

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast  
Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce  
TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Tracey Feild, Annie E. Casey Foundation

[00:00:00]: Music Introduction

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:00:02]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

**TOM OATES** [00:00:33]: I don't think we're going out on a limb or making reckless claims when we say the child welfare field has a workforce problem – some may say crisis depending on how you look at it. The problem is turnover compounded by stress. When frontline caseworkers leave, remaining case workers take on more cases, and supervisors take on cases themselves. This adds more stress to staff and prevents supervisors from being fully able to support their already overworked teams. Combine that with at times a lengthy recruiting and hiring process, and the stress to the entire agency continues. Vacancies open, the staff burden increases, development and support struggle, and vacancies open.

[00:01:16]: Hello all, Tom Oates here and welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. As agencies try to address the vacancies, they also have the two-fold challenge of making sure that the right staff are brought on board with the skills to perform the stressful and arduous tasks and providing that staff a supportive and healthy environment. Now, this isn't a shock to anyone, and we've spent some time here on the podcast addressing aspects of this problem. Today's episode, however, looks at some agency-wide steps taken by two separate jurisdictions, that resulted in reductions by at least 50% in both the average time agencies filled vacancies and their overall turnover rate.

[00:01:58]: The steps are documented and mapped out in Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce. It's a report developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. So, we chatted with Tracey Feild, the Foundation's Director of Child Welfare Strategy. Now, the Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce was developed after 3 years of working with two different county agencies – specifically to strengthen, from an agency perspective – the frontline staff of Child Protective Service caseworkers. So, if you go over this episode's web page – that's [www.acf.hhs.gov/cb](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb) – and just search podcasts, we'll have a link to the report, and links to other podcasts related to workforce, Gateway resources on workforce, as well, and another Annie E. Casey Foundation publication, Better Decisions for Better Results.

[00:02:46]: Now, in our conversation with Tracey, we dive into the five steps, including what agency leaders can do, how to involve the right people – including HR departments - in speeding up the recruiting and hiring process; how to take advantage of the employee satisfaction and workforce data to recognize the skills needed for the work; and overhauling how interviews are conducted - both in a timing sense and the format of the interviews themselves - so agencies can bring aboard candidates with those key skills. And we also dive into developing what the report calls “organizational care”. Now, this all came from an effort called “On the Frontline” where the research and testing took place. Now, that is where we start our conversation with Tracey, and then we get into the key takeaways and guidance for the five steps. So here we go, Tracey Feild from the Annie E. Casey Foundation on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

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[00:03:43]: So, Tracey, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:03:47]: Thank you, glad to be here.

**TOM OATES** [00:03:48]: So, if we can start from where all this kind of came from, the genesis - can you explain the "On the Frontline" effort and what that really entails?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:03:57]: Yes, we began this effort as a result of some work we were doing with New York City, when John Mattingly was the Commissioner of the Administration for Children Services. They do primarily Child Protective investigation work because they contract out all of the ongoing services, and he was very concerned about the caliber and the expertise and the tenure of his workforce doing child protective investigations and when he left ACS, he came back to the foundation and we decided to spend a little bit of time and energy trying to think through those issues and trying to help that practice improve - mostly around the workforce and who we've got and how long they stay and when they leave and why they leave.

**TOM OATES** [00:04:48]: So when agencies - and that's, you know, that's a common concern for agencies across the country - in the research that you guys have done, when you look across the landscape, did you find anything that was, maybe the most common or the largest barrier or challenge that agencies faced around their workforce?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:05:08]: Well, I think we've seen - not only in New York, but everywhere we work - is the high turnover rate, the high vacancy rate and you have to get under why is that happening, I mean, these are challenging jobs, they're very difficult jobs, they're very high stress jobs. But, we don't seem able to keep people in them regardless of how hard we try, so maybe we could figure out what's going on and how to improve it - and that was our interest.

