

New York State Workforce Retention Study Phase 3:
A Survey of 12 County Systems with Low Turnover Rates

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Overview: The Need to Understand Preventable Turnover

New York State's (NYS) public child welfare agencies depend fundamentally on the quality and stability of their workforces. While every staff member is important, caseworkers and supervisors comprise the top priority because they are the key determinants of the quality of services provided to clients. In turn, service quality is a key determinant of client outcomes.

In short, the retention of high quality caseworkers and supervisors is vital to agency performance, especially each agency's ability to meet the performance expectations of the Adoption and Safe Families Act. This is one of the reasons why the NYS program improvement plan prioritizes workforce development and stabilization, including the development of supportive conditions for effective child welfare practice.

Unfortunately, some NYS agencies are experiencing unusually high levels of turnover. Some of this turnover is caused by retirement and family relocation. This kind of turnover usually is predictable, understandable, and manageable. In most cases, nothing can be done to prevent it. In fact, the ability to hire replacements may benefit the agency.

In contrast, some turnover is undesirable because it destabilizes the agency and interferes with effective service delivery. This undesirable turnover is evident when significant number of caseworkers and supervisors leave each year. While this problem includes veteran caseworkers and supervisors, it is especially problematic when new caseworkers leave after the state and the agency has invested training resources in their development.

This undesirable, preventable turnover is the focus for our research. The immediate aim for this research is to reduce and prevent this kind of turnover. The other aim is to provide knowledge that agency staff can use to improve the quality and stability of their workforces and agency performance.

Background: The First Two Phases of the Retention Study

In April 2001, Commissioners representing agencies with turnover exceeding 25% met to discuss the related challenges and to explore solutions. These Commissioners identified the need for more knowledge and understanding. They recommended a survey of caseworkers and front line supervisors in order to find out why they leave and what it will take to encourage more to stay.

With the support and participation of the NYS Office of Child and Family Services' Bureau of Training, a team of researchers representing the Social Work Education Consortium agreed to conduct this survey. The team quickly adopted a participatory research design. This kind of design makes commissioners and OCFS leaders full partners in the research design.

For example, after the team completed the phase 1 survey and shared the findings, commissioners wanted more information. At their request and with their full participation, the

team completed phase 2 interviews with caseworkers and supervisors at each agency. Both phases are described next.

Phase 1: The Survey of High Turnover Counties. 13 counties identified as experiencing consistently high turnover (HTCs) were surveyed during 2001-2002. According to OCFS data these counties experienced turnover of at least 25% in 2000.

The research team developed the survey in close consultation with Commissioners and OCFS leaders. Its several items derived from other surveys (Dickinson & Perry, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell, 2003), literature from other fields on workforce retention and turnover, and the suggestions of local district leaders.

As the data were analyzed, eight factors emerged as key pieces in the workforce retention puzzle. Six may be categorized as organizational factors; the other two may be categorized as supervisory factors.

The six organizational factors are:

- Clarity and coherence of practice,
- Life-work fit and goal attainment,
- Job satisfaction and efficacy,
- Job supports and relationships,
- Technology and record-keeping,
- Salaries and benefits.

The two supervisory factors are:

- Supervisor support
- Supervisor competence.

In the fall of 2002, the team submitted individualized reports to each of the high turnover county agencies. These reports highlighted unique factors in each agency as well as similarities and commonalities among agencies.

The commissioners, after gaining new knowledge and understanding generated by the survey, wanted more "actionable knowledge." That is, they wanted to know what they might do differently and better to encourage desirable retention and prevent undesirable turnover.

Phase 2: Interviews with Individuals in Each Agency. The research team then conducted interviews with caseworkers and supervisors in the high turnover county agencies (henceforth referenced as HTCs). These brief interviews were designed to yield in-depth knowledge about workers' responses to the survey. For example, workers identified "organizational and administrative issues" as reasons to leave. The Commissioners wanted more detailed knowledge about these issues and, more importantly, what workers' recommended that they do differently and better to improve retention.

