

# Study: Inclusive leadership keeps child welfare workers on the job, benefiting children and families

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Child welfare systems have historically dealt with the challenges of high employee turnover, but developing a workplace characterized by

inclusive leadership is one way to keep workers on the job and maintain uninterrupted services for children and their families, according to a new study by researchers at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

When [leaders](#) are more inclusive, child welfare workers are less likely to experience workplace [racial discrimination](#) and more likely to stay in their positions and with their agencies, according to Qi Zhou, a social work graduate student at UB and the corresponding author of the [study](#) published in the *Journal of Social Service Research*.

"The compounding impact of high turnover of child welfare workers makes improving workforce retention a priority," says Zhou.

The study's novel approach looks at the issue of high turnover by investigating how administrators can contribute to improving retention, a view not widely taken in previous research that instead has surveyed employees rather than their managers.

High turnover increases workloads, decreases productivity and disrupts services, as agencies assign new workers—from a reduced staff—to additional cases. Turnover also hinders the development of a diverse child welfare workforce that's serving an increasingly diverse population of children.

"Individuals with minoritized social identities may be ignored and marginalized," says Zhou. "But when employees work with inclusive leaders, they are more likely to have perceptions of inclusion and fewer perceptions of discrimination.

"Inclusive leaders respond to and manage discrimination by treating all [group members](#) in equitable and supportive ways," Zhou adds. "These leaders also serve as [role models](#), as employees learn inclusive behaviors from inclusive leaders."

Zhou says managers can work toward inclusive [leadership](#) by satisfying within their agencies two basic human needs: belongingness and uniqueness.

Those needs extend from research conducted in [social psychology](#). When workers become immersed in a group, they feel a sense of belongingness, but that feeling should come with an appreciation for an employee's unique personality.

Words and actions are critical to inclusive leadership, according to Zhou.

"Leaders should be proactive and welcome different perspectives," she says. "An open office, seeking employee input and creating forums to share viewpoints are all important components to inclusive leadership, but similar steps can lead to an equally important inclusive climate, such as modifying policies across the organization in ways that enhance inclusive leadership."

The study was conducted with Jangmin Kim, Ph.D., an assistant professor of social work at UB, and Annette Semanchin Jones, Ph.D., an associate professor of social work who also directs the school's Ph.D. program. Researchers analyzed secondary data collected from nearly 2,500 child welfare workers across three public [child welfare](#) agencies and examined the direct and indirect impacts of inclusive leadership on [workers'](#) intentions to remain with their agencies.

"This research can serve as an important addition to previous studies that have proposed models using job rotation and talent management as methods that support inclusive leadership building," says Zhou.

**More information:** Qi Zhou et al, Inclusive Leadership to Address Discrimination and Improve Retention in Child Welfare: Examining Multiple Pathways, *Journal of Social Service Research* (2024). [DOI:](#)

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