Workforce Guidance

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Workforce Definition

The field of public child welfare is responsible for the development and implementation of a workforce strategy that recruits, staffs, manages performance, continually educates, retains, rewards, recognizes and adequately compensates a well-prepared, supported and appropriately deployed workforce equipped to provide effective services to children, youth and families. Public child welfare administrators must be able to understand, anticipate, plan and act upon current and future workforce needs.

Overview

Positive outcomes for vulnerable children, youth and families are achieved when a competent, well-trained workforce that is able and motivated to achieve the agency's goals and objectives is deployed. It is the workforce that translates broad organizational strategies into everyday actions. Positive outcomes for children, youth and families are most likely to occur when there is enough staff prepared and supported to implement services. The workforce is where the "rubber meets the road."

Within this guidance, the reference to workforce includes all staff. When there are issues that apply only to specific staff such as front-line, direct service staff, a distinction will be made. The primary audiences for this guidance are child welfare agency teams charged by agency leadership with developing and maintaining a high-performing workforce with the capacity to execute the agency's strategy to achieve positive outcomes for the children, youth and families it serves. In presenting this chapter, PPCWG recognizes that each agency has a unique structure, legal environment and demographic profile to which the concepts must be adapted and applied. Nonetheless, PPCWG believes that this chapter will serve as guidance that all agencies can use to attract and retain a highly competent workforce.

Questions the Guidance Will Answer

- What central issues are addressed in a comprehensive and effective workforce strategy that is well-integrated with a child welfare agency's practice model, structure and modes of operation?
- What are the components and practical considerations of an effective workforce plan that can be applied to any child welfare agency setting?
- What elements of agency culture, climate and capacity warrant attention in recruiting and retaining an effective and stable child welfare workforce?
- What are the attributes, knowledge, skills and abilities of an effective child welfare workforce?
- How do the attributes, knowledge, skills and abilities of front-line workers, supervisors and managers relate to job descriptions, the practice model and the critical performance management practices that promote building and retaining an evidence-informed, outcome-driven, highly competent child welfare workforce?

Why is this Critical Area Important to the Field of Public Child Welfare?

- A well-trained, highly skilled, well-resourced and appropriately deployed workforce is foundational to a child welfare agency's ability to achieve best outcomes for the vulnerable children, youth and families it serves.
- The workforce is the agency's public face to the children, youth and families it serves. Additionally, the actions of the workforce are what stakeholders use most to judge an agency's competence and effectiveness.
- The workforce is both the most important and most expensive resource that child welfare agencies must invest in to achieve their goals and objectives.
- Studies have established a causal relationship between a capable child welfare agency workforce and positive case outcomes[1]. This includes the influence of workforce capacity on placement stability, maltreatment recurrence, reunification, and foster care and permanency outcomes.

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[1] Administration for Children and Families. (2006). *Summary of the results of the 2001–2004 Child and Family Services Reviews.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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- When supported by the agency leadership, the workforce will demonstrate a high level of investment in evidence-informed practice, be willing to innovate where appropriate, and take measured risks to provide services that are anchored in the practice model and will improve outcomes.

How Will Outcomes be Achieved for and with Children, Youth and Families?

- When a workforce possesses adequate attributes, skills, knowledge, abilities and resources, the agency will be better positioned to engage clients and improve client outcomes through the services they provide.
- When a clear understanding of what goes into building a strong and vibrant workforce is present, management will be able to use resources more effectively and efficiently.
- When a workforce has credibility in the community, it will be able to engage the resources of other agencies to provide service that the agency is unable to provide.
- When a workforce is at peak performance, it will provide legitimacy for funding requests for staffing and other resources.

Strategy

Workforce strategy is the agency's overall approach to maximizing the performance of its workforce by defining the goals, objectives and expectations of the workforce. It encompasses all aspects of the performance management system required for the workforce to function, including recruitment, selection, retention and professional development. An agency's progress toward achieving its overall mission depends on the successful implementation of its workforce plan.

Strategic Work

Agency leadership and senior management are ultimately responsible for the effective planning and implementation of the workforce strategy. Aspects of agency strategy that must be established and clearly communicated are:

- An inspiring agency vision and a set of explicit values and principles that guide employee performance and agency practices.
- An agency-wide approach to workforce practice that is fair and equitable.
- Protocols for recruitment, hiring and retention, including compensation/benefit packages that will make the agency an employer of first choice and build a highly competent workforce eager to learn and grow professionally.
- A positive image of the workforce among external stakeholders, including legislators, funders, colleges and universities and the news media, which conveys the message that the agency is invested in building and maintaining positive relationships and is a good steward of community resources and public funds.
- A positive agency culture and climate that leverages capacity through engagement with and empowerment of staff, stakeholders, children, youth and families.

Workforce Plan Components

A workforce plan provides written step-by-step procedures for executing a *workforce strategy*. The workforce plan lays out what is needed to get the job done and calculates the human and non-human resources needed to build a competent and properly deployed workforce. It assesses the agency's workforce and estimates current and future needs to achieve agency goals. Realistic projections are essential to justify budget requests and to plan for effective programming.

The workforce plan contains five components that define the context, characteristics and capacities of the workforce—both program and administrative support staff—and how, together, these drive the agency's work. These components are:

- The vision, mission and values of the workforce.
- An environmental scan of the context within which services are provided.
- An agency assessment of its structure, culture and workforce capacities.
- Long- and short-term goals for workforce recruitment, retention and capacity-building.
- A process for monitoring and continuous improvement of the workforce and its related issues.

Successful implementation of a workforce plan requires inclusion and engagement of staff at all levels as well as the external stakeholders that the plan will affect. The result of inclusion is an empowering process that heightens investment in the workforce plan's success and commitment to the overall mission of the agency. It takes into consideration the needs of the children, youth and families served. Behaviorally, this process mirrors and will reinforce the principles of child-focused and family-centered practice and the tenets of community capacity

building. Some important groups who must be aware of and support the workforce plan include:

- Involvement of agency staff in the planning and development process will strengthen the plan with a broader spectrum of expertise and exchange of ideas. Each staffing level has a unique perspective on the potential impact of the plan on the workforce and, ultimately, the clients. In addition, such involvement garners the commitment of the workforce to the workforce plan and will have a positive impact on its implementation.

- External stakeholders play many roles. Stakeholders, such as policy makers, must be briefed and those expected to participate as resource partners—providing services, recruiting or training staff, unions and executives who control budgets—must not only be informed, but also actively engaged in the workforce planning process. The information received by these resource partners and how they interpret it is critical since they interact frequently with the legislature on funding and the allocation of non-financial resources.

    Example: a union can be a powerful ally when it comes to advocating for funds or establishing performance management protocols.

- The engagement of clients provides an understanding of how the agency is perceived by the children, youth and families it serves, the environments in which workers deliver services and how these contexts can promote or hinder good practice.

    Example: clients can provide feedback on how they perceive the availability of quality medical services or how foster care regulations affect them.

Workforce Vision, Mission, Values and Guiding Principles

Effective agencies are founded on statements of vision, mission, values and guiding principles. Workforce Plans must flow from these foundational statements. By describing how the future will look, the agency's vision statement lets employees, partners and those it serves know what is needed and expected of its workforce. It follows that the workforce plan is one of the implementation strategies for achieving the overall agency vision and for aligning the agency's values and guiding principles. The workforce plan details specific strategies, approaches and methodologies that will build a competent, well-trained, adequately resourced and appropriately deployed workforce to carry out its responsibilities and to move the agency mission forward.

The way an agency hires, develops and manages the performance of its workforce should reflect its mission, values and guiding principles. The workforce must not only understand and be committed to the agency's vision, mission and goals, but also demonstrate the willingness and ability to carry them out in their day-to-day activities.

Environmental Scan

A description of an environmental scan that provides information to develop an agency's overall strategy is addressed in the Strategy Domain. Here it is sufficient to note that a comprehensive workforce environmental scan gathers information on factors within the community in which the agency operates that will impact the workforce's ability and capacity to meet clients' service needs and improve outcomes as defined in the practice model. A thorough workforce environmental scan identifies factors that affect the overall recruitment, selection, performance, retention and deployment of staff across the agency.

    Example: If there is a shortage of IT staff in the labor market, recruitment and retention strategies for that type of staff may have to be accelerated or the agency may contract out for these services.