As with the Phase 1 survey research, each agency received an individualized report. These reports provided commissioners with knowledge about the unique, similar, and shared perspectives of the workers who participated.

Site Visits to Share Research Findings. Beginning in 2003 and continuing through 2004, the research team is visiting each high turnover agency that requested an agency wide meeting. Team members provide caseworkers, supervisors, and other agency staff with a overview of the research findings from the survey and the interviews; request confirmation of these findings; seek additional information that may have been overlooked or distorted; and elicit recommendations that will improve retention.

Phase 3: The Low Turnover County Survey

The first two phases of the study, together with the site visits to share the findings, provided much-needed knowledge and understanding about preventable, undesirable turnover as well as strategies needed to improve retention, workforce development, and performance. Even so, several important questions remained.

With some of these questions in mind, commissioners from the high turnover counties asked that the research team survey workers and supervisors in low turnover counties. They were especially interested in special organizational and supervisory factors and strategies that they could adopt to improve retention.

In partnership with OCFS, the team selected 12 counties with turnover rates of 17% or less in 2001. Obviously, your county is one of them. As with the high turnover counties, each county is receiving an individualized report, which profiles relevant workforce characteristics.

Unfortunately, these reports, individually and collectively, do not yield all of the knowledge and understanding needed to solve the turnover problem. One reason is that each county is somewhat unique. Because each is unique, what's needed and what works in one may not work in the others.

In short, as with the first two phases of the research, this third phase raises new issues related to workforce development and performance improvement. It also provides new knowledge and understanding that may assist staff as they engage in planning aimed at preventing undesirable turnover and improving performance.

The Organization of the Remainder of this Report

Your report is divided into three sections. It begins with an overview of all of the 12 low turnover counties (LTCs). This overview includes relevant contrasts between LTCs and HTC. Then your agency is described. Finally, statistical data for your county are provided.

Overview: A Profile of Low Turnover Counties

519 supervisors and caseworkers representing 12 LTCs were eligible to participate in the survey. 372, or 71.7 %, of these workers actually completed the survey. (This response rate compares favorably to the response rate of 74.5% in the HTC survey.)

Mirroring the HTC findings, these LTC reports indicate that, while the 12 counties exhibit some commonalities and similarities, each county is a unique entity. Indicators of uniqueness, commonality, and similarity are emphasized in the summary profile for your county. The team encourages you to look for them in your county's data profiles.

Demographic Information

1. LTC Service Longevity (see page 6-Bottom of the Statistical report)

- ❖ LTC respondents reported working an average of 11.1 years in child welfare,
- ❖ 10.6 years in their current agency and 5.3 years in their current job
- ❖ Supervisors reported working approximately 17 years in child welfare, 17.5 years in the current agency and 6.4 years in their current jobs.
- ❖ Workers reported working approximately 9.5 years in child welfare, 8.8 years in the current agency and 5.1 years in their current jobs.

2. LTC Age Distribution (Workers & Supervisors Combined) (see page 5-Bottom of the Statistical report)

- ❖ 8.3% LTC respondents were between the ages of 22 and 29.
- ❖ 32.1% LTC respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39.
- ❖ 33.2 % LTC respondents were between the ages of 40 and 49.
- ❖ 24.9% LTC respondents were between the ages of 50 and 59.
- ❖ The average worker age is 41 years and 34.2% of workers fall between the ages of 40 and 49.
- ❖ The average age of supervisors is 47 years and 40.3% of supervisors fall between the ages of 50 and 59

3. LTC Salary Distribution (see page 13-Top of the Statistical report)

- ❖ 12.5% LTC respondents were paid between \$20,001 and \$25,000.
- ❖ 32.3% LTC respondents were paid between \$25,001 and \$30,000.
- ❖ 18.1% LTC respondents were paid between \$30,001 and \$35,000.
- ❖ 25.2% LTC respondents were paid between \$35,001 and \$45,000.
- ❖ 11.5% LTC respondents were paid over \$45,000.

