

Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy – Working group for recruitment & induction

Background

The child welfare workforce in Australia faces numerous occupational, organisational, and socioemotional challenges in their day-to-day work that cumulatively deter practitioners from pursuing a career in child protection and make it difficult for child welfare agencies and departments to recruit qualified staff.¹ These challenges are not unique to the Australian context. In the US, child welfare recruitment has been characterised as 'ineffective' and 'passive', leading to a shortage of qualified workers in rural areas, unrealistic expectations about the job and haphazard recruitment of variously qualified practitioners when positions need to urgently be filled.² Similarly, in Australia, recruitment of child welfare practitioners in regional and remote areas is a major challenge.³

Consultations undertaken to inform the NSW Workforce Skills Strategy with professionals working in the child and family sector yielded similar themes. Participants indicated that remuneration for qualified personnel was generally unattractive and uncompetitive, given the demands and nature of the work. Difficulty recruiting qualified staff in regional and remote areas were frequently reported.

In light of these challenges, research-based recommendations for workforce recruitment and retention for agencies include the following: develop clear, consistent recruitment messages; provide realistic job profiles; use professional marketing techniques to positively influence public perceptions about child and family welfare work; and increase employee salaries and benefits.⁴

Need for a recruitment campaign

The workforce consultations emphasised the importance of sharing accurate and precise information about the day-to-day duties of child and family sector roles during recruitment processes. This includes ensuring that job descriptions are reflective of the tasks required to perform a role and having transparent conversations with job candidates about the proportion of time that would be spent on various tasks. Attention was drawn to the gap between perceptions of the nature of child and family sector roles and realities of the work, leading to job dissatisfaction and turnover among newly recruited staff.

Key working group action areas:

- Develop clear, consistent recruitment messages, including realistic job profiles.
- Promote targeted recruitment campaigns for Aboriginal and culturally diverse communities.
- Consider recruitment strategies to address challenges attracting staff to regional and remote areas.
- Prepare standardised position descriptions for common roles that reflect core tasks and responsibilities.
- Adopt agreed upon protocols and approaches to workforce induction and on-boarding.
- Identify the personal attributes needed for roles such as: active listening, empathy, respectful communications and cultural competence.
- Provide pathways for people from Aboriginal or culturally diverse backgrounds to enter the workforce and be supported to gain professional qualifications.
- Explore integrated Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and non-government organisations (NGOs) on-boarding and induction programs.

Consistency across roles and positions

The lack of alignment between government and non-government approaches to workforce recruitment pose a structural barrier to an integrated workforce strategy. Job descriptions, competencies and entry-level qualifications also vary, even when the same model of service exists. An integrated and tiered training model is recommended that incorporates different levels of child protection training as matched to the essential criteria/competencies for different job functions.

The child and family population in Australia is diverse, therefore, it is important that linguistically and culturally diverse and competent staff make up the child and family welfare workforce. Despite the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the child and family welfare sector, only 2.3% of the welfare workforce identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2020 in Australia.⁵ Given the importance that the child welfare workforce has the competencies required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, recruitment strategies that prioritise linguistic and cultural diversity are needed. Strategies for diverse recruitment must also address diversity disparities in educational and training programs.

Recruitment challenges

Given the importance that the child welfare workforce has the linguistic and cultural competencies required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, recruitment strategies that prioritise linguistic and cultural diversity are needed. This is especially pertinent in Australia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are disproportionately represented, as more than 40% of children in care.⁶ Strategies for diverse recruitment must also address diversity disparities in educational and training programs.

There is increasing recognition in the Australian context of the value of lived experience for the design and implementation of programs and services in human services, such as mental health and disability services.⁷ In the disability sector, designated 'lived experience' jobs have gained recognition as a legitimate and needed practice position.⁸ While there is less of a focus on the lived experience child welfare workforce in academic literature, the benefits of lived experience in child welfare work are self-evident.

Research on the effectiveness of peer support and peer mentoring whereby peers draw on shared lived experiences as a vehicle for connection and