Data should be gathered in as many relevant areas as possible and be analyzed and approached from a strength-based perspective. Components include but are not limited to:

◆ **Community Resource Analysis**

The purpose of community resource analysis is to identify and assess challenges, opportunities, expectations and potential resources that can enhance or impede the agency's ability to provide services as well as factors that help or hinder the recruitment and retention of qualified staff at all levels. More specifically, the analysis should include:

- The adequacy of service provider agencies that can supplement the public child welfare agency's resources and services.
- Duplication of services in the community.
- Institutions of higher learning available to provide a qualified candidate pool and training.
- Law enforcement and school systems willing to provide support.
- Relationships with clients and stakeholders.
- Governmental oversight—modifications in laws and procedures, funding, political climate.
- Media perceptions and coverage that affect the public's perception of the workforce, workforce morale and ultimately the agency's ability to recruit and retain a stable workforce.
- Legal mandates and rules such as consent decrees and litigation.
- Community demographics such as the need for extensive resources due to blighted community conditions and unemployment rates.
- Community setting (urban, rural, remote), which includes the travel time to access clients and resources needed to secure worker safety.
- Labor market conditions that suggests opportunities (e.g., colleges and universities) and challenges (such as economic conditions causing people to move out of the area).

◆ **Client Analysis**

A comprehensive client analysis includes the make-up of the client population and its needs so the public child welfare agency can meet these needs. It must look at the complexity and diversity of the clients. In addition, it identifies trends that forecast the size of the client population and other relevant demographic changes that affect service needs. The analysis ought to map clients' geographic locations, the client services needs in each specific area, and the available services in each area to meet the identified needs.

Agency Assessment

Structure, culture, capacity and productivity are interrelated. When one is affected, it may affect the others. These elements work together to enhance or impede the agency's ability to achieve its mission. Agency leadership and workforce planners must continuously assess the agency to determine how the agency structure and culture affects workforce capacity. Assessments of all these elements must be conducted both within and across workforce titles/units.

Questions to address include: (1) does the agency structure support a shared understanding by program and administrative staff of agency mission and mutual respect for each other's expertise; (2) does the agency culture enable front-line program staff to cope with the high stress and emotional upheaval that comes with the job and empower them to carry out their jobs; (3) does the way workloads are established and assignments made leverage agency capacity; (4) does the agency's productivity measure up to its capacity?

◆ **Agency Structure**

In child welfare, client needs can be complex. Boundaries among different departments and services need to be porous. Clients might benefit from multiple services being delivered from a single point of entry. A well-implemented practice model will balance the tension between agency processes and procedures and be responsive to client needs.

Agency structures are generally described on a continuum from *hierarchical* (rule bound with vertical lines of authority) to *flat* (high levels of autonomy with horizontal professional decision-making). A table of organization reflects the levels and lines of authority: how people report for work, how they are supervised and the ratio of supervisors to employees. The structure of the agency is set through definitions of roles, levels, departments, polices and procedures and the use of cross-departmental work teams.

Agency structure generally defines whether power is centralized or shared. It determines how decisions are made at each level and how roles and responsibilities are defined. In addition, it determines where the authority lies to formalize external relationships with community partners and how partners are defined. Each child welfare agency faces its own political, legal and service environments and must adapt its structure accordingly.

> *Example: In child welfare agencies, direct-line program staff frequently may not report in person to the office each day but go directly to appointments in the clients' homes or community offices. This type of operation requires more autonomy and professional accountability. In addition, it is essential that clear boundaries regarding decision-making authority exist and that there are clear and open channels of communication and consultation. A child welfare worker providing in-home services and making a monitoring home visit may find circumstances changed. Faced with the need to secure child safety, the worker would need immediate access to supervisory consultation for decision-making as well as resources to strengthen parental capacity and preserve the family.*

◆ **Child Welfare Agency Culture**

Culture is the observable way work gets done within an organization. It is the actions and inter-relationships driven by the underlying beliefs that affect the workforce ability to perform. Culture shapes the way staff understands what management expects of them and determines how organizational changes are made. The agency culture must respect and value staff in their peer, supervisory and administrative relationships, in the same way it expects staff to treat children, youth and families.

Whether the agency culture is open and willing to change or closed and defensive in nature can be assessed by looking at how:

- Goals and practice standards are set.
- Decisions are made.
- Problems and conflicts are resolved.
- Information and values are communicated internally and externally.
- Policies are developed and implemented.
- Performance management systems communicate job expectations, conduct staff appraisals and promote professional development.
- Staff is organized and deployed.
- Support is provided in times of crisis and how the agency shapes the public's image of the workforce.
- The agency maximizes employee safety, sets workloads, makes training available, builds career ladders, heightens morale and takes steps to retain talented and effective staff members.

- Outreach and cooperative initiatives are undertaken with external community partners, including corporations, to enhance service delivery resources.
- Field staff is engaged in identifying innovative practices and delivering quality services to clients.

Example: the negative attention from the media and government oversight bodies that public child welfare systems receive when interventions are unsuccessful in keeping children safe often leads to a defensive organizational culture—one devoted to protecting itself against public and political criticism and punitive legal action.

Climate is the manifestation of culture in the hearts and minds of workers, individually and in small units. It is a function of many factors, including salaries and benefits, supervision, training, support, safety, opportunities to move up a career ladder, esteem and work-life balance.

Agency culture has a significant impact on climate. The way decisions and policies are made and communicated permeates the workplace and affects staff morale. Morale, in turn, can affect the quality of services delivered. Conversely, culture can mediate and change climate over time.

Example: Internal professional development can be promoted in an agency that traditionally looked externally for higher-level staff.

Climate is best measured through perceptual surveys, focus groups and exit interviews that explore workers' perceptions of the conditions under which they work and the basis upon which they make judgments about the job and working conditions.

Examples of these can be found in research of Charles Glisson who has researched culture and climate in child welfare and Alberta Ellett who has developed a scale for measuring organizational culture in child welfare.

- **Workforce Capacity**

Capacity refers to the tools, human and otherwise, needed to accomplish the agency's goals and objectives. In child welfare, capacity is an intricate equation that requires looking at the interrelationship between program and administrative staff. The number of staff needed to handle the cases that come to an agency is affected by many factors, including the complexity of the service needs of the client population; the resources available to meet the service needs of each case; the environment in which services are delivered; the level of training and experience of the workforce; the way in which the agency organizes services, such as whether support staff are available to assist program staff with data input, transportation, caseworker visits and other tasks; the way supervision is provided; and the agency's staff performance expectations.

The children, youth and families that a public child welfare agency serves come with a highly variable set of needs, issues and levels of motivation. Ideally, the agency will discern in advance the types and levels of service that case "types" require. For example, sexual abuse cases require more time and attention than cases that may be directed to alternative response. The public child welfare agency must also always be on guard to note the changing nature of its case mix and its effects on the specializations and numbers of workers required to get the job done well.

The workforce is a fundamental but multifaceted ingredient of capacity. Some agencies rely more on specialty workers; others rely on generic workers. Some agencies include administrative tasks as part of its program staff's responsibilities; others limit those tasks to staff hired solely to perform administrative work. Staff members come with different

skill sets and capabilities. They adapt and add to their repertoire in differing degrees and at differing speeds.

The goal is to align client needs with the skills that its workforce possesses to serve the clients well. Agencies must be clear about the work that needs to be done as well as the amount of work that a worker can reasonably be expected to do in a period of time. That estimate is crucial to an agency's ability to meet the expectations of its mission and practice model, its funding agents, stakeholders and clients as well as its workforce.

Achieving equitable, manageable workloads in public child welfare is more than a mathematical distribution of cases. The agency must find a way to assign cases to workers so that the inherent amount of "work" in a particular case is taken into account. In the end, case assignments must balance the mix of casework and non-casework time needed with time available. That formula may change based on the mix of competencies that public child welfare agency staff possesses and the clients' needs at any given time.

There are many ways to estimate workload. The most comprehensive way is for each agency to conduct its own study, taking into account all factors that affect a worker's potential to deliver services in its own unique environment and meet the practice model standards. While preferred, this mechanism is also the most expensive. When a child welfare agency is unable to access funding for a full study, it still needs to get an honest appraisal of workload. There are several approaches that agencies may adopt to achieve this. For instance, findings from field studies conducted by other agencies can be used to adjust internal estimates of agency workforce needs. Agencies can use this kind of approach to systematically determine workforce capacity, estimate required staffing and help ensure equitable distribution of workload across the workforce.

◆ **Productivity**

Productivity is an important measure of the agency's skill at managing for workforce performance. High productivity is an expectation of the public child welfare workforce. When agencies are staffed adequately based on reasonable workload estimates, agencies must then examine their levels of productivity. To calculate an agency-wide level of productivity, one must take into account the number of workers needed to cover the number and type of cases being served, and how the effectiveness of the services is demonstrated. The calculation should also rest on the assumption (that is valid and reliable) that workloads are comparable across units, departments and among individuals and should also incorporate the clients' perspective.

Root cause analysis of both high and low levels of productivity will position the agency to continuously improve its workforce performance. Levels of productivity are linked to an agency's culture and climate, but can also be the sum of individual worker skills or deficiencies. The agency's expectations and demands on staff should be formally laid out in its performance management policy, which must include staff development, training, monitoring, coaching, supervision and rewards for high productivity. While an agency must pay careful attention to staff skill development, it also must take seriously and have methods for dealing with chronically poor staff performance. This will be addressed in the subsequent Performance Expectation section.