- ❖ 1.1% LTC respondents were paid over \$50,000.
- ❖ Approximately 70% of workers made between \$25,000 and \$45, 000.
- ❖ Approximately 85% of supervisors made more than \$35,000.

General Information

1. Slightly more than half (54%) of the survey participants reported they had considered looking for a new job in the last year (see page 9 of the Statistical report of this County Report).
2. Survey participants who had not looked for another job in the past year were asked to identify three reasons why they stayed. In response to this open-ended question, participants cited a variety of reasons. In other words, participants did not agree on a single reason for staying. In fact, no more than 29% of those who answered this question identified the same reason. The most frequent reasons for staying were: Time put in (29% of the respondents); I like the work (29%); the pay (24%), both pay and benefits (22%). (See page 10 of the Statistical report).
3. Participants who said they had looked for another job in the past year were asked to identify three changes that would make it possible for them to stay. In response to this open-ended question, participants cited a variety of recommended changes. In other words, participants representing the LTCs did not demonstrate much agreement on the improvements needed for them to stay. The most frequent responses were changes in 'Respect' (35.9%) and changes in 'Salary' (35.9%) (See page 11-Top of the Statistical report).
4. Participants who said they had looked for another job in the past year were asked to identify three reasons why they were thinking of leaving. In response to this open-ended question, participants cited a variety of reasons. In other words, participants representing the LTCs did not demonstrate much agreement on reasons why they were thinking of leaving. The most frequent response cited was burnout (43.7%) as a reason to leave; other reasons are more individualized and variable (see page 12-Top of the Statistical report).
5. Consistent with the idea of "a low turnover county," in five of the counties fewer than 50% of the participants reported that they had looked for another job in the past year.
6. Because salary issues were important in the HTC's, salary needs were important in this study of LTCs. 42.7% of LTC respondents reported being satisfied with their salary. The Demographic Section (# 3 above) describes the LTC salary range breakdown. (See page 13-Top of the Statistical report).
7. LTC caseworkers participating in this study report the following information for average caseloads. The county data is contrasted with the Child Welfare League of America's recommended caseload standards. The LTC's caseload data mirrors the Child Welfare League recommendations.

	LTC Caseworker Caseloads	CWLA Caseload Standards
Investigations	10.6	10 active on-going cases 4 active investigations.
Families	15	15 in Family Preservation
Children	25.1	Varies depending on unit
Adoptive Parents	9.2	12-15 depending on child needs
Foster Families	6.8	12-15 children

8. Participants were asked to report the amount of time they spent each week on tasks associated with child welfare practice. The majority of the week is spent doing either paperwork or direct practice. In the LTC's respondents reported spending, on average, 38.1% of their week on paperwork; and, 30.2% on direct practice (see page 17-Top of the Statistical report).
9. Participants were asked whether they would take this job again, knowing what they now know about the job. Most (75%) of the LTC respondents reported that they would make the same career choice. This finding corresponds to a key finding in HTCs where 72% reported that they would take the same job again (see page 18-Top of the Statistical report). Other important comparisons follow.

Relevant Contrasts between LTCs and HTCS

Comparisons of LTCs and HTCs are important to both kinds of systems. Leaders in systems representing both categories can use this knowledge to maintain effective operations, learn and improve. In fact, this knowledge enables focused planning within agencies and strategic exchanges among agencies to share innovations, effective strategies, and achievements; and to brainstorm better approaches for meeting shared needs and challenges.

The following comparisons offer some guidance as to areas for further inquiry. They also highlight some of the relevant differences between LTCs and the HTCs.

- *Years in the Current Position.* Persistent turnover destabilizes HTCs. One indication is how long supervisors and workers stay in the same job. Note the difference in the number of years both workers and supervisors have spent in their current position (see the table below) between LTCs and HTCs.

