

Quality supervision, coworker support key to child welfare caseworker retention

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Instead of looking at the reasons child welfare caseworkers leave their jobs, Oregon State University researchers examined the common factors among workers who stay in the field, and what makes them feel most

satisfied in their work.

In their recent study, researchers found that quality supervisory support and strong relationships with coworkers helped caseworkers feel appreciated and understood, while having adequate technology and equipment helped them manage their workload effectively

They hope child welfare agencies can use this information to support caseworkers and reduce the field's high turnover and burnout rates, which in turn will mean better support for children and families.

"Caseworkers have very challenging jobs, but some are satisfied with the work despite its challenges, and they intend to stay," said co-author Kelly Chandler, an assistant professor in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "If we want to improve continuity in terms of service to children and families in the community, it's important to not only minimize the job challenges that are inevitable, but also think about which employees are really thriving and what we can learn from them."

Researchers sent a confidential online survey to all social service specialist caseworkers in Oregon's Department of Human Services in 2018 and were able to use the data from 485 respondents, including 222 from Child Protective Services.

The survey posed a series of statements and asked caseworkers to rank how strongly they agreed with them. The statements covered a range of topics, from job satisfaction and intention to remain, to more specific items about job resources, such as: "My supervisor gives me clear feedback on my job performance" and "I have the technology and equipment to do my job well."

For more quantitative points about job demands, researchers examined objective agency records to measure caseload and case severity. They

took a unique approach to measure case severity, basing it on the number of substantiated abuse flags in a single client family, up to a total of five per family.

Case severity was the only job demand shown to have a significant negative impact on whether an employee was a "satisfied stayer;" that is, someone who intended to stay at the agency and was satisfied in their job. They compared satisfied stayers with undecided workers and found caseworkers were 8% less likely to be in the satisfied stayer group if they had severe caseloads.

On the flip side, all three job resources studied—supervisor quality, coworker support and work tools—were significantly and positively associated with caseworkers feeling satisfied and wanting to stay in their [jobs](#).

Lead author Brianne Kothari, an assistant professor at OSU-Cascades, said that while there are obvious budget and salary factors that affect caseworker retention, this study demonstrates that agencies also need to remember the value of intangible support for their workers.

"It's really about finding how we can support caseworkers to increase their [job satisfaction](#) and intention to stay at ODHS," Kothari said.

"They want to feel seen and heard. It might be a pat on the back for one person; it might be something else for another person. This study demonstrates the importance of quality supervisor relationships and the need to identify specific supervisory behaviors that benefit employees. It's also important to remember that all workers, including supervisors, need support."

That kind of emotional support, both from coworkers who are "in the trenches" together, and from supervisors who see how hard caseworkers are working, can go a long way toward helping employees feel that

they're not alone, Chandler said.

This study aligns with a broader effort at Oregon DHS to transform the workplace culture and employ more trauma-informed approaches to training at all levels, Kothari said. And it opens the door for further collaboration between OSU and the agency, where researchers can work together to dig into the data and help the agency solidify the best evidence-based practices.

"This is part of our effort to figure out how we can better collaborate with state agencies, which I think really falls within the OSU land grant mission," Kothari said. With ODHS, "There are ways we can think about how we as a larger community can be supportive of these workers, who are really there because they want to make a difference in these children's and families' lives."

More information: Brianne H. Kothari et al, Retention of child welfare caseworkers: The role of case severity and workplace resources, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106039](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106039)

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