

Investing in Technology to Break the Burnout Cycle in Child Welfare



By Andrea Tipping, Business Development Manager, Northwoods

Turnover is a chronic problem in children and family services. Complex caseloads and a high-stress environment, coupled with inefficient systems and time-consuming paperwork requirements, often cause workers to burnout and leave, which creates negative ripple effects across an agency.

While not all contributing factors can be controlled, one way to combat the problem is to provide technology that lessens administrative burden. That's why Jefferson County Department of Social Services (DSS) has invested in technology to give caseworkers more time to do high-value work with children and families.

Jefferson County's Paperwork Problems

Social Services Commissioner Teresa Gaffney says between 20 and 25% of child welfare caseworkers at Jefferson County DSS turnover each year. Overwhelming paperwork is a large factor.

"Our caseworkers are stretched so thin," Gaffney said. "They know the real work is done through one-on-one interaction with families, but they're here in the office trying to get paperwork done instead. They get frustrated that these requirements take them away from what they want to do."

Besides limiting valuable time with families, the demands of paperwork make it difficult for caseworkers to do their jobs without putting in extra time, which makes it hard for the agency to retain staff.

Despite trying to set expectations during the interview process, new staff don't realize how much work is required outside of normal hours until they start, which causes them to quickly leave. "You can't do this job without putting in extra time, but that's hard to see until you have to do it," Gaffney said. "We end up spending a lot of time training staff, and then losing staff, and then we have to start all over."

On top of everything, increasing child protection investigations and an unexpected spike in foster care placements earlier this year have increased demand for services in Jefferson County, which is compounding the agency's problems.

Shifting Time from Paperwork to People

To mitigate these issues, Jefferson County DSS will use technology designed for efficiency, engagement, and daily work. This means more time to spend with children and families, which will lessen stressful administrative burdens that contribute to turnover.

The technology will help in three key areas:

- Accessing forms in the field. Workers will have immediate access to any form or information they need at any point in time, so they can fully focus on engaging clients. "You never know until you get out there and start talking to the families what the issues may really be," Gaffney said. "Other things may come to light and you realize you don't have the right paperwork, so it's wasted time having to come back to the office, get what you need, and go back out."
- Uncovering dark data. Turnover creates significant information gaps, as critical information and case history gets buried as the case file moves between workers. An emerging technology called case discovery will help them draw out previously hidden information to make better decisions. "The chances they may miss something, or not see everything they need to see, is there. Having that real snapshot of what the issues might be in the case will be a real benefit," Gaffney said.
- Reducing duplicative work. Workers throughout New York are required to use CONNECTIONS to record and submit data to the Office of Children and Family Services. Technology that integrates with CONNECTIONS can reduce the need for workers to enter the same data multiple times, further freeing up their time to focus on families.

Gaffney knows the work of child welfare becomes increasingly difficult as cases increase in complexity. Without the right tools in place, turnover will remain a problem.

"I hope to alleviate some of the stress of trying to keep up with paperwork with this solution," Gaffney said. "If it helps workers manage their cases better, if it allows them more time to spend with families, and if it decreases some of their stress doing their job, then it's worth it." 🏠