Years in this Job

	LTCs		HTCs	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Supervisors	6.4	4.8	4.2	2.2
Caseworkers	5.1	3.4	3.2	2.0

- *Age of the Respondents.* In HTCs, 25% of *all the respondents* (supervisors and workers) are under 30 years of age; and 30% of the caseworkers who responded are under 30. In the LTCs just 8% of *all the respondents* are under 30 years of age; and, 67% of the caseworkers who responded are between 30 and 50 years of age. In brief, LTCs, in comparison to HTCs, have an older staff with more years in the same job.
- *Satisfaction with Salary and Benefits.* In contrast to HTC respondents, a higher percentage of respondents from LTCs were satisfied with their salary and benefits. The table below illustrates the difference in the percentages.

Questions about salary and benefits

LTC	Yes	No	HTC	Yes	No
<i>Satisfaction with Salary</i>	42.7%	57.3%	<i>Satisfaction with Salary</i>	22.2%	77.8%
<i>Satisfaction with Benefits</i>	60.7%	40%	<i>Satisfaction with Benefits</i>	45.1%	54.9%

- *Salary Distribution.* Here, the team approached the data analysis with an eye toward the size and location of the agency. For example, the team looked at small, usually rural, LTCs versus their HTC counterparts. In the small LTCs, 59% of the workers earn between \$25,000 and \$35,000; 40% earn between \$35,000 and \$50,000. In the HTCs, 25% of the respondents earn less than \$25,000; 71% earn between \$25,000 and \$35,000. In brief, there's a salary differential. This difference may be related to age and time in the agency; both age and time in the agency are higher in LTCs. This salary differential also be related to a higher starting salary for caseworkers in the LTCs.

(The results of a salary study carried out by OCFS in 2001 is summarized in the table that appears below. It shows beginning and average casework salaries for participating LTCs and HTCs.)

SALARY DISTRIBUTION FOR HTC and LTC COUNTIES IN THIS STUDY

Small/Medium LTC	Beginning Caseworker Salary	Average Caseworker Salary	Small/Medium HTC	Beginning Caseworker Salary	Average Caseworkers Salary
County 1	\$28,865	\$32,650	County 14	\$27,100	\$27,250
County 2	\$30,904	\$32,517	County 15	\$28,441	\$28,816
County 4	\$33,793	\$38,818	County 16	\$27,912	\$29,413
County 5	\$25,370	\$30,030	County 17	\$28,405	\$30,946
County 6	\$31,359	\$37,114	County 18	\$25,625	\$31,000
County 8	\$32,641	\$35,179	County 19	\$29,972	\$31,682
County 9	\$27,254	\$31,197	County 20	\$25,358	\$25,985
County 10	\$30,518	\$36,175	County 21	\$23,446	\$26,528
County 12	\$26,402	\$30,282	County 23	\$30,105	\$33,320
			County 25	\$27,714	\$29,586
Average	\$29,678	\$33,774	Average	\$27,408	\$29,453

Large SMTA LTC	Beginning Caseworker Salary	Average Caseworker Salary	Large SMTA HTC	Beginning Caseworker Salary	Average Caseworker Salary
County 3	\$32,150	\$38,293	County 13	\$28,682	\$35,691
County 7	\$34,572	\$40,612	County 22	\$33,940	\$38,759
County 11	\$38,805	\$48,000	County 24	\$33,008	\$46,954
Average	\$35,176	\$42,302	Average	\$31,877	\$40,468

➤ *Attraction to a Career in Child Welfare.* The survey contained four questions related to attraction to child welfare work. As the follow table indicates, the responses from participants in LTCs and HTCs are comparable.

<i>Attraction to Child Welfare</i>	<i>LTC YES</i>	<i>HTC YES</i>
Casework as first choice	21%	19%
First full time job	21%	25%
Step up from last job	78%	72%
Make the same Decision again	75%	72%

➤ *Workers Who Have Considered Leaving.* This is an important item because previous research indicates that intent to leave predicts actual turnover. In other words, workers who have started to search likely will turnover. In this context, the difference between LTCs and HTCs is noteworthy. 54% of LTC respondents reported looking for another job in the past year. This contrasts with the 72% of workers in HTCs who had looked elsewhere.