**TOM OATES** [00:05:38]: So, that's led to what we're here for - the Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce - and so, we have five steps and as you and I were talking earlier before we recorded, they are five steps and they are meant to be done sequentially, though there is a little bit of overlap. So, we'll start at the beginning here with that step one - Partnering With HR - and for a lot of agencies that HR department could be part of a larger, let's say health and human services kind of agency within their state or within their county. And, so, just trying to get in front of that HR representative, or that person that may be supporting just the Child Protective Services or the Child Welfare Department, just getting that communication started seems to be key. But, the way you guys have broken it down, it's not only communicating with the folks, but getting the right folks to communicate together. Can you walk me through from where those HR departments sit in an organization and how getting the right folks also offers kind of that different point of view that you guys need?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:06:43]: Yes. We partnered with Cuyahoga County, Ohio and Jefferson County, Colorado at the county level and county administered systems because we thought starting at a county administered system might make more sense to see if we could make a dent in this problem. So, with both of them, they had their HR responsibilities in a different agency than the child welfare agency. And so, we thought, well can we develop a better relationship with HR than they've had in the past other than just send the position over and then have them approve it or not approve it and there'd be all kinds of delays.

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[00:07:24]: So, we, rather than meet with them and talk to them, we thought, let's try and bring them into the problem to be partners in solving the problem rather than just telling us what the rules are and handing us candidates. So, we brought them in as partners, not only at the sort of analyst level, but at a management level to bring them in to say can you work with us to meet our HR needs that are hugely important to us and that we need your help to solve - rather than, you know, just a transfer of paper back and forth. And that was critical and key to giving them the opportunity to help us problem solve and it made a huge difference.

[00:08:12]: Now, sometimes, it's a little hard to reach out to them, sometimes they're not all that interested - but that's when we take it up to the director of the agency and say, you know, you've gotta be the one invested in getting HR on your side - and that really made a difference, is you've got to bring them into problem solving with you.

**TOM OATES** [00:08:33]: Did you notice that, you know, from that HR perspective or even from the agency perspective that each of their points of view on a particular position differed, you know, had completely different points of view or differed wildly in terms of what HR thought was necessary versus what the agency thought was necessary?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:08:53]: Yes, I don't think there was, in both cases, a really good understanding of how critical the filling of positions is on the workload and the wellbeing of the staff in the child welfare agencies. And once they came in and understood what it means to have vacancies - and lots of vacancies and continuous vacancies - they were able to see this as bigger than just a set of rules to make the hiring process fair, which is, you know, what civil service is all about. They were able to see that it's a different set of issues in child welfare that is critically important, not only to the staff, but to serving children and families well. So, I think that made a big difference in their attention to their own rules and them showing a little bit more flexibility in how to meet our needs.

**TOM OATES** [00:09:46]: You know, part of what you've talked about like you mentioned getting at the director level, but also having those folks with positions of either insight or authority that can help maybe drive some of the progress forward - and you guys have this Workforce Innovation Team that really falls within many of the five steps here. So, you've recommended specific roles and specific staff to help complete this team - talk to me about the Workforce Innovation Team you guys have WIT written all over the five steps - what's the value of the group and what role do they really play in the entire process?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:10:23]: The Workforce Innovation Team, in both jurisdictions, was critical to not only identifying what the issues are and the problems are, but in solving them. So, the team is made up of management-level, senior management-level in the child welfare agency - as high a level as HR personnel as you can get involved - it had managers, supervisors, staff, direct caseworker staff of the child welfare agencies so that the problems can be fully fleshed out - not just, you know, from a manager to a manager - but, these are the problems caseworkers face because of HR difficulties or the lack of communication between HR and child welfare.

[00:11:08]: So, having them all sitting at the table to sort of work through or hypothesize, you know, what is the problem we're facing here and why is it we can't get it solved. And part of that meant identifying, sort of, what is the process flow. When we've got a vacancy, what happens, who has to sign

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off, how many steps does it have to go through before we actually get candidates to interview and then once we do, what's the process of actually filling the vacancy? And when you map that all out, it is a hugely time-consuming process. I think in Jefferson County, which is about half the size of Cuyahoga County, Jefferson County it took like 70, over 72 days on average to fill a position. In Cuyahoga County, it was taking 200 days.

