

RETAINING STAFF



As with recruitment, retaining qualified staff is an ongoing challenge for youth organizations. Although many staff enjoy the work they do with youth, they end up moving on to new jobs because of low salaries, poor benefits, and limited opportunities to move up the career ladder. These typical staff retention challenges become more complex when an agency tries to hold on to staff members who have demonstrated an ability to work effectively with immigrant youth and their families.

When youth organizations undertake the process of redefining themselves to serve immigrant populations, staff continuity is critical for maintaining the momentum. Staff members who reach out and network in immigrant communities often nurture meaningful and trusting partnerships. If those individuals leave, trust can be weakened and relationships can be neglected. Yet when those staff members remain over time, they often amass important information about the organization's history and its commitment to immigrant or cultural outreach. They play a valuable role in linking current work with past experiences and lessons learned. Long-term staff members typically take on increased responsibilities and grow into leadership positions. This kind of staff continuity deepens the links between specific work with immigrant youth and the organization as a whole.

You get a staff member who's got the heart, which is what you need, the heart and the dedication to do it—because what wins over any immigrant community is finding a worker they trust, who is reliable. And then that staff person leaves. Every time you bring in another person, it requires a whole other trust-building process. So instead of being able to move on to other levels of your work, you're starting again at the trust level. –Director

Youth workers experienced with immigrant populations recommend the following strategies for retaining qualified staff.



Nurture Passion

I do this work for the kids. I want the program to be the best, because I want the kids to be the best. A lot of the young people don't understand English that well, so it's hard for them in school. They're just getting passed through because they don't make any trouble, but there are so many stories I can tell you from my work, so many great things they can do. I'm dedicating the rest of my life to them—they give me back so much. –Director

- **Connect staff to the organizational mission.** When staff members believe strongly in a program and its goals, they typically increase their commitment. Passion for the work is often the most important key in the retention of youth workers.
- **Support healthy caring relationships between youth and staff.** Many individuals enter the field of youth work because they care about young people and enjoy working with them. Deep attachment to participants, families, and communities can motivate staff to continue their career in youth work even when they are frustrated by organizational issues. At the same time, having a relationship with a caring adult outside the family is a protective factor in the life of any young person, and this is especially so for immigrant youth.

Provide Leadership Development

- **Identify and nurture individual staff strengths.** Talk with each staff member to find out his or her interests and goals within the field of youth development. Offer support in areas in which individuals want to grow or are perhaps experiencing some difficulty. Sometimes it is necessary to shift staff positions in order to best utilize each employee's skills and talents.
- **Create pathways for gaining increased responsibility.** For example, you might encourage and support staff members to design a new program or to participate in national dialogues or other initiatives relating to immigrant youth topics. Structures such as site-to-site mentorship programs or regional strategy-sharing groups provide opportunities for staff working with immigrant children and youth to share their expertise and to be recognized as leaders in their work. This kind of recognition can enhance staff members' professional self esteem and their community and national reputation.
- **Foster development.** Not all organizations are large enough or command sufficient resources to provide job mobility to their staff. Even in those cases, it is important to foster leadership development. This can prove effective in encouraging employees to stay with the organization for a few years, and has the added benefit of persuading those staffers the skills to work with immigrants to remain in the field as a whole.

The “Human Touch”

In the small town of Willimantic, Connecticut, Biil Stover, Director of the CT Migratory Children’s Program, has been very successful in retaining staff who work with immigrant youth. He attributes much of his success to the simple practice of establishing personal connections with staff and “giving them a pat on the shoulder” for a job well done. Bill has also created an organizational culture that is open and egalitarian in its decision-making process. He notes: “I want staff to feel like they have ownership in the programs so I don’t mandate anything. We make decisions as a group, so there’s a lot of buy-in from everyone. Since many of the staff are immigrants themselves and face issues and challenges that I don’t have in my own life, I try to listen carefully and respond to their needs. As a leader, I’ve found that it’s the human touch, personal communication - being as open as possible - that has inspired staff to want to return year after year.”

Create a Culture of Appreciation

- **Express appreciation to individual workers on a regular basis.** This helps those who are rising to the challenge of working with a new and underserved population to feel valued and integral to the work of the organization.
- **Hold “appreciation events.”** Offer award ceremonies and recognition dinners to publicly thank staff for their efforts. Encourage workers to invite family and friends to these events.
- **Incorporate into your program the perspectives and cultural traditions of staff members.** This can include promoting staff-wide engagement of everyday communication (greetings, phrases and other expressions) used by immigrant staff and participants and recognizing and incorporating cultural traditions, rituals and holidays.
- **View immigrant staff and participants as assets, and tap into their strengths.** Create forums for acquiring staff input on the needs of youth, and make changes in response to criticisms of organizational dynamics or environmental issues.