children and families (Julienne-Chinn et. al., 2021). This disruption prolongs the time it takes to achieve permanency and it reduces the likelihood of family reunification (Julienne-Chinn, et al., 2021; Child Welfare Capacity, 2023; CWLA, 2022).

Social workers have the ethical obligation to uphold the values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2021). Given the current circumstances of the workforce crisis, social workers have numerous barriers that make it difficult to fulfill this ethical obligation. Instead, the workforce shortage makes self-care difficult, leading to burnout and a reduction in the quality of service.

Child welfare employees work in a variety of settings and have many position titles. For example, they may be referred to

as case managers, program specialists, family engagement liaisons, or a variety of other titles. In addition, each position has a range of necessary qualifications to fulfill that role. This can also vary depending on the state that the social worker is employed in and if applicable, licensure. Given these variables, it is very likely that the estimated shortage of child welfare workers is grossly underestimated. Further research is needed to better understand these gaps and provide a more accurate estimation of the workforce's needs.

There is a severe shortage of child welfare workers in Pennsylvania. This workforce shortage is a result of a high demand position that is simply burning workers out. As turnover rates rise, it only perpetuates those strains on the remaining workforce. Furthermore, this workforce shortage negatively impacts service delivery, negatively impacts children and families, and creates barriers for social workers fulfilling their ethical obligations. This multifaceted phenomenon requires further research and systemic changes at the state, local, and agency level to identify and implement sustainable change.

## References

- 2022 legislative agenda*. (2022). <https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022HotTopicWorkforce.pdf>
- About*. NASW, National Association of Social Workers. (2021). <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Benefits of recovery-ready workplace policies*. DOL. (2022). <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/RRW-hub/Recovery-ready-workplace/Benefits-of-RRW>
- Julien-Chinn, F. J., Katz, C. C., & Wall, E. (2023). An Examination of Coping Strategies and Intent to Leave Child Welfare During the COVID 19 Pandemic. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 40(5), 587–596. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00800-w>
- NCWWI. National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2023). <https://ncwwi.org/>
- Research & Statistics*. CSWE. (2021). <https://www.cswe.org/about-cswe/governance/governance-groups/commission-on-research/research-statistics/>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023, September 6). *Social Workers: Occupational outlook handbook*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm>
- Workforce development*. Workforce Development - Center for States - Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative. (2023). <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/topics/workforce-development>