[00:12:02]: So, if you've got a vacancy for 200 days, you can see the disruption that would have on the unit in which that worker is working or trying to do their job. It's just, it's overwhelmingly difficult to get the job done when you're redistributing cases to workers who already have a full caseload. So, having that mapping allowed the HR folks, as well as the team, to say oh my god, what's happening here and how can we fix this?

**TOM OATES** [00:12:33]: So, this kind of cascades, now, in bringing HR and the agency together to recognize, you know, the urgency and recognizing the urgency and what a right fit looks like. So, it moves right into step two - and you guys have titled it Get Strategic Building Your Leadership Capacity - and using that WIT and using data. So, once this group comes together and they start to identify maybe a number of different needs, how does a group like this - where everyone's got a little bit of a different perspective and everyone, obviously, has input that's valuable to the group - come to a decision on what's the direction we need to go, what are the primary needs, probably with the idea in the back of their mind, and I'm just throwing this out there, that you know you can't solve every single problem right now?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:13:23]: Right. So, they ended up trying to identify what are the gaps, what are the things we can do in the short run and then what are the longer-term issues that might take more time to work on. So, for example, in both jurisdictions they've developed a plan and started thinking about what, what is it that we can look at now? And I think one of the first things they tackled was can we make this process of hiring more efficient? So, what are the steps - we've identified, we laid it out - are those steps there because they need to be there or because they've always been there? And can we eliminate steps and make the process more efficient? And can we make sure only the people - you know it's not sitting, the process isn't a paper sitting on someone's desk for three weeks, which happens all the time in bureaucracies.

[00:14:15]: So, is there a way we can speed this up? And when you get HR involved in helping, it was amazing the ability that they were able to do to speed it up, I think, Jefferson ended up having a process that resulted in a 27-day time period between posting the vacancy, or having the vacancy, and filling the vacancy. That is pretty remarkable in any bureaucracy. So, that's a great, I think, example of when you work together how you can figure this out.

**TOM OATES** [00:14:48]: Do you recall some of the steps that may have been reduced or some of the big key wins to reduce that timeframe to, like you said, less than 30 days?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:14:58]: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that's, well, it's really who's processing the paper. One of the other interesting things that, a problem that Cuyahoga had, which was causing part of the delay was they had an ongoing problem of having 40 vacancies all the time. They couldn't get that down to a lower level. That's a lot of vacancies in direct service workers. So, what they realized when they started mapping it out, is they would start with a pool of something like 200 applicants. So, that sounds good, we have 40 vacancies, we have 200 applicants. But, what happened is that they realized that once they

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started weeding out those people who weren't really qualified, then they weeded out those who didn't take the civil service exam that's required and then they weeded out those who didn't actually pass the civil service exam and then they weeded out those who decided they didn't want the job, they would end up with like 20 applicants.

[00:16:00]: Well, they had 40 positions. So, you could never catch up if that's the way it's gonna work. So, they solved that problem - and they solved that problem this way in Jefferson as well - is having anticipatory hiring. So, they got permission to actually develop a set of candidates in anticipation of vacancies, rather than, you know once we get a vacancy, so that when you had a vacancy you had a whole slew of people already who've been whittled down to who's really a viable applicant. So, that really helped them define or solve the problem of having a solid pool of candidates.

**TOM OATES** [00:16:46]: That changes the mindset of recruiting to not recruiting for an opening but recruiting for when the opening occurs. And it's almost like, well it's the same thing, it really is, well we're gonna do one step before the other as opposed to waiting for the vacancy to appear and say oh no, what are we gonna do, we gotta get somebody here. As opposed to, alright, let's just go into this room -

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:17:09]: And, the way that worked is having the ability to say we know we have a vacancy rate of X, 9%, whatever it is, so we're gonna allow the department to anticipate that vacancy in advance and get those candidates ready to go.

