

## Introduction

Have you ever had to cancel a class because an instructor quit? Or lost a participant because a case manager left your organization? If so, you know staff turnover can greatly impact an organization's ability to provide effective services. This fact sheet addresses the effects of staff turnover on program participants by providing: 1) key strategies to improve staff retention; and 2) steps designed to ensure seamless transitions between outgoing and incoming staff members.

## Staff Retention

Staff turnover is one of the most challenging issues facing community-based organizations. About 20% of non-profit/public agency staff positions turn over each year ([Annie E. Casey Foundation \[AECF\], 2003](#); [Nonprofit HR Solutions, 2013](#)). Factors such as low wages, excessive caseloads, and financial uncertainties cause high employee turnover. Turnover costs include advertising the position, conducting interviews, lost productivity, and training new staff ([Opportunity Knocks, 2010](#)). This section provides research-based retention strategies that range in effort and cost. Implementing even just a few of these ideas could improve the turnover rate and operational efficiency ([Opportunity Knocks, 2010](#)).

## Employee Engagement

Employees have personal motivators for their choice of employment (Armstrong, Blufisher, Lopez-Newman, Paul, & Paul, 2009; Fukofuka, 2014). Staff members want to see value in the work they do. Retained employees tend to be committed to the mission of an organization (Armstrong et al., 2009; Fukofula, 2014, [Opportunity Knocks, n.d.](#)). Thus, it is important to communicate and reinforce your mission with your team. Making this connection can

be particularly helpful for staff who do not directly engage with participants and see the benefits of the program firsthand.

### Connecting to the Mission

Revisit your mission and culture with your staff during:

- ✓ Staff meetings
- ✓ Individual staff assessments that track performance outcomes back to the mission
- ✓ Quarterly reviews of program performance
- ✓ Yearly staff retreats

## Professional Support

Organizational leadership and administration are strong drivers of staff retention ([AECF, 2003](#); [Wold, 2010](#)). Strategies to create an enriching environment for your team members include:

- *Supportive Leadership*: The quality of the relationship between supervisor and employee is a strong workplace determinant of staff retention (Armstrong et al., 2009). A quality supervisory relationship starts with trust and mutual respect. To accomplish this, supervisors can individualize how they engage and communicate with their team members, champion their professional development, and model behavior representative of your organization's culture ([McKenzie, Jackson, & McKenzie, 2007](#)).
- *Staff Recognition*: Staff are more likely to stay when they feel their contributions are recognized and appreciated ([Wold, 2010](#));

[Opportunity Knocks, n.d.](#)). Such recognition can take many forms beyond pay raises or promotions. Low cost options for staff recognition include distributing employee of the month awards, spotlighting good work in your organization's newsletter or during staff meetings, providing small spot bonuses such as a gift card, scheduling small staff appreciation parties, or awarding accomplishment certificates. Be sure staff understand the criteria for staff recognition participation and awards so acknowledgements build loyalty to your organization rather than distrust and jealousy among the staff.

- *Professional Development:* Staff needs to feel like they are developing new skills and competencies in their jobs (Armstrong et al., 2009; [Opportunity Knocks, n.d.](#)). Training opportunities are often costly. If such trainings are beyond your organizational budget, look for other ways to provide growth opportunities. Additionally, your local community college may have affordable professional development training opportunities on leadership, software, or technology.

## Managing Employee Burnout

Community-based, human service work is stressful. These stressful conditions can lead to burnout or disengagement if not handled properly ([Opportunity Knocks, n.d.](#)). You can help reduce stress and the risk of burnout by assessing staff workloads, identifying unnecessary burdens on staff, and instituting a culture of work-life balance. For example, encourage supervisors to check timesheets to identify employees working excessive hours, and ask staff to speak up when they are feeling overwhelmed. Human service staff feel particularly burdened by the increase in accountability-focused data collection, analysis, and reporting (Armstrong et al., 2009). Review your data procedures to streamline processes and reduce redundancies, staff time, or staff effort.

