

Strategic Case Study: Workforce Recovery & Resilience

Children's Wisconsin Child Welfare | Evaluated by the Institute for Child and Family Well-being

The Challenge: The Staffing Cliff

In early 2021, Children's Wisconsin Child Welfare (CWCW) encountered an unprecedented workforce crisis. Annualized staff turnover peaked at an unsustainable 41%, driving vacancy rates to 19% and leaving over half of the remaining active case managers carrying workloads significantly exceeding contractually defined safety thresholds.

The Implementation: Urgent Leadership Action

To stabilize frontline operations and safely protect continuity of care for Wisconsin's families, CWCW leadership deployed a series of targeted tactical strategies. Rather than relying on a single mechanism, leadership intervened simultaneously across three focal areas:

- **Workload Redesign:** Hired specialized Case Aides and mobilized 'Helping Hands' organizational volunteers to offload extensive administrative burdens from frontline caseworkers.
- **Hybrid Flexibility:** Formalized a trust-based 'Office-by-Need' work model, shifting professional autonomy and scheduling geography back to the staff.
- **Compensation Adjustments:** Executed a 19% market floor baseline salary adjustment and instituted immediate 'Surge Pay' mechanisms for hours worked above standard FTE limits.

The Evaluation: Understanding What Worked

Following the successful stabilization of the workforce, the Institute for Child and Family Well-being (ICFW) partnered with CWCW to conduct a rigorous, reflective evaluation to determine which strategies were most effective and why.

The evaluation method synthesized three distinct data strands: quantitative workforce metrics, retrospective strategy mapping of leadership intervention timing, and the qualitative lived experiences of frontline staff captured through 'Stay Interviews' and Most Significant Change (MSC) discovery tools. This evaluation successfully validated that while compensation was important, the relational elements such as supportive supervision and flexible autonomy served as the long-term fuel that sustained the workforce.

The Five Codified Pillars of Stability

The findings from this reflective evaluation codified the successful turnaround into Five Interdependent Pillars of Stability, establishing a clear conceptual blueprint for long-term organizational health:

- 1. Supportive & Responsive Leadership:** Operationalizing 'responsive visibility' and proactive advocacy that prioritizes worker personhood over simple task production.
- 2. Hybrid Autonomy & Work-Life Flexibility:** Transitioning to trust-based scheduling architectures that grant staff authentic control over professional geography.
- 3. Workload Management & Caseload Equilibrium:** Enforcing strict, non-negotiable adherence to safety thresholds (~15-child limit) to protect the clinical depth of the work.
- 4. Relational Culture & Holistic Well-being:** Embedding peer-to-peer validation networks, intentional psychological safety, and direct, visible recognition touchpoints into daily workflows.
- 5. Competitive Compensation & Value Recognition:** Sustaining structural adjustments to anchor employee value and establish a stable economic baseline.

Validated Outcomes

By implementing a cross section of organizational strategies, the Child Welfare program shifted from crisis to workforce recovery.

"I had a caseload of 23 and now it's 15, so it's a lot easier to manage." - Case Manager

41% to 13% Turnover Reduction	100% Caseload Compliance	At Our Best Culture Operationalized
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Consultation & Technical Assistance Offering

While these five pillars identify the macro-conditions required for long-term workforce retention, the sustainable path to system replication depends entirely on execution: internal sequencing, leadership, behavioral scripts, custom workload redesign policies, and operational trust frameworks. The Institute for Child and Family Well-being (ICFW), provides specialized diagnostic assessments, data mapping services, and customized technical assistance to help external jurisdictions successfully tackle system level challenges and sustainable change.

For technical assistance inquiries or consulting engagement details: <https://uwm.edu/icfw/contact/>