**TOM OATES** [00:17:26]: Was that step, kind of, that, I guess, was there a big ramp up step to actually kind of create this candidate pool before the openings happened, or was that something that just, you know, was an easy implementation?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:17:40]: It was tough. It was tough to get it approved - you have to go through, obviously the whole civil service system and you have to make sure that the budget was actually there to get that approved, because the budget departments very often will, knowing that you have a 10% vacancy, actually give you enough money for 10% fewer staff than you have, you know, approved. So, we had to go through all those processes to make sure that this was a doable activity.

[00:18:09]: But, knowing that impact of having that continuous vacancy rate on the workload of the staff we were able to work in both jurisdictions to convince them that this is necessary step to provide services to children and families.

**TOM OATES** [00:18:24]: Yeah, does a process like this cost you money, or does it save you money?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:18:28]: Yeah, right, in the long run. And I think that's one of the steps that's important is trying to think through what is the cost of turnover. And when you think about the cost of recruiting, training, going through all the steps of interviewing - it's not insignificant. It takes a lot of time of staff and management.

**TOM OATES** [00:18:48]: And so, part of that getting the right staff on board and maybe avoiding having as much turnover and having to invest in the continuous training of new staff means getting the right folks. And, so, that kind of gets into step three - so, you've got those candidacies, you've got the candidates, rather, and so as they come in, how do you make sure that the hiring processing, the

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interview process is gonna give you the best candidate to fit your needs? And of course, you guys have that in step three of Creating a Competency-Based Culture.

[00:19:21]: And so, when you and I talked earlier, we had talked about competencies based on not necessarily of how do I create a culture, but how do I create an identification process within that interview to make sure that my new staff have, really, the skills or the competencies that the resume may not tell me? Talk to me about the difference between hiring for skills and hiring for, you know, experience, or what may be on paper.

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:19:50]: Yes, you know, most of the hiring that's done in child welfare systems is based on what your resume looks like. What is your educational background and what is your experience. Unfortunately, that's not necessarily enough to determine who's gonna be a good, solid caseworker. What we have done in both jurisdictions - and both jurisdictions took this up really solidly - was look at what are the skills, the inherent skills that may be hard to train for that a worker, that a good worker has? What are those attributes, those competencies? And, we did focus groups in both jurisdictions to say, you know, think of the best workers you know and let's look at a whole list of competencies and let's identify the top 10 or 12 competencies that those best workers have.

[00:20:45]: And they're things like adaptability, building trust, conflict management, stress tolerance - those kinds of skills or attributes. And identified those attributes, well that was the first step. This was done, you know, with focus groups throughout the agency. Narrowed it down to about 10 or 12 each agency - and they vary slightly, but there's a lot of overlap - and then say, alright, these are the competencies, now how do we interview to understand whether or not the applicant has those competencies?

[00:21:23]: So, we did behavior-based interviewing, which is really asking about, tell us a time when you had a very stressful or conflict situation, how did you deal with it? And, so, let them explain to you what it meant for them to address a conflictual situation. Now, this was a completely different type of interviewing that's ever been done and it really led to a discussion with the applicant rather than just a rote set of questions. And so, they were able to understand more about how the person thinks and what their reactions are to these kinds of situations.

[00:22:06]: So, once we developed those questions, then all of the staff who were doing interviewing were trained on how to do this type of interview. And then, panels were set up that met monthly, they were assigned to, you're gonna be on a panel this month, you know it. In Jefferson, it was line workers and supervisors, in Cuyahoga, it was supervisor and manager - but they knew that this is the month they were gonna be on a panel.

