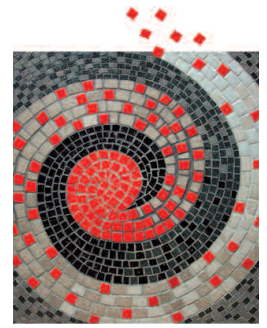


Capturing Promising Practices in
Recruitment and Retention
of Frontline Youth Workers

A Project of the National Collaboration for Youth

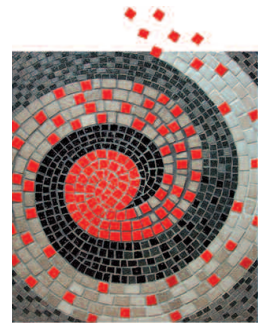
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Cornerstones for Kids

Introduction



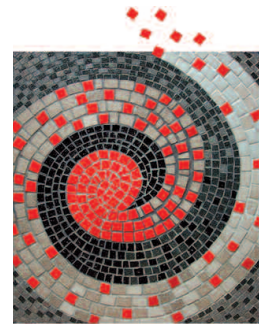
The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. HSWI's premise is that human services matter. Delivered well, they can, and do, positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, often at critical points in their lives.

We believe that the quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload, and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover; in others an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork render otherwise capable staff ineffective; and keeping morale up is difficult in the human services fields. It is remarkable that so many human services professionals stick to it, year after year.

HSWI's mission is to work with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a series of publications and other communications efforts we hope to

- Call greater attention to workforce issues
- Help to describe and define the status of the human services workforce



- Disseminate data on current conditions
- Highlight best and promising practices
- Suggest systemic and policy actions that can make a deep, long-term difference

In this paper the National Collaboration for Youth reports on the findings of its investigation into best practices in the recruitment and retention of youth workers. Based on surveys, interviews, and a symposium with representatives of NCY member organizations and on the input of an advisory group of experts, the report describes a variety of practical and effective strategies currently in use by a number of local organizations that serve youth. While this is not a comprehensive listing, it provides useful recommendations for any local organization attempting to respond to the challenges of effectively recruiting and retaining qualified and competent youth workers.

Additional information on the human services workforce, and on HSWI, is available at www.cornerstones4kids.org.

Cornerstones For Kids
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- Those who completed the survey, graciously participated in the interviews, and made themselves available to attend the symposium. The programs they represent were chosen because of their forward-thinking efforts in advancing the youth work profession (Appendix B).
- The Advisory Group who, in spite of their busy schedules, provided guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the final development of this publication (Appendix C).



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Pam Garza

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Introduction



A nation that truly wants no child left behind must make sure that workers who care for children, youth, and families have the motivation, resources, and support to succeed.¹

The staff who work directly with youth in community-based organizations represent an essential component in creating program environments that facilitate positive development. A common challenge faced by youth service organizations, however, is how to attract and retain qualified individuals. The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) emphasizes the critical link between youth outcomes and positive relationships between young people and skilled staff.² A continual influx of inexperienced and inadequately trained workers threatens the development of such relationships as well as the implementation of effective youth programs, thus presenting significant challenges to achieving positive youth outcomes.³

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's March 2003 report, *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*, documented many conditions that are at odds with developing and retaining a healthy, productive human services workforce: heavy workloads, long hours, and high vulnerability to burnout; high turnover among the most talented employees; significant minorities reporting that they do not have access to essential resources; low pay and few rewards for talent and achievement; and staff members' dissatisfaction with the low level of respect received for their work.⁴ Working with youth is rewarding; however, it is also emotionally and physically challenging. Without adequate

support, supervision, resources and training, staff turnover is likely to be high and to necessitate a continual rebuilding of a youth organization's direct service segment.⁵

Given the ongoing interest in providing high-quality programming for youth among those concerned about children and families, a better understanding of how to find, develop and retain skilled program staff becomes a high priority for youth-serving organizations. To address these issues, the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY) received funding from Cornerstones for Kids to research and disseminate promising recruitment and retention strategies being used by NCY member organizations. Interviews were conducted with 20 leaders in the youth service field at the local and national levels, most in community-based organizations. These local agencies employ roughly 16,000 frontline youth workers, at annual salaries ranging from \$14,500 to \$31,500, and provide program services to more than 200,000 youth. While the results of these interviews do not represent a comprehensive study of all youth service groups or even all NCY organizations, they do illustrate a wide range of effective strategies. In addition, an advisory group provided insight and perspective. (Appendix E, page 39, contains a complete description of the methodology.) *Capturing Promising Practices in Recruitment and Retention of Youth Workers* describes how select organizations have already put into effect practical and concrete activities for dealing with key issues relating to frontline youth workers and provides recommendations for other local organizations facing similar issues of recruitment and retention.



Identifying Promising Practices



In the literature on youth work and organizational psychology several themes emerge as factors essential to promoting worker success: (1) adequate compensation and opportunities for advancement; (2) opportunities for professional development and training; (3) a supportive environment that fosters success (this includes adequate supervision and a climate of collaboration); (4) clear role descriptions and competence to perform those roles; (5) a sense that staff members' work is valued; and (6) opportunities for networking.⁶ While each of these features individually plays a substantial role in how individuals perceive their work environments, it is difficult to separate them completely in practice. For example, individuals need to be adequately compensated and have a clear understanding of their role within the context of the organizational mission in order to be motivated to pursue professional development opportunities. In addition, staff need to have a sense that their work has meaning and that they are supported and valued by supervisors and co-workers. With these elements in place, youth service organizations will also be in a position to promote a more professional image of youth work.⁷

This publication presents numerous strategies focused on either recruitment or retention. It is important to note, however, that many of these approaches could affect both areas.



Strategies aimed at staff recruitment are presented first. We provide promising practices for offering incentives, using the Internet as a recruitment tool and recruiting youth workers from diverse populations. Staff retention strategies are presented next, and include promising practices that encompass compensation, career advancement, professional development, respecting and valuing workers, creating a supportive and inclusive environment, and establishing peer networks. We conclude with recommendations for both local and national organizations.