Goals and Objectives

Goals should define priorities and be measurable and achievable. They must be monitored regularly for potential barriers and to assess if they still reflect external conditions. Objectives focus on activities while initiatives are projects to support these activities. Goals, objectives and initiatives should address the full range of what the agency wants to accomplish. To the extent possible, agencies should move forward incrementally, starting with two or three workforce

goals that can be realized to gain a sense of competence and or credibility. Additional goals can be phased in as original benchmarks are achieved.

> *Example: The agency may set a goal of decreasing worker isolation when they are providing in-home services in order to increase their safety and to improve service delivery by enabling consultation with supervisors. A possible initiative to support this goal would be to provide all workers with a cell phone.*

Impact on the workforce should be considered as each agency goal is set. However, some goals that affect the workforce significantly are due to federal, state and local regulations or mandates. In these situations, the impact on the workforce can be realistically assessed and even minimized by communicating and consulting with affected staff and including them in planning for implementation of the mandate prior to leadership directives for execution.

> *Example: There is a federal requirement for caseworker visitation with children in out-of-home placements every calendar month. If workers are included in the planning process for goal setting and understand the potential fiscal consequences of not achieving this goal, there is a greater likelihood that they will adapt their schedules to make the visits within the guidelines and document them in the agency's information system so that the reporting data are accurate when compiled.*

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

It is important to note that workforce planning is not a static process that is completed when the strategy is written and communicated. This is a dynamic process that involves constant measurement, reassessment and adjustment. Human resource and child welfare management staff must regularly analyze this information in order to anticipate or react quickly to changes in the organizational composition or climate and to make adjustments as they become necessary.

A monitoring system provides feedback on workforce performance both internally and externally. Feedback, in turn, is the driver of continuous improvement. Each goal should include measurable objectives with timeframes, actionable steps and benchmarks against which to measure progress. Determining which data are relevant and how to gather it is a critical monitoring function. It is essential that the indicators selected for measurement are valid and reliable and that one area of improvement is not negatively affecting another area.

> *Example: An agency may have the goal of enhancing its credibility in the community by increasing the credentials of its leadership. Highly credentialed supervisory and management staff may be recruited from outside the agency. This could have the unintended consequence of a high level of turnover and the loss of experienced front-line program staff if staff begins to feel devalued and perceives no potential for professional growth within the agency. The agency's ability to provide effective services may be diminished, affecting its credibility and further exacerbating the issue by undermining its ability to recruit qualified staff.*

◆ **Monitoring Workforce Plan Objectives**

Workforce planning must monitor the effectiveness of recruitment initiatives and outcomes, retention efforts and turnover and staff development and training. Exit interviews, salary surveys and other questionnaires can track whether adjustments to the workforce plan are needed to build and retain a highly competent workforce. Measuring the completion of action steps is necessary but not sufficient. Effective monitoring requires that measurement must, ultimately, speak to effects on client outcomes. Data must be reviewed regularly and objectively to determine if the workforce strategy is improving outcomes for children, youth and families.

Example: It is not enough to assume that completing a training course will enhance performance. Whatever the worker has learned must be applied in case situations and is only valuable if it improves client outcomes. If all staff are trained in family engagement skills and apply them effectively, the agency should, in the short run, see an increase in the number of clients participating voluntarily in parenting skills programs and other preventive activities; in the long term, success will be measured in terms of reduced rates of repeat maltreatment.

◆ **Monitoring Service Delivery and Outcomes**

Agencies need a systematic method for examining case processing activities to assess service delivery quality or compliance with practice standards. Quality Assurance units, Child and Family Services Reviews and audits provide data on how the workforce plans are affecting the achievement of improved outcomes for children, youth and families.

◆ **Effects of Monitoring on the Workforce**

Monitoring in child welfare can have complex effects on the climate of the organization and the capacity of the workforce, depending on the culture of the agency. The need to support workers and establish a doable job has been well documented. It is ultimately important that the monitoring in child welfare convey the common purpose of supporting workers as well as hold them accountable for service delivery.

Example: Routine failure to close investigations in a timely manner, to complete case plans or make monthly contacts with clients shows that agency practice standards are not being met. But this requires further analysis of the underlying cause. It may be an indication that workforce capacity is inadequate or that workforce management is an issue at the agency, unit or individual levels.

Agencies can benefit from systematic efforts to routinely: (1) monitor service delivery performance relative to established practice standards; (2) estimate if the agency's current workforce capacity is adequate to meet those practice standards; and (3) assess how to leverage strengths and opportunities to cope with challenges and be alert to emerging issues that may promote or impede the plan's success.

Key Processes

Key processes are the required components, protocols and activities needed to implement a plan of action successfully. For successful workforce planning, closely related key processes include: a robust data collection and analysis system focused on client needs and provider capacity; a strong human resource function; a focus on staff development and performance management; and a clear communications strategy.

Data Collection and Analysis

Child welfare agencies must collect and analyze data credibly and translate their findings into information that guides planning, dictates program change and supports funding requests. Although agencies may, at times, lack the full range of data that would be ideal, all agencies have some data that can be useful in planning. The same data can be used for various tasks. It can be managed and analyzed in different ways for different purposes. Extreme caution needs to be exercised when using less-than-perfect data. It is imperative that agencies be explicit about the limits of their data. At a minimum, child welfare agencies should collect data and get answers to questions on the following subject areas:

Targeted Child, Youth and Family Needs

In the environmental scan, the agency collected data on who its clients are and their current and future needs. Analysis of these findings can help determine which interventions work best with a particular population, under what set of circumstances and why, and ultimately what knowledge, skills and abilities are needed in the workforce. Program decisions require review of staffing patterns. The agency must use this information to staff and deploy its workforce and use resources effectively and efficiently to meet client needs.

Current Status of Workforce Available to Meet the Needs of Children, Youth and Families

The number and type of workers an agency needs should be determined by clients' current and projected needs. Planners should gather baseline data regarding the agency's workforce operational capacity to determine current and future staffing levels and configurations and to measure productivity.

> *Example: The agency needs to gather information about the knowledge, skills, ability, education and experience of its staff to identify the numbers and type of additional staff and other resources needed to provide effective services to its client population.*

An accurate determination of an agency's workforce needs requires estimation or measurement and analysis of the following:

- The agency's productivity levels (provided it is adequately staffed given the current and projected demand for client services).
- Staff retention patterns, including vacancies, turnover rates and characteristics of the workforce.

> *Example: An aging workforce suggests anticipated retirements.*

- The time a worker has available to serve agency clients in a month or a year and in a manner that meets established agency practice standards.
- The impact practice or policy changes have on the workload of existing staff.

Example: Changes in practice that screen in more child protective service investigations or increase the worker-client contact requirements will increase the workload of workers. Documentation, reporting and federal regulations such as the caseworker face-to-face contact with children in foster care requirement also have a direct impact on workload.

Labor Market

Child welfare agencies need to know what the candidate pool looks like to determine what the options may be if the labor market does not have candidates the agency considers ideal. It is critical that the practice model service standard not be compromised. The agency has the responsibility to take action as necessary to develop and attract the ideal candidates. To consider alternatives and make decisions, agencies will need to gather data and analyze the labor market to understand its relation to:

- Labor force trends and shortages. Note: While much of the emphasis is on front-line workers, labor force trends and shortages are equally important for technical and professional staff in administrative functions (IT, fiscal, legal, etc.).
- The demographic characteristic of the candidates. What attributes, knowledge, skills, abilities and educational levels are available in the job market for every position in the agency?
- Competition in the job market, including local salary differentials, specific compensation and benefit packages and professional growth opportunities.
- Economic conditions, including geographic wage differentials, unemployment and community resources.

  Example: High unemployment and tight labor markets could make more people available for employment, but not necessarily the ideal candidates. Economic downturns could also increase the numbers of the client population and cause an increase in workload. Potential candidates may consider leaving the area for higher wages, more reasonable workload or other employment opportunities.

Budget Obligations and Statutory Requirements

Budgets can pose both opportunities and systemic barriers. Aligning workforce planning with the budget process is essential for setting realistic workforce goals and initiatives. Budget allocations affect the number and type of staff that may be hired, the scope of resources that can be accessed through community resources and contracts, and the size of the agency's support and administrative staff, as well as non-personnel resources.

Statutory requirements and commitments force choices that affect budget allocations and program selection. It is essential that agencies determine the workforce capacity they need to support credible practice and meet statutory service obligation. It is important to collect information on the potential impact on clients that insufficient staff (both in number and skill sets) will have. Credible data can also be used to demonstrate the need for non-personnel resources (cars, cell phones, information technology, etc.) that the workforce requires to conduct its work safely and effectively.