[00:22:34]: Then it didn't matter what unit the applicant was applying for, those were the people who were doing the interviewing. So, it wasn't, you know, the interviewing process wasn't slowed down by is the supervisor on vacation or is this a really busy time and she just can't deal with it this week. It was just, we knew exactly when the interview process could take place. So, it made the process more efficient - and interestingly, in Jefferson, we found that having this pool of people do the interview that was not necessarily assigned to the unit in which the worker would be working resulted in more diversity by not only gender, more men hired, but more diversity racially and ethnically in the candidates selected. Now, we didn't see that necessarily in Cuyahoga, but it was interesting that it happened in Jefferson.

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**TOM OATES** [00:23:28]: That brings an interesting point just in overarching recruiting and hiring because many places it's your future potential direct supervisor and your future potential coworkers are the ones conducting those interviews and so, instantly it's, part of that interview process becomes can I develop a rapport, do I like this person and those tend to be a lot of the decisions we make in hiring versus do they have the right skills to handle the job. So, when I am making, maybe a more unbiased decision based on we have these roles, we have these needs and here's a person that could respond, whether they will work for me or with me or not, kind of separating yourself, that's an interesting take on interviews.

[00:24:19]: And there's a trust factor though, for maybe that direct supervisor knowing that those folks over there are going to be key in hiring the person I am going to be responsible for managing. Was there any tension that came across knowing that you're providing, if I'm a manager, I'm really empowering some other folks to make the decisions on who's gonna be on my staff.

**TRACEY FIELD** [00:24:43]: Yes. I mean, obviously, that's sort of a scary thought, you know, I don't get to hire my own people. But, what that meant was you really had to focus in on what those competencies were rather than whether or not you like the person. And I think it gave more consistency across the agency in the types of people that were hired and what their skill sets were. So, ultimately, they both have adopted this process and have found it to be really a solid, good process.

**TOM OATES** [00:25:13]: So, with step three - and really even into step two and step three talk about the right people. And now people need something to make decisions on. So, step four gets us into really developing the data. You know, where are we gonna make our decisions from, you know, Building A Dashboard is the step. And, as you and I talked earlier, it's not only developing the data showcasing it, but then it follows up on doing something about it.

[00:25:39]: When you are pulling that data, what's the most valuable data? What's the big key numbers that you guys found or the big key indices that you guys found to kind of bring the most, you know, bang for your buck when it comes to really, you know, improving that workforce?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:25:55]: You know, I think that's a really interesting point. It sounds like it's sort of simple minded to think, oh we need a dashboard, but it was remarkably hard for both systems, both Cuyahoga and Jefferson to put together a dashboard on workforce related issues. So, what we tried to include in the dashboard that are really critically important to the functioning of the system are what are the caseloads - and that's not just, you know, how many approved positions do we have or even how many filled positions we have - it's how many people we actually have on the job. Because, you know, a workforce is primarily young females who are in childbearing age and you could have five, six people out on family leave at any given time.

[00:26:42]: So, let's not count them when we're counting the caseload. They're not there to carry a caseload. So, we want only the people who are carrying a caseload to count. So, that sort of brings down the caseload to a much different level than saying we have, you know, 500 approved positions and we only have 300 people actually working right now. So, that's one, the turnover rate, how long it takes to fill a position, the time to train - you've gotta count how much time it's gonna train so that you know whether or not, when a position is filled, when are they actually gonna be on the job.

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[00:27:19]: What portion of your staff leave within 12 months? Now that tells you something about whether or not you've got the right people, whether or not they have a good understanding of what the job is, whether or not there's something going on in the culture of the agency that makes this not a good place to work. I mean, obviously the stress of this job is not right for everyone, but they should have a good idea of what their job is when they start.

[00:27:47]: Also, your diversity data, that's really important, too. Do our staff look like our clientele? Can they relate well? So, those are the kinds of things that we look at and then we look at a quarterly basis are we making progress? Are we slipping? Where are we slipping? How can we solve that problem? And that's where your Workforce Innovation Team comes in on an ongoing basis to check out the data and say, you know what, look what's happening here, it's taking longer to fill, what's going on? How can we solve that problem?