- *Reasons to Leave and Changes Encouraging Retention.* HTC respondents had very similar reasons for leaving and changes that would be necessary in order for them to stay. 65% of these respondents identified improvements in pay and benefits as an incentive to stay; and, 59% identified pay and benefits as a reason to leave. In contrast, LTC respondents did not agree on a single improvement that would encourage them to stay. While some 40% cited burnout as a reason to leave, the absence of consensus on reasons to leave and changes to stay is an important finding.
- *Time Devoted to Paperwork Versus Direct Service.* HTC respondents reported spending about the same amount of time on paperwork as the LTC respondents (40.6% vs. 38% respectively). There is a slight difference in the amount of time low turnover county respondents report spending on direct service; LTC respondents spend more time on direct service than HTC respondents (30.2% vs. 26% respectively). Otherwise, there are few important differences between LTCs and HTCs in the time spent in other activities (e.g., supervision, court, management, community action).
- *Familiar Concerns Raised in Some LTCs.* As with the HTCs, in some LTCs respondents identified needs, problems, and concerns that are related to turnover. For example, caseload size is a big issue in some of the LTCs. Burnout and administrative/ organizational needs are issues in other LTCs. In others, the fit between home life and work responsibilities is an area of conflict. In others, the clarity and coherence of practice is an area of concern. To repeat: These factors play out differently across the counties. One agency's strength may be another's weakness. These complementary characteristics suggest that it's timely to network and exchange effective strategies and achievements.

Points of Clarification

Mean Scores Versus Median Scores. Mean scores and median scores are provided in this Executive Summary, many County reports, and the data profiles for each County. Sometimes the mean score is more important than the median, while in other cases the median is the more important indicator. A brief reminder follows about each and their relationship.

The mean score is simply the average. The mean results by adding up all of all values and then dividing the total score by the number of values.

In comparison with the mean score, the median score reveals more information about the distribution of these values. The median is the mid point in the distribution of all of the values. Half the scores are higher than the median, and the other half is lower.

Missing Data. Some respondents did not respond to every question. So some items were tabulated with less than the total number of respondents. Further, for some items respondents could provide several ratings for one question. Thus, an item's responses may not total 100%.

HTC versus LTC. In the HTCs, at least 25% of the workers left in 2000. In the LTCs, 17% or less left in 2001.

Caseworkers versus Supervisors. One item on the survey asked respondents to identify themselves as a Supervisor or a “Worker.” A worker is anyone who did not identify his/her self as a supervisor.

The Limitations of Self-reported Perceptions. This presents participants' perceived realities, which may depart from actualities. For example, this report presents respondent's perceptions of their caseload sizes and the amount of time they spend performing tasks. It's possible that their actual caseload sizes and the amount of time they spend in different activities could be different. Another limitation: Participants may have responded in socially desirable ways, at the same time concealing their true feelings. For example, some respondents may be apprehensive about revealing their desires for a new job and other more objective measures could reveal a different picture. These limitations and others are simply unavoidable in this kind of research design.

Caseload Size

According to the Child Welfare League of America, the recommended caseload size for a family foster care worker is 12-15 children per social worker. The recommended average caseload for a CPS worker is 10 active on-going family cases and 4 active investigations.

Within the Adoption unit caseload recommendations are:

“20-25 families per 1 social worker counseling with birth families, preparing and assessing adoptive applicants for infant placements, and supporting these families following placement.

12-15 families per 1 social worker preparing and assessing adoptive applicants for the placement of children who are older or have special needs, and supporting these families following placement.

10-12 children per 1 social worker preparing children for adoption who are older or who have special needs.

30-35 families per 1 social worker assessing and preparing adoptive applicants for inter-country adoption” (Day, 2002).

Recommended caseload size for Family Preservation Workers is 15 families per social worker.

References

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