The Function of Human Resources

Human resource functions should be developed in a way that support the agency's mission and strategies and contribute to a well-prepared, competent workforce. Human resource functions operate at three levels: (1) tactical, (2) performance management and (3) strategic leadership. Before human resources can move to the strategic leadership level, it must demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness at the other two.
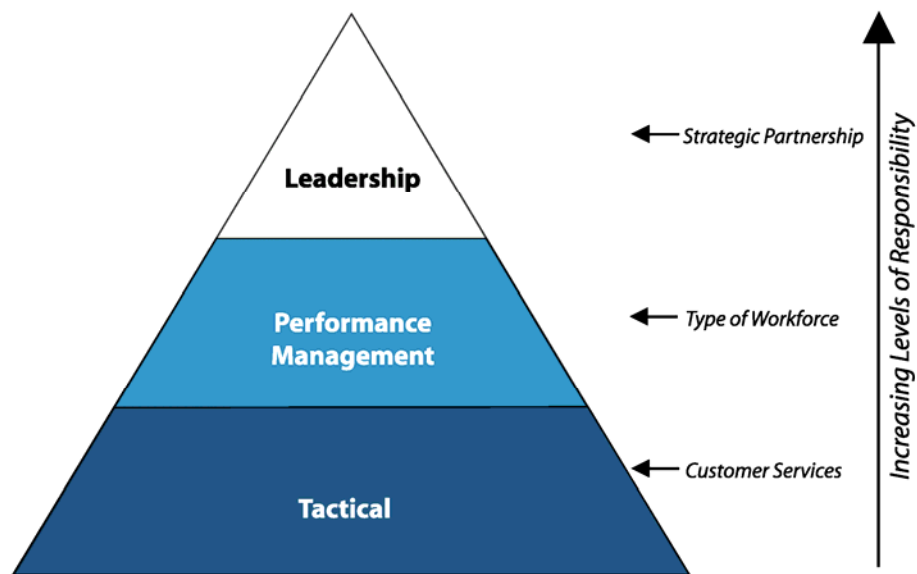
Tactical

At the tactical level, human resources must master the basic customer services function, which includes vital administrative and personnel tasks that get staff hired with benefit packages and compensation (pay checks) in place. This includes internal reactive functions such as workplace safety procedures and other ergonomics. These functions should be automated as much as possible to promote the efficient use of time to enable human resource staff to focus on other assignments.

Performance Management

To build a top-flight workforce, human resources must (1) have knowledge and a basic understanding of the agency's core work in order to bring the best available job candidates on board, (2) be facile in data analysis to implement best practices in recruitment, staff development, retention and training and other staffing activities, and (3) work closely with managers, staff development personnel, front-line supervisors and direct service field staff in recruitment, hiring and performance management so that these processes continually support the agency's mission.

Each layer of the organization brings its unique perspective. Working together these teams increase the likelihood that the right people are recruited and hired and then trained and treated in a manner so that they stay.

> Examples of teams may include the formation of task forces or focus groups to assess and improve human resource processes, or the establishment and maintenance of a regular "personnel committee" consisting of field workers and management so that job descriptions are consistent with job expectations.

Strategy and Leadership

In this capacity, human resources engages in broader workforce strategy and planning. There is close collaboration with executive leadership, administration, management, and staff development partners so that a comprehensive workforce strategy is in place and each partner understands its role and responsibility in carrying out the workforce plan. In addition, human resources plays a strong supporting role in how agency policies and procedures; compliance

with local, state and federal laws; and the structure and implementation of the agency's performance management system affects the workforce.

Example: Human resources is in a pivotal position to evaluate the assignment (or reassignment) of staff to implement and track compliance with new legislation.

To gain credibility and achieve this position of influence with leaders, human resources must first become highly efficient and innovative in providing tactical services and administering performance management systems.

Performance Management System

Fundamental to the Performance Management System is a code of ethics that sets the tone for expected behaviors and performance that is consistent with the agency's mission. The code of ethics provides a foundation to define actions required for all staff in a child welfare agency. In addition, the agency code of ethics must address the challenge of balancing ethical dilemmas that may arise between its standards and professional codes of ethics.

The Performance Management System requires an effective and efficient recruitment process that utilizes accurate and up-to-date selection criteria. This means being able to hire the right people with the attributes that are indicative of success in the child welfare field.

The Performance Management System also clearly defines performance expectations and then develops programs that support the workforce through training, supervision and the provision of resources necessary to perform their jobs as expected.

The Performance Management System integrates six components that come together with the goal of building a workforce with the capacity to move the agency's mission forward.

Child Welfare Code of Ethics

Every public child welfare agency should adopt a code of ethics that is applicable to the entire workforce and takes into account the agency's governance structure and the clients served. The entire workforce should be trained, familiar with, and held accountable for compliance to the agency's code of ethics. The code must be sufficient in breadth and scope to meet the reality of the agency's day-to-day functions and to advance its mission, values and guiding principles.

Because child welfare incorporates many professions, it is each professional's individual obligation to be well versed in the codes of ethics from the licensing boards or professional organizations that will hold them accountable for appropriate conduct and behavioral integrity.

Public child welfare administrators should take reasonable steps to ensure that the working environment for which they are responsible does not interfere with ethical practice of any profession. The agency must establish protocols to advise and offer counsel to the professions it engages to provide services and to reconcile any potential conflicts. Professionals may encounter ethical dilemmas just as they do in other areas of professional practice. Such conflicts must be resolved in the most therapeutic way possible.

Examples: Dual relationships may inadvertently occur. A child welfare worker's own child may meet and become friends with a child to whom the worker is providing child welfare services; child welfare workers may have a relative receiving agency services and need to become a part of the family support group; or child welfare workers may engage a client through alternate employment. Such relationships may require the worker to disengage from a situation professionally or alter the professional relationship.

Likewise, at times team decision-making may create concerns for practitioners. Differences in treatment approaches and methods need to have channels for review so that clients receive the most appropriate and effective service available. Disagreements that fall within the parameters of acceptable treatment do not constitute violations of ethical practice.

A code of ethics must include the protocols and responsibilities for action when a colleague is impaired or not acting within the parameters of acceptable ethics. Internal regulations should include awareness training and the impact that unprofessional conduct may have on vulnerable clients. Protocols should also provide for the ability of staff to defend and assist colleagues believed to be unjustly accused.

Example: if agency staff has direct knowledge that a coworker is driving an agency vehicle with clients in it while under the influence, this impairment activity presents a threat to client safety and there is an obligation to report this through appropriate channels. On the other hand, if an employee is chronically late for work due to substance abuse but not presenting a risk to clients, it is the supervisor's obligation, not the coworker's, to deal with the performance issue.

Recruitment

Recruitment strategies have to include examination of the labor market data and consider the best options for building a highly competent workforce. Human resources and other agency staff need to know if the agency's compensation and benefit packages are viable. To develop strategies to market the agency as the employer of choice, recruitment personnel will rely on the agency's reputation in the community. Significant factors may include whether and to what extent the agency supports and empowers workers in their day-to-day job and provides opportunity for professional growth. The agency must establish policies and procedures that ensure hiring practices offer equal opportunity to all qualified applicants and that the staff hired deliver services that are culturally sensitive, competent and fair.

Human resources is responsible for matching the available candidate pool with the core competencies required by the agency. This requires a comprehensive understanding of each job, the skills necessary to perform the job effectively, and how each job contributes to improving outcomes for children, youth and families served.

Human resources, along with child welfare agency managers, needs to heighten awareness of child welfare as a desirable career opportunity by developing relationships with community agencies, professional associations and colleges and universities so that candidates are aware of available and future positions.

Agencies can assist colleges and universities with skills training, internships, and recruitment of candidates in sufficient numbers for expected vacancies. Additionally, agencies can insist that educational curricula include coursework and internships that will prepare candidates in the specific competencies that are required for the available jobs in child welfare. Colleges and universities are vital to filling the gaps in the workforce, clearly articulating the requirements of the job to potential candidates for child welfare work, and providing the supplementary training for staff at all phases of professional development.

After implementation of reasonable recruitment strategies, if the ideal candidates are not available for vacant positions, the composition of the workforce and how services are delivered may need to be changed. Job roles and responsibilities may be written differently. Agency job alignment must be supplemented with the necessary training so that all tasks are performed effectively.

Example: If candidates that can meet the needs of the clients are not readily available in the job market to fill program entry positions, several options could be considered:

- *More resources may need to be allocated to intensive on-the-job training. Trainees must complete the curricula and demonstrate competence before providing client services.*
- *Some of the time clinical workers spend on administrative tasks might be freed up by hiring support staff to assist these workers with transportation, data entry and other tasks.*
- *Contract providers may be used to render specialized services.*

It is important that the agency look at ways to reach the broadest spectrum of candidates most effectively and efficiently in order to select from the most qualified applicant pool. Technology can provide a variety of informational marketing techniques and recruitment tools, and expedite the screening of potential candidates with video and web conferencing interviews and on-line applications.