**TOM OATES** [00:28:17]: You know, I'd like for folks to, who are listening, to think about what Tracey just mentioned when she talked about the dashboard, that data dashboard because I'm pretty sure many agencies have some sort of, you know, data analysis that they go through and they could have a dashboard, but I'd be curious to know how many of those folks have a dashboard specific to workforce as opposed to all of the outputs, you know, what is our time in care, what about the numbers of children or families that we are dealing with - those are output based.

[00:28:48]: Everything you just mentioned, Tracey, is really an internal reflection. You didn't talk about the outcomes of cases, you talked about a case to work, you know a caseload-to-workforce ratio of how hard are my staff working, how much are we piling on each of our active staff members and looking at how do they feel, why are they leaving or are they leaving? So, it really makes somebody turn around and go, alright I need to turn around and not look at the outcomes, I need to look at my, you know, our staff internally to say how are we doing.

[00:29:24]: And I'm glad that you, my next question - and you led right to it - was where does the WIT fit into this along the way of you've got folks that maybe have, not only the dashboard tells them something, but this is the group that's empowered to do something about it, isn't it?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:29:39]: Yeah, this is a really important issue for your staff to know that you care about as a manager and as a leader. If workforce is never discussed and the amount of vacancies you have are never discussed, then why would staff think that you care there are vacancies - you know, it's just a process, and HR process, it happens when it happens. But if you're tracking this on a regular basis, then it shows them that this is important to you that staff has reasonable caseloads, or at least you have the positions that you do have filled and ready to go. And I think that's an important message to staff. It's really about the internal operations of your organization, do we have the capacity to do the job we were hired to do?

**TOM OATES** [00:30:25]: And in the long run if staff, when they see an opening and that opening is filled, over time if you start to trust, you know, trust the process, you start to recognize that that new person that is coming aboard is maybe more equipped for the job than in previous times because they've spent the time to get the right skills. Now, it is gonna take time for training and it is gonna take time for them to be able to ramp up to take a full caseload - but I also may feel, if I'm another worker, that I may not have to worry about picking up the slack for a poor performer because maybe I'm gonna be less likely to have poor performers because I can kind of trust the process behind me.

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[00:31:06]: I know that's kind of a long term, kind of secondary result, but did you start to find that in the employee satisfaction results?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:31:15]: Yes, I think that's another part of the Workforce Innovation Team is collecting data from your actual staff to say, you know, how are you doing? And I think the work in Jefferson took this to a whole new level. They did regular staff satisfaction surveys. Of course, if you're gonna ask staff how they're doing, then the expectation is you better be willing to try and address some of those issues, and that as a manager, you have to be willing to do that, or don't ask. But, they really wanted to find out - in terms of keeping staff, retaining staff - what's working well, what's not working well and even though I can't solve all the problems that you may have as a worker in a public agency, especially a child welfare agency, there are certain things that are under your control.

[00:32:03]: One of the things that Jefferson county learned was that the secondary trauma issue was hugely troubling for their staff. And so, they brought in an organization to provide some regular assistance to deal with secondary trauma, which they really hadn't occurred to them or they hadn't done in the past. So, this was, you know, real benefit to staff and it showed the staff that management cares about them having a work experience that is manageable and that they could handle.

**TOM OATES** [00:32:37]: And so, we even hinted at it for step four, part of that developing the data and building a dashboard, but we said, you know, and then do something about it. So, when it comes to doing something about it that is - as we talk about it, these steps kind of cascade into each other - step five, Building A Positive Work Environment. And one of the key terms that you guys have brought up in the Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce is, you know, approaching this from an organizational care perspective. Can you describe what you mean by organizational care?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:33:11]: Yeah, it's really about thinking about, as a leader, your organization as a whole. What is the emotional health and wellbeing of your organization? And you can't know that unless you know about the wellbeing of your staff. And do you care about the wellbeing of your staff enough to put it together into a culture in your organization that is positive and that people feel this is a good place to work, in spite of the fact this is really hard work. And that's, you know, that's the best of both worlds - you've got a difficult job, but you feel good about where you work and about how you're being supported to do that job.