## Compensation & Benefits

Salary dissatisfaction drives turnover (Armstrong et al., 2009). While non-profit human service employment makes very few people financially

wealthy, it is important to ensure that your organization's wages and salaries are comparable to similar local employment options. You can gather information about compensation information through online salary searches or conversations with managers at other organizations to ensure people do not leave simply in search of a slightly better compensation package.

While large increases in salary or wages may be outside of your budget, you can reduce turnover rates by providing important, non-financial benefits (Armstrong et al., 2009; [Opportunity Knocks, n.d.](#)). Examples of non-financial benefits include flexible work schedules, telecommuting, a relaxed dress code policy, or close early on some Fridays.

### Avoiding Burnout

Encourage work/life balance with these tips:

- ✓ Discourage late night email traffic
- ✓ Offer coffee breaks and other downtime opportunities
- ✓ Ensure staff takes their vacation time

## Preparing for Staffing Transitions

Even with the best staff retention strategies, transitions are inevitable. The silver lining of this inevitability is predictability; organizations will eventually face staffing changes. In turn, you can prepare and position yourself for a relatively smooth transition. Preparing for staff turnover involves both time commitment and financial resources. The strategies below can be tailored to fit a range of budgets. Additionally, the upfront investments in these strategies will likely pay for themselves in terms of increased organizational capacity to consistently deliver services during times of staff turnover ([AECF, 2008](#)).

## Staff Turnover Preparation Strategies

### Preserve Relationships and Human Capital

While succession planning often focuses on high-level staff and leadership, tactics for thoughtful preparation for staff departure are relevant to any staffing level. Each level of personnel carries information key to an organization's day-to-day operations ([AECF, 2008](#); [SkillWorks, 2012](#); Hume & Hume, 2008).

- **Strategic Planning:** Develop a strategic plan that outlines your organization's goals and objectives, as well as individuals in leadership positions. The plan should encompass the next two to three years and outline emergency coverage for the leadership team. The strategic planning process can help highlight gaps in staff training or contingency planning, and should include a timeline and process for filling those gaps ([AECF, 2008](#)).
- **Take a team approach:** When possible, have more than one staff member work on a project aspect to mitigate the effects of turnover. Have a leader and one or more support staff per task to ensure that no one person holds all the knowledge on that task. For example, you may use a team of two staff to handle outreach and marketing on a day-to-day basis, rather than one outreach specialist. The team shares knowledge between themselves, as well as with the larger organization ([SkillWorks, 2012](#)).
- **Relationship sharing:** Staff members should be encouraged to take a team approach with individual participants. From the beginning, staff can explain how the broader organization supports the participant and introduce them to several additional staff members. The participant can then build a relationship with the organization, rather than a single staff member. For instance, the intake process can be shared by two staff and include a tour of the organization. Additionally, if your budget allows, have a backup facilitator sit in during some program sessions. Participants then develop a relationship with this extra facilitator who is

able to fill in at a moment's notice ([SkillWorks, 2012](#)).

- **Exit Interviews:** Before a staff member departs the organization, conduct an exit interview. These interviews can provide both information about how the employee completed their tasks, but also suggested improvements to work flow. The staff member's input can also be used to make positive changes in organization culture ([SkillWorks, 2012](#)).

#### Prepare to Pass the Torch

- ✓ Update your Operations Manual
- ✓ Write in-depth job descriptions for each staff position
- ✓ Document program staff duties
- ✓ Identify back up staff members
- ✓ Maintain a robust (and backed up) data system

([AECF, 2008](#); Hume & Hume, 2008; [SkillWorks, 2012](#))

### Preserve Systems and Data

It is imperative for organizations to develop systems and processes that keep their work efficient and deliver the best services to their participants. However, if these systems are not documented, they could be lost if a staff member leaves the team. Knowledge management collects not only data, but also information about how an organization functions, including documenting curricula adaptations, outreach locations, contact information for referral partner staff, and domestic violence protocols. Knowledge management frameworks are not "one size fits all," but you can implement some general strategies to protect your essential processes (Hume & Hume, 2008).