Candidate pools need to be maintained so that talented staff is available to fill vacancies as they occur and to protect against lowering practice standards. Factors such as an aging workforce that suggests an approaching retirement wave, current and projected labor shortages and budget restrictions may affect recruitment and the need for candidate pools.

Selection Criteria

Selection criteria should be derived from the attributes, knowledge, skills, abilities and education necessary for an effective workforce to meet the needs of the clients they serve and used to hire the right people for the work. Selection criteria must be closely linked to the implementation of the agency's practice model, including the commitments to address problems of disparate treatment related to disproportionality and the need to maximize effective and efficient use of technology. It is essential that the selection criteria delineate in writing what the public child welfare agency expects its workers to do.

> *Example: The clinical and generic case management work that a front-line program worker performs must be carefully distinguished from the traditional clinical work that many prospective workers may expect. For public child welfare, the social work principle of meeting clients where they are and moving them forward includes meeting, engaging and supporting clients in their homes, communities, and neighborhoods, not necessarily in the worker's office.*

The following sections address the core attributes needed for the entire child welfare workforce and the educational levels, knowledge, skills and abilities that are relevant to the performance of direct service and other program jobs. This in no way mitigates the importance of non-program child welfare staff. Rather, it emphasizes the specialized skills and support systems needed by program staff.

◆ **Attributes that Identify the Best Candidates for All Child Welfare Agency Staff**

The field of public child welfare is complex, and there are a number of personal attributes that are predictive of those who will excel. An assessment of these attributes should be embedded in a standard behavioral interview for all child welfare staff. Attributes include:

- Commitment to the fundamental values of child welfare and to the children, youth and families served
- Ability to communicate effectively based on requirements of the job
- Awareness of and ability to handle stress and manage conflict using self-care strategies and without personalizing issues
- Self-efficacy that is team-focused and service-oriented
- Motivation, drive and a willingness to work hard
- Ability to apply critical thinking in day-to-day situations
- Personal integrity
- Ethics

- Self-direction with the ability to anticipate and take necessary actions in areas of assigned responsibility
- Demonstrated cultural competency in day-to-day work

◆ **Education and Training for Program Staff**

Public child welfare service delivery involves a broad array of professionals offering services from a variety of disciplines (e.g., social work, psychology, law, medicine, nursing, education). Agencies must clearly articulate to professional schools what basic knowledge, abilities, skills, behaviors and personal attributes are expected of the public child welfare workforce to enable schools to develop a curriculum, create relevant internships and provide students with appropriate career guidance. The curriculum needs to include course work specific to public child welfare.

Social work is the primary profession that focuses on preparing graduates to provide public child welfare services. Social work education coursework and field experiences include education in child and adult development, social welfare policy, organizational behavior, research and direct practice needed to fulfill the roles required by public child welfare agencies. Public child welfare–specific courses and field placements enhance commitment to public child welfare careers and a readiness to work in public child welfare organizations.

Completion of a bachelor's degree in social work or allied professional equivalent degrees that include specialized public child welfare education and public child welfare field experiences is the minimum educational requirement that signifies a basic readiness for service as a public child welfare worker. Though usually equipped for an entry-level program position in child welfare services, these professionals must undergo additional education and training in programs with an emphasis on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of mental, behavioral and emotional disorders in individuals, families, and groups to provide higher-level services. These competencies can typically be attained through graduate-level education and field internships and fulfillment of the postgraduate supervised practice hours required by a state licensing board or state agency where they will practice.

A master's degree in social work (MSW) or allied profession prepares graduates to provide services for more complex client needs, to manage programs and to provide supervision. Program supervisors and managers should possess an MSW or equivalent degree with coursework that provides knowledge and skills in supervision of staff or program development and management required by the job description. If these positions have a clinical component, staff should also have the prerequisite credentials for providing clinical supervision as defined by individual states. Front-line workers who move into supervisory and management functions must also receive additional training in these functions before taking on such duties.

Program staff at all levels without the prerequisite field internships and education must receive additional training and demonstrate the ability to apply the techniques prior to assuming responsibilities. Practice proficiency must align with client needs.

◆ **Front-line Program Staff**

Front-line program staff is required to have a unique combination of knowledge, skills and abilities to perform the job effectively. These may vary based on how job functions are designed within an agency. For example, a good front-line program professional:

- Knows and applies relevant federal and state statutes, rules, policies and procedures related to child abuse investigation, case planning and family services.

- Understands basic social data and their implications for promoting positive outcomes for children, youth and families and for estimating service needs and requests.
- Takes responsibility to keep up-to-date on best practices and learns to apply these effectively.
- Knows human development and family systems theory; concepts of youth and family involvement and empowerment; family-centered assessment and case planning and is able to apply this knowledge to provide appropriate interventions to meet the needs of children, youth and families across a wide range of complex issues.
- Knows and understands the dynamics of child abuse and neglect, is able to identify it, assess its effects and apply appropriate interventions to protect children from maltreatment and promote their safety in stable, permanent families by making reasonable efforts to prevent placement, reunify children and families, or pursue permanent alternative placement through adoption or legal custody.
- Can identify dysfunction in a family caused by mental and behavioral health challenges and substance abuse; understands the implications of these issues and knows and can apply appropriate interventions.
- Gathers information from a broad range of sources and weighs it to make evidence-informed decisions.
- Communicates clearly—verbally and in writing—so that information is correct and adequately documented.
- Can build relationships in the community; knows the community service array and can readily facilitate relevant service connections.
- Possesses professional licensing or credentials for the service being provided or child welfare practice as defined by the identified jurisdiction, if applicable.

◆ **Front-line Program Supervisors**

Front-line supervisors must be experts on what workers do. They need to support, protect and mentor staff while holding them accountable. Typically, front-line supervisors must:

- Possess the core knowledge, skills and abilities of front-line program staff and keep up-to-date on the professional, technical or procedural aspects of the job to provide day-to-day guidance and support. They must know and be able to teach best practice and evidence-informed interventions and provide resources for staff training.
- Manage staff performance in a manner that supports staff and promotes high performance by providing oversight in a manner that builds confidence and maintains self-esteem; promotes worker self-efficacy and a belief that it is possible to effectively intervene in complex cases. They must reward good performance, support career goals, and deal with underperformance. They must encourage and accept input from supervisees and higher-level managers to improve services being offered, accommodate different personal styles and levels of expertise in making assignments, and facilitate cultural competence.
- Conduct agency administrative tasks that require skills in using non-personnel resources efficiently and effectively for case management and worker safety, and for employing vertical and horizontal communication channels effectively, both internally and externally.
- Utilize agency data, analysis to drive performance.
- Must have at least two years of child welfare front-line program staff experience.

◆ **Program Managers**

Management often represents a career shift for front-line workers and direct practice supervisors. This shift is attained through recognition that management exists to support and serve the direct practitioner and their supervisors. Additional training is required. The following are some indicators of an effective manager:

- Keeps staff focused on the agency mission.
- Creates an organizational culture that agency supervisors can promote to maximize service delivery capacity.
- Knows current child welfare principles, best practice developments, emerging issues and research and is able to apply this knowledge to improving processes and programs and engage the support of staff and stakeholders.
- Analyzes polices and establishes protocols that provide supervisors and front-line practitioners with direction, guidance, supports and resources needed to provide effective, quality services that represent the best practice in child welfare

  Example: A competent manager advocates for policy change when necessary, insulates front-line staff from organizational crises, and uses mistakes as learning moments, while at the same time holding people accountable for their services to children and families.

- Understands that budgets drive resources and has the ability to manage budgets in the service of client outcomes.
- Analyzes factors contributing to turnover and acts to stabilize both supervisor and practitioner positions and contributes to recruitment of viable candidates.
- Gathers information and input on issues from staff at all levels and from stakeholders, and decisively implements decisions with an eye toward their systemic implications.
- Must be accountable to the people of the state and their elected officials or tribal governments for maximizing agency achievement of desired outcomes for children and families and affirms that the agency is a good steward of the public trust and funding.
- Understands and is sensitive to political realities, but as the liaison to state level officials in the executive and legislative branches, represents the best interest of children and families served and the public child welfare staff.
- Must have 2 years of child welfare program staff experience and 2 years of child welfare program supervisor experience.

Hiring Procedures

It is essential to assess the available qualified candidate pool and the competition (current and future) for those candidates. Screening tools such as realistic job previews, written exercises and requirements for specific courses and specific degrees can narrow the pool of candidates to those with the most desirable qualifications. Interview questions directly related to the competencies required will help identify the most desirable candidates. Required pre-service training with monitoring, feedback and evaluation helps eliminate or improve poor performers and identifies those without the requisite skills to perform the job.