**TOM OATES** [00:33:55]: As a manager or a supervisor, you know, just your day to day work itself may, at times, separate you from your staff, you don't get a chance to walk the halls, to stop by and ask folks how they're doing. What kind of recommendations would you give for those managers, for those supervisors to be able to recognize, or to see from their staff's perspective where they could help improve the work environment?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:34:22]: Yeah, I think that's done in couple of ways. First of all, in Jefferson they were asking their staff in regular supervision, how are you doing, hoping to elicit from staff - and they got to the point where they were - you know, what is the culture, what is the climate of this organization? Are there things we could do that may not be very expensive but are helpful and make people feel better about the job?

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[00:34:46]: And, as well as these sort of bigger issues around the staff as a whole and these satisfaction surveys - it's at all levels. It's at the individual worker level with their supervisor and it's at the agency level. And some of the things that people need to feel good about their jobs are not costly, outrageous things. It's, you know, making the environment better or small things about, do we have a common lunch room where people can come and sit with each other and have lunch? Do we care enough to - part of the workforce issue is when you have so many vacancies, you have supervisors carrying caseloads, so they can't supervise.

[00:35:31]: If we can undo that vacancy problem, then we've got the supervisors able to supervise. And that makes a big difference in and of itself. A lot of the reason people leave is because they don't feel supported. They don't feel supported because they don't have a supervisor supervising them.

**TOM OATES** [00:35:48]: So, this kind of gets us into this entire array, the five steps that you guys have laid out and, you know, in the publication you guys have specific timelines and implementation tips and, you know, it's not just the five steps that Tracey has just talked about and there you go. So, I'd encourage folks to check out and take a deep dive into what is an easy read, but it breaks down those five steps and even to things like who would you recommend the types of roles for the Workforce Innovation Team, so there's some appendices with that and so I encourage folks to check it out.

[00:36:27]: But if somebody's at that management level and they turn around and go, you know, this sounds great, we can build the dashboard or we can have folks on our WIT that we need to get and we need to spend the time to partner with HR and, you know, alter our recruiting and hiring processes. And then, they look at you and go, okay, how do I do it with limited resources and limited time? How do I build all this when I'm so busy doing my day to day?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:36:55]: So, that's a really good question. But, my response to that would be how can you not do it? You're already in crisis, you know you've got all this turnover, you know you've got all these vacancies and you're going to continue to have this problem forever if you don't take it on - and there's no time like now. The crisis mentality that child welfare always finds itself is because we don't take this time initially to solve some of these problems so we can get out of the crisis. And I honestly can't think of a child welfare agency I've been in where workforce hasn't been a crisis.

**TOM OATES** [00:37:31]: It's one of those issues that everybody recognizes and if you turned to them and say alright, well what are you doing to address it, and they'll tell you what they're currently doing, and you look right back and go, so how's that working for you? And therein lies, kind of, the answer to the question. So, looking back on all of this, after - you know, and we're talking about a series of months and years, also - how did you make sure that these two counties were able to maintain momentum and engagement through this?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:38:02]: Well, I think, as I said, it's taken a little bit longer for Cuyahoga than for Jefferson because the size difference, the scale difference. And I think that, at this point in time, we spent a lot of time providing technical assistance, but they both are still committed to the processes and I think Cuyahoga is still working through some of the issues that Jefferson has resolved, but they're both committed to it because they see that they've gotten results. And, honestly, the proof is in the pudding, if you can see that the issues are improving, then you wanna keep doing it.