- **Document processes:** Keep written records of all essential processes. Methods for intake, referrals, financial records, incentives, and outreach (for example) should be documented by each task's team. You can then share the documents across departments during staff meetings, allowing

all staff to be familiar with the organization's (Hume & Hume, 2008)

- *Collect and disperse knowledge:* Written documentation can be used in conjunction with cross-training staff in key functions and methods of the organization (e.g., case management forms, class schedules or facilitation styles). Recorded trainings, process documents, job descriptions and mission statements can disperse knowledge throughout the organization and can ensure quick and effective onboarding of new staff (Hume & Hume, 2008).
- *Leverage technology:* Shared drives, intranet system, or email archives keep files accessible after a staff member departs. For instance, case management notes, participant demographics, and surveys should be accessible to the team, and not localized with one staff member. Research options to find free or low-cost cloud-based storage or existing database templates. Technology needs are unique to each organization, so work with IT professionals or the HMRF technical assistance team to find solutions for storing essential data and files (Hume & Hume, 2008).

## Conclusion

Taking steps to reduce rates and impacts of staff turnover will allow you to remain successful at providing needed family strengthening services. Staff retention has impacts beyond your organization; its effects are also felt in your community and by your participants.

## References and Acknowledgements

- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2003). *The unsolved challenge of system reform: The condition of the frontline*. Human Services Workforce. Baltimore, MD. <http://www.aecf.org/resources/the-unsolved-challenge-of-system-reform/>
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2008). *Building leaderful organizations: Succession planning for nonprofits*. Baltimore, MD. <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-BuildingLeaderfulOrganizations-2008-Full.pdf>
- Armstrong, L., Blufisher, J., Lopez-Newman, L., Paul, D.R., & Paul, K.R. (2009). Non-profit crisis: How to retain

employees in the non profit sector. UNLV Theses/Dissertations/Professional Papers/Capstones. Paper 810.

- Fukufuka, S. (2014). Factors that predict employee retention in profit and not-for-profit organizations. *Global Journal of Human Resource Management*, 1-8.
- Hume, C., & Hume, M. (2008). The strategic role of knowledge management in nonprofit organisations. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*. 13: 129–140. doi: 10.1002/nvsm.316
- McKenzie, J., Jackson, R., & McKenzie, J. (2007). Staff Retention in Child and Family Services: The Practice of Retention Focused Supervision. <http://www.socialwork.msu.edu/outreach/docs/Workbook%20Retention%20Focused%20Supervision%206-07-07.pdf>
- Nonprofit HR Solutions. (2013). Nonprofit Employment Trends Survey. <http://www.nonprofithr.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/2013-Employment-Trends-Survey-Report.pdf>
- Opportunity Knocks. (2010). Opportunity knocks nonprofit retention and vacancy report. [http://commongoodcareers.org/assets/pdf/Retention\\_Vacancy\\_Report.pdf](http://commongoodcareers.org/assets/pdf/Retention_Vacancy_Report.pdf)
- Opportunity Knocks. (n.d.). Engaging the nonprofit workforce: Mission, management and emotion. [http://www.gcn.org/sites/default/files/ctools/OK\\_Engaging\\_the\\_Nonprofit\\_Workforce\\_Report.pdf](http://www.gcn.org/sites/default/files/ctools/OK_Engaging_the_Nonprofit_Workforce_Report.pdf)
- SkillWorks. (2012). *Succession planning for workforce partnerships: A toolkit for practitioners*. Boston, MA. [http://skill-works.org/documents/SW\\_Succession\\_Toolkit\\_Web.pdf](http://skill-works.org/documents/SW_Succession_Toolkit_Web.pdf)
- Wold, K. (2010). *Adult Protective Services Specialists in Texas: Perceptions of Three Factors Affecting Turnover*. Applied Research Projects, Texas State University-San Marcos. <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/3654>

A special thank you to Chantel Devaughn, President of STRAT-TRACK consulting, for her careful review of this document.

---

*This document was developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families ([www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov)), Office of Family Assistance under a contract with ICF International, Contract No. HHSP23320095636WC Task Order No. HHSP23337032T*

---