The use of good screening tools and technology are essential in the selection process. Human resources must ensure that managers and others on the interviewing teams are trained to conduct appropriate screening interviews and are knowledgeable regarding recruitment and selection policy, collective bargaining agreements, merit system requirements and the use of available technology.

Unions and merit systems may affect the way in which workers are selected and, later on, have an impact on performance management and retention. The agency must engage these entities as partners when developing the Code of Ethics, selection criteria and hiring procedures. It benefits everyone to hire people for jobs in which they can be successful.

Agencies need to use a formal system and relationship-building techniques to engage union representatives as allies to get employees into positions where they can perform optimally or to counsel them into other jobs. Human resources should be involved as a partner in any employee management settlement discussions or policy on proposed employee policy revisions.

Merit systems for hiring staff generally require testing of candidates, detailed selection processes and pre-employment requirements like drug testing, fingerprinting and background checks. Conducting this testing in a routine manner in anticipation of vacancies can contribute to maintaining an applicant pool of qualified candidates. Internship programs can also contribute to the candidate pool and speed up the hiring process.

The need to maintain a candidate pool makes it imperative to have employee-friendly policies and procedures in place to attract candidates who may be swayed by higher compensation elsewhere. Partnering with unions may help to create an environment that draws new hires.

The existence of collective bargaining agreements and unions, in combination or separate from a merit system, provides a specific legal framework with limited flexibility. Collective bargaining agreements generally cover the conditions of employment and compensation and incentive programs. There are often provisions for seniority transfers or bidding for positions.

Performance Expectations

The initial introduction of workers to their jobs is important in setting expectations and connecting their work to the larger mission of the agency. For public child welfare caseworkers, the awesome responsibility of protecting children starts with careful preparation for assuming case management responsibilities.

There are various models for acclimatizing new workers across the states, but the most important aspect in any model is the ability of new workers to see experienced staff perform the work. Combinations of training and on-the-ground work are common, with the didactic classroom training of the past giving way to competency-based training and experiential learning curricula.

Workers should not assume case management responsibility without careful oversight by seasoned supervisors. Often, training units provide both supervisory support as well as a peer environment that encourages safe exploration of the caseworker role.

Mentoring, training and supporting workers are the agency's tasks in creating a viable workforce. Much of that work is facilitated by careful selection of workers in the first instance, and then providing training and mentoring. There are several overarching themes that pervade job expectation and function, and agencies must make sure that elements of these are infused into the fabric of training and workforce development.

Written job descriptions are indispensable performance management tools for recruitment and performance expectations. They are essential for making it clear to job applicants what the position entails and for setting measurable expectations for new employees. Well-constructed job descriptions match skills, abilities and education to the tasks the position requires and should be written and reviewed with staff members in the early stages of their employment and during performance appraisal processes.

Public child welfare is required to establish policies and procedures and make available the tools that workers need in order to work successfully with all the families they serve. These include translation services, affirmative minority hiring practices and competent supervision, among others. The key to offering quality services is that the workforce be aware of, trained to understand and provide equitable treatment and services to all populations that its workers will encounter

Trauma is a topic of particular concern for public workers as so many of the children and families they work with are, in fact, victims of or witnesses to significant violence. Additionally, the public agency workforce is highly susceptible to the negative effects of secondary trauma from repeated exposure to these cases and the stress of the work they are asked to do. Over

time, repeated trauma will have a significant impact on workers. The most damaging part of secondary trauma is its corrosive impact on the worker's sense of competence, trust, worth and hope. Agencies must be sensitive to this issue and provide supportive services that workers can access confidentially and without concern that their competency or ability to continue to work will be called into question. On the other hand, agencies should be prepared to counsel those who may not be suitable for the work into other employment.

The focus of public agency work over the last decade has been to sharpen its practice and to use the power of research to guide development of child welfare work and to underscore that workers need to look for empirical evidence of their impact on clients and communities. Workers at every level of the public child welfare agency must develop an appreciation of the value of using evidence to guide and improve services to children and families.

The higher-level information that workers now receive through evidence-informed practice and research-based assessments makes it more important than ever that the workforce be taught to challenge and connect what the worker knows from experience to the research available to guide their practice.

Public child welfare practice requires the use of critical thinking techniques at all levels of the agency to gather and evaluate information regarding the children and families served in order to make competent decisions regarding safety and effective intervention. Critical thinking is also employed in the continual assessment of the impact of interventions on the family in order to enable appropriate adjustment.

Supervisors and managers must be able to facilitate critical thinking while at the same time use systemic thinking that aligns existing case practice with the agency's predominant philosophical approach, practice model and organizational priorities. Management commitment to the development of critical thinking skills among both workers and supervisors must be evidenced by willingness to direct valuable resources of time and funding to the mastery of this skill.

◆ **Performance Appraisals**

Given clear role definitions and behavioral expectations, there are many structures and supports that need to be in place in order to maximize the performance of the child welfare workforce. Timely feedback that clearly states actual performance compared to expected or desired performance is important for changing behavior and improving practice and must be ongoing. Feedback can come from peers, from clients, from data systems and from supervisors. Staff must be held accountable for adherence to job expectation, ethics and operating tenets of the practice model.

Mechanisms need to be in place to support both formal and informal constructive and contextual feedback to workers. These discussions should include the chance for workers to discuss their accomplishments. Self-correction becomes a powerful tool for practice improvement. Discussions should periodically include formal written performance appraisals that are based on written job descriptions and clear behavioral expectations.

Performance appraisals should include or be attached to developmental plans for continuous improvement. Employees should be involved in their own development. This should be an individualized, proactive skill enhancement opportunity agreed upon by the worker and supervisor that aligns with agency resources and leads to creating a well-prepared workforce invested in achieving the agency mission.

Staff needs should be clearly assessed, written down and used as the point of access to on-going skill development. Training should be available to address worker deficiencies identified in this process as well as opportunity for individual capacity building.

◆ **Staff Development**

There are three types of staff development plans that can flow from performance appraisals. These are: (1) remedial plans to enable the employee to meet job expectations; (2) development plans for continuous improvement; and (3) developmental plans to build agency capacity and the employee career path.

All three are based on supervisory feedback, jointly agreed upon and directed to focus on the worker's needs and interests as well as building the agency's capacity to achieve its mission. All developmental plans should challenge the worker to reach for higher levels of performance whether in their current job or by taking on a new endeavor. A good staff development process improves worker morale, improves retention rates and most importantly, improves service delivery to families. Resources must be available to keep worker competency at the level needed to perform the duties required of the agency.

- Remedial Plans for Workers who do not Meet Job Expectations should derive from formal performance appraisals and are developed between the supervisor and the employee. When an employee is found lacking, plans are formulated to provide the employee with the tools to bring their skills up to the level expected by the agency. Such remedial plans require additional supervisory oversight of a worker's performance.

  Example: A worker has a workload established through a valid, reliable workload estimation technique that is equitable to those managed by other staff in the same role at the same level. However, he/she is unable to complete the necessary paperwork. This worker may benefit from writing or time management training to enhance language or organizational skills. Whether either or both would be helpful should be mutually determined by the worker and the supervisor.

  It must be emphasized that remedial plans are not disciplinary in nature but are directly tied to enhancing the worker's performance. Employees should be notified when actions other than remedial are contemplated. Workers who are unable to meet expectations may be counseled into other jobs within the agency or other employment. However, employees who are unable or unwilling to meet job expectation should be removed from the workforce.

- Developmental Plan with Workers that Meet Job Expectations should clearly identify what is needed to maintain current functioning and identify areas for development that enable the employee to reach a high level of performance in the current job or qualify for a career track for promotional opportunity that will meet agency needs.

- Developmental Plan with Workers that Exceed Job Expectations should clearly identify what is needed to continue to excel in the current job, take the current job to another level, qualify for promotion and what areas for professional growth will meet agency needs. Agencies must look critically at how they manage their own talent to ensure the retention and development of the most talented workers. These plans may include:

  ▪ Staff development and human resources personnel must work together to create accessible career ladders. Staff needs to see the opportunity to grow in the agency. There must be a formal process to enable staff to gain experience for higher-level opportunities that fit the agency's need for succession planning and the individual's need to take pride in their profession and develop advanced skills. Ideally, there should be multiple paths available to develop professionally and achieve status and rewards for becoming an excellent or specialized practitioner, a trainer or field coach, as well as ways to enter supervisory jobs, management, information technology, research and others areas.

Public child welfare work requires that fully qualified workers be promoted based on performance and skill. Many states have civil service systems that reward longevity, but that should not be an impediment to the advancement of qualified staff. Successful engagement of unions and other worker representatives is both possible and highly constructive in development of promotion policies.