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**TOM OATES** [00:38:38]: So, what were the results? What did you see after these years of working with Cuyahoga and Jefferson counties?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:38:43]: Well, Cuyahoga, as I said, they had a vacancy problem that was considerable. They got it to 10%, their vacancy rate. But it's now down to about 2%. It wasn't a huge vacancy rate, but 2% is a whole lot better than 10% when you start counting up the bodies. Jefferson went from 9% to a 5% vacancy rate. So, again, that's almost half. Both of them have found that to be hugely impactful in terms of caseloads for their staff.

[00:39:16]: The time to fill vacancies, Cuyahoga went from over 200 to under 100, Jefferson went from 72 to 27 days. The turnover rate in Cuyahoga was pretty low to being with because it's a slower labor market, but they were at about 10% and now they're down to about 2% and Jefferson was 15%, now they're down to 2%. And those, you know, there's a little variation and fluctuation but both of them seem to be pretty stable and Jefferson had better results, but Cuyahoga's doing okay, too.

**TOM OATES** [00:39:57]: You know, you had mentioned about Jefferson County implementing a separate group to come in and help that staff deal with their secondary traumatic stress and I'll point listeners to an earlier episode of the Information Gateway Podcast where we talked about implementing some tools and strategies to help staff deal with that secondary traumatic stress. And so, that is one of our earlier, earlier episodes where three different agencies and organizations implemented various tools and studies from a group out in Michigan.

[00:40:32]: So, that's an interesting read to talk about some tangible steps to help staff reduce that stress or deal with it or manage it, because that's always gonna exist, no matter how well qualified your staff is or the amount of staff that you have - it really does go back to that supporting that positive work environment for your staff, so I'd encourage folks to go and check that episode out. So, Tracey, after these years, what would you say were the biggest things that you and the Annie E. Casey Foundation learned, you know, walking into this process from day one to where you are now - what's the biggest thing that you were able to take away from this?

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:41:11]: I think there's a couple of things. Is that the workforce problems are solvable, to a large extent, at least to the point where staff can feel like somebody's trying. And I think, secondarily, the importance of addressing the positive work environment at the same time you're addressing the work, you know, the numbers issues with workforce. They go hand in hand. And if you just are solving the numbers problem without addressing your work environment, you may not have the same impact on turnover that you would like to have. So, you really can't, I can't overemphasize the need to think about whether or not people feel good about the place they work.

[00:41:57]: This is hugely stressful job, and you need to feel like you can talk to people and people support you in order to stay in a job like this. And if you don't have that kind of culture within your organization, I don't think the numbers alone are gonna make a difference in terms of turnover. So, you need to do both at the same time. And again, I don't think it's that costly to handle both at the same time.

**TOM OATES** [00:42:26]: It is the Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Tracey Feild, thank you so much for your time and thank you for your efforts for putting this together and really going through a deep dive with both Cuyahoga County and Jefferson

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County out in Colorado. So, we appreciate your time, we appreciate the energy and the dedication you've put and thanks again, for being part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

**TRACEY FEILD** [00:42:52]: My pleasure, I enjoyed it. Thank you, Tom.

**TOM OATES** [00:42:56]: So, again, I want to remind everyone to head over to this episode's web page at [www.acf.hhs.gov/cb](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb) – and that's the Children's Bureau's website – just search podcasts. Now there we've got links to the Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce report, along with the Better Decisions for Better Results publication from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Now, again, you'll also find links to our four-part series on Workforce featuring the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, you'll find links to our episodes on Secondary Traumatic Stress, and our dive into starting your career on the frontlines in Casework Practice What it Really Takes – all those episodes are linked from this episode's web page, go there and take a listen back to those.

[00:43:41]: You'll also find links to our specific sections on Workforce, including our collection of Realistic Job Previews – now, these are videos developed by states for those interested in the field to get a better sense of what the work entails. So again, my thanks to Tracey Feild from the Annie E. Casey Foundation for taking the time to speak with us and share their findings, and thanks as always to you. We are so grateful you've chosen to spend your time with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Three years on and going strong. I'm Tom Oates – have a great day!

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:44:20]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.