- This is the agency process to identify talented staff and prepare them to fill critical roles when jobs become vacant. Such planning is essential and can be used by agencies to insulate themselves from the negative effects of cyclical or unexpected changes in leadership at all levels across the agency. Succession plans are also excellent vehicles for grooming staff to perform higher-level tasks and provide a means for continuity when change occurs.

- Research demonstrates that the success and organizational tenure of the worker is to a great degree determined by the level and quality of supervision received. This must be widely considered when assessing the performance of supervisors. Although, organizationally, supervisors are not full-fledged members of the management team, supervisors should be included in decision-making processes and serve as the disseminators of management policy and information. Supervisors need coaching or mentoring designed to ensure their full participation in the achievement of organizational goals.

  Supervisors and managers must also tend to their own professional growth in order to cultivate a cadre of future agency leaders. Attention and funding must be devoted to the development and training of supervisors and managers. Every supervisor should be receiving regular supervision or consultation from an agency administrator or manager, a peer or a group of peers. This process may connect newer supervisors to more experienced mentors or coaches.

  The organization should require developmental plans for all supervisors. Management must show support of these plans by actively participating in structured learning events, lending their expertise to development of desired competencies, and devising strategies to "free" supervisors to participate in learning activities despite caseload/workload management challenges. Supervisors' developmental plans should include:

  - Administrative and managerial aspects of supervision of a work unit, including monitoring the functioning of the organizational unit, the assignment and management of workload and guiding the work of the supervisees.
  - Evaluation and management of staff performance, including ongoing assessment of staff skills and fulfillment of work responsibilities, formal performance appraisals, developing and monitoring corrective action plans, and progressive discipline methods that are consistent with agency regulations. Human resources should provide supervisory tools for use in this process to promote consistency across work units.
  - Leadership skills such as aligning front-line practice with organizational goals and priorities, inspiring staff to do their best work and to recognize their role in the greater agency, serve a communications function. Community leadership skills are also required as the supervisor serves as a representative of the agency, its policies and its philosophy within their locality. Public child welfare agencies are typically in a constant state of change, so supervisors must have skills in leading teams through change. Supervisors should be considered ambassadors, advocates and advisors to front-line staff and to the community, as these functions relate to the mission and purpose of the agency. For that reason, their role in the agency planning and implementation of priority projects is essential.

- Clinical supervision that is related to the professional development of front-line workers as well as the promotion of competent practice with families. Skills associated with this role involve the promotion of self-reflective practice and critical thinking and the interpretation of the agency's practice model with individual families. Supervisors should receive ongoing clinical training.
- Training in the value and management of diversity in the workforce, as well as promoting culturally sensitive practice. This includes strategies for avoiding racial disproportionality and other issues appropriate to the specific geographic region.
- Organizational management skills. The supervisor role is a critical link between the front-line and the administration. System thinking is required to connect practice to organizational priorities and the elements of strategic planning.
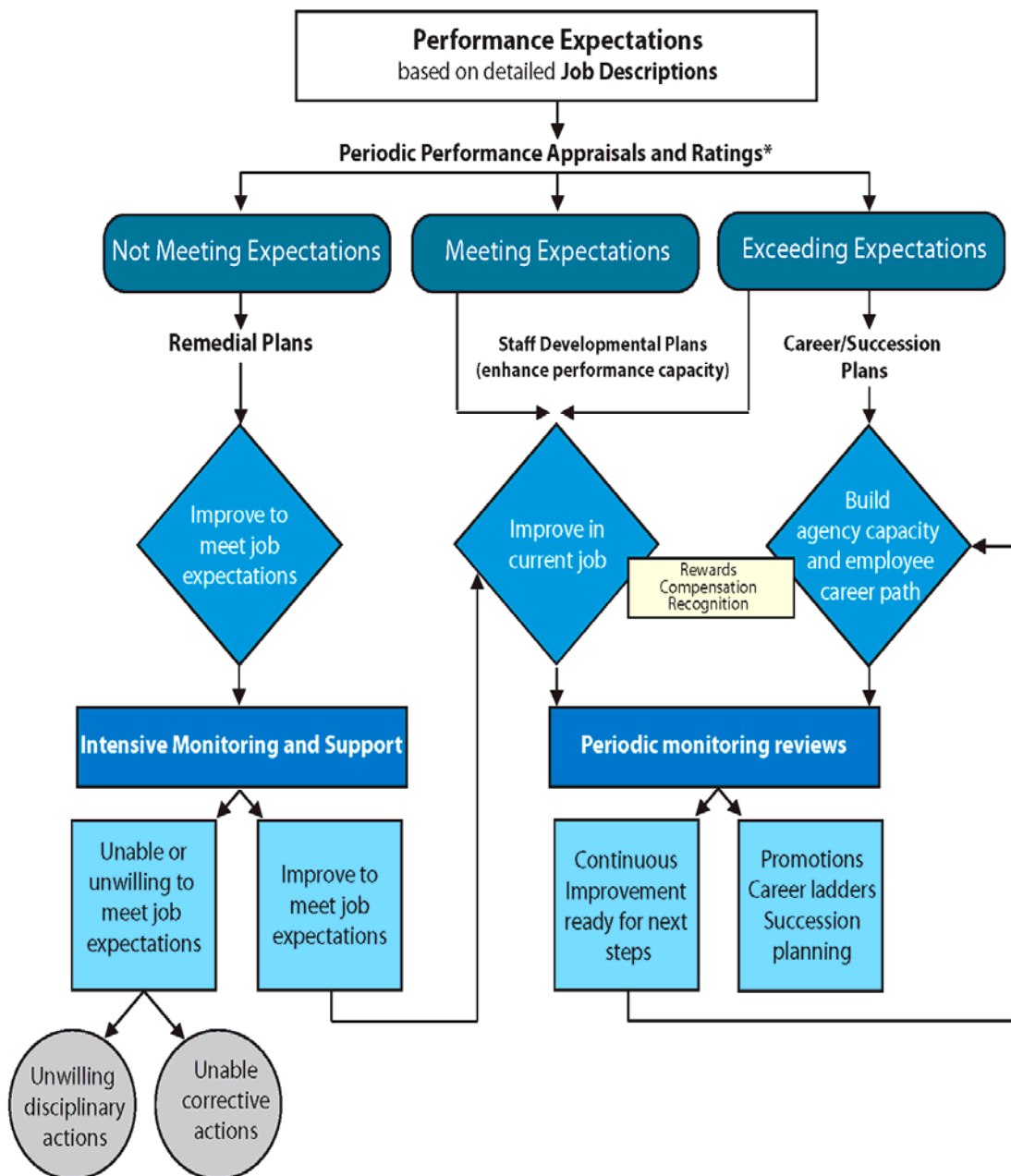
Not a schema for discipline

◆ **Disciplinary Action**s

It is expected that all staff will follow policy and procedures and perform appropriate to their role and level. Methods of discipline must be in place when communicated performance standards are not met. Disciplinary actions are progressive, designed to clearly communicate a performance problem and to include opportunity for improvement along with monitoring loops and action plans in the event performance does not improve. Like in performance appraisal and staff development plans, every effort should be made to maximize the potential for staff success, but discipline is different from developmental plans. Disciplinary actions are designed to move forward to removal if performance does not improve or the aberrant behavior is repeated.

Low performers, either due to ability or motivation, must be managed out of the public child welfare system through counseling or, as a last resort, through involuntary termination. Given the critical nature of child welfare work, the workforce cannot tolerate anything less than high levels of competence and performance. Staff in all positions must be held responsible for all actions and outcomes that they have control over. Disciplinary action can and should be taken at any time a worker is not showing sufficient motivation or violates policy and procedures.

Though disciplinary action is generally progressive, some behaviors or lack of behaviors require immediate termination. These include, but are not limited to, one time or repeated behaviors that place another person—client or other employee—at risk. Discipline can be taken at any time against any employee at any level.

Retention, Rewards and Compensation

High rates of employee turnover are well-documented at many levels of the public child welfare system. Worker turnover carries enormous costs for the agency. It has a direct fiscal cost in that the investment made in training and enhancing the skill of the worker is lost. It disrupts progress in work with a family, so it has clinical costs. It spreads cases to other workers, causing both a slowing of work and, potentially, safety and morale issues among the workforce. In addition, supervisors charged with the task of training and guiding field workers on a day-to-day basis suffer secondary trauma when faced with ongoing loss of these workers.

However, monetary benefits are not sufficient to retain all employees in the field of public child welfare. Child welfare agencies must provide support and training to enable new employees to do their job competently. Research indicates that supportive supervision, recognition and a sense of competency are the most decisive factors for retention and professional growth.

Reward, recognition and compensation provide intrinsic satisfaction and contribute to individual self-fulfillment and self-esteem that can, in turn, enhance agency capacity building. Compensation systems allow compensatory pay increases and/or bonuses for performance. Frequently, public child welfare agencies are bound by civil service pay scale systems that preclude the ability to financially reward excellent performance. Rewards and recognition can still be used as motivational tools. Agency leaders can fashion opportunities for workers' contributions and high productivity to be publicly recognized within the agency and in the community.

Example: Exemplary work can be recognized openly and can be appreciated even with little or no financial awards.

Workforce retention requires looking at how non-occupational factors affect the development and productivity of staff. These "work-life balance" factors include the worker's leisure and recreational time spent alone and with family, as well as attending to one's own physical and mental health. The agency should support workers in constructing a healthy work-life balance.

This is best addressed by educating the workforce regarding self care. However, the entire spectrum of options must be considered. If resources are available for providing recreational facilities on-site or in cooperation with a local facility, this is a significant workforce bonus.

Communications

In addition to the broad organizational goals for communications there are many places where communications critically affect workforce issues and are central to the implementation of the workforce plan. Communications should be used to:

- Inform staff at all levels of the agency's goals, objectives and initiatives to make them feel a committed part of the agency's mission.
- Develop the agency's image in the community and convey its expectations of the child welfare workforce. The community image affects worker morale and their willingness to stay with the agency.
- Promote positive views of the workforce to the public and stakeholders.
- Anticipate when negative incidents may escalate to public attention and take action to minimize damage to the public face of the workforce.
- Impart to all stakeholders a clear understanding of their roles and the impact of these roles on agency operations.
- Convey to stakeholders and to the children, youth and families served what can be expected from the workforce.
- Gather the information needed to understand the community and context in which services are delivered.
- Disseminate information to policymakers and key external stakeholders in a clear and concise form to enlist support for additional workforce resources.
- Create feedback loops to evaluate the impact activities may have on the workforce.

Operations

Operations for the workforce plan involve successfully leveraging skills and resources to meet agency goals and achieve the agency's overall mission.

Agency leadership is ultimately responsible for the outcomes of the workforce plan. In child welfare agencies the execution of the workforce plan and benchmarking is a shared responsibility of management, human resources and supervision.

In its operation, the public child welfare agency must be clear about its practice principles and support its workforce in their implementation. Clarity about mission and the worker's specific role is fundamental. Key components of workforce operations are the day-to-day supervision of the workforce and the environment in which the workforce must function.

Supervision

Supervisors of all staff at all levels must be trained to cope with their own job challenges, to sustain and retain new and experienced workers and to promote high productivity for the tasks performed. This is the hallmark of a successful workforce plan.

Clearly, supervision and support for supervisors is crucial in maintaining a viable and vibrant public child welfare organization and retaining its staff. Organizational support of the supervisory workforce must come from the highest levels of the agency's leadership. Supervisors need support and training in supervisory roles, managerial roles and mentoring roles from both peers and trainers if they are to sustain and enhance their own competencies and job satisfaction.

As guardians of the workforce plan, supervisors require manageable caseloads. The need for manageable caseloads for front-line workers has been established for some time, but applies equally to their supervisors. When individuals are assigned duties outside the managerial/administrative responsibilities or mentoring/supervisory roles, the magnitude of the responsibilities needs to be considered so that individuals can concentrate on both the administrative and supervisory duties required to operationalize the agency mission on a day-to-day basis.

Environment for the Workforce

Agencies must develop standards and polices that identify and minimize all safety and health risks in the internal and external workplace and contribute to the extent feasible to the overall well-being of their workforce. Staff should be included in discussions of how their space can best promote productivity and collaboration. This includes sensitivity to the diversity of the workforce and clientele (community). There are four major components to workforce environment: safety management; attention to the quality of internal and external workspace, including equipment and facilities; flexible work arrangements; and interpersonal relationships.

- Safety management should be embedded in the culture and climate of the agency. Improving safety heightens productivity. Workers can transfer the time and emotional energy that might be spent protecting personal safety to focus more on their work. A sound risk safety management system and staff support requires the following elements.

  - First, the agency must have a workforce safety plan. The elements of the workforce safety plan are contingent on the structure and location of the agency and conditions under which the workforce must accomplish its tasks. Agency workforce safety plans should include not only rules, regulations and procedures but also resources (e.g., cell

phones, buzzer systems) and networks (e.g., law enforcement, community agencies). Details will vary based on the requirements of the job function.

Safety in child welfare offices requires special attention to assist staff in coping with situations where someone becomes physically aggressive.

Example: Furniture should be placed in interviewing rooms in a way that allows workers to exit safely in the event their physical safety is endangered. Security for administrative staff greeting clients must be assessed and any identified safety concerns mitigated.

Safety precautions beyond the walls of the agency include securing worker safety while entering and exiting buildings, making field visits to unsafe neighborhoods, visiting clients' homes and traveling to and working in satellite locations. Actions must be taken so workers feel safe and *are* safe.

Example: Clear protocols and reliable communications tools (including cell phones and PDAs) that can be activated in hazardous situations.

Special arrangements should be made for workers who have been threatened or exposed to situations of harm.

Example: Workers who have been harmed, had property damaged (such as tires slashed) or may otherwise be at risk should be escorted to their cars and agreements should be made with the local police that when alerted, extra patrols will be provided to protect the workers' homes and families.

- Second, the agency must provide training to make sure all personnel are aware of safety procedures. Staff orientation, supervision and mentoring can help embed safety into the daily action of the workforce. "To truly protect staff in the field, common training topics and best practice standards for child welfare staff must consistently be reviewed, updated and used as a reminder in relation to work safety".[1] Training must include techniques to de-escalate crisis situations.

- Third, the agency must set up a management system to know whether all staff are following protocols and take appropriate actions when they are not. All employees must adhere to safety measures and practices, use agency policies and procedures to express experiences and perceptions in timely ways, and participate in ongoing workforce development so that they remain professional under stressful circumstances. Agencies can provide training and create protocols, but managers must also assure that the protocols are followed.

- Fourth, an agency safety management system must include a method to identify and correct unsafe circumstances before incidents occur and learn from incidents that have occurred to avoid reoccurrence. Effective agencies might set up a worker support advisory board and maintain local threat assessment teams at each local site to assess the safety needs of staff, paying close attention to what staff has to say.

The United States Office of Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has published *Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care & Social Service Workers* that can be accessed at http://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3148/osha3148.html.

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[1] Rubin, Jon. (June 2008). Words From the Field. *Policy and Practice.* p. 20. Washington, DC: American Public Human Services Association.

- The workspace itself—including physical structures, equipment and facilities—visually demonstrates the values and principles of the agency. Several considerations related to the workspace which the agency must address to maximize staff productivity and enhance the effectiveness of services are:

  - Physical space and use of agency equipment should be adapted for evolving practice modalities.

  Example: Appropriate space may be needed to conduct Family Group Conferencing

  - Ergonomics should be part of the agency's comprehensive occupational safety and health programs. Laws and industry standards designed to eliminate injuries and illness in the workplace must be reviewed and adhered to. This includes those related to private space for staff, physical design of common and individual workspaces, and furniture and equipment placement for work site health and safety (U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health). Federal and state laws, regulations and standards must be applied to workers on and off site, whether in the field, placed in other agencies or working from home or in other remote locations.

- Flexible work arrangements that respect the full range of staff needs (e.g., child care, general health, commuting challenge, and daily living activities) can have an effect on the development and productivity of staff, reduce work place injury and reduce the use of sick leave.

  Example: Flexible schedules that allow workers to telecommute on days when their presence in the office is not essential can improve efficiency and increase productivity in the following ways: (1) Time and energy can be focused on completing tasks rather than being lost in frustrating travel. (2) Trust between the worker and supervisor is conveyed and enhanced. (3) Workers may be able to attend to personal needs on a lunch hour rather than taking a day off (e.g., attending a child's school conference, keeping a medical appointment, letting a repair man in the house).

- Interpersonal relationships must be given serious attention. The way people feel about their workplace sets the stage for attracting and retaining talent, eliminating waste of time and motivating teams. It is a powerful determinant of employee productivity. A workplace environment where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, which is inclusive and fair and without conflict enables employees to focus on outcomes for children youth and families. On a day-to-day basis, positive and supportive encouragement should be provided for each and every employee.

  Agencies must deal with the way staff is treated and the way staff perceives they are treated. This includes interpersonal relationships between peers as well as the conduct of management and supervisors with supervisees. Creating harmony in the workplace requires being sensitive to insensitive remarks that lead to an unpleasant atmosphere. Every situation and its potential solution differ. Creating a solution may depend on the temperament of the workers, the cause of the problem and the agency's policies governing the conduct. Legal rights may play a role as well.

  Federal and state labor employment laws require agencies to have and to abide by policies and procedures that control certain work place conditions. Within the hostile workplace criterion, the legal parameters that regulate harassment usually come to mind first. But the need to regulate workplace behavior and create an affable culture in which staff can work goes beyond the legal parameters. Any employee has the right to protest unwelcome treatment in the workplace, regardless of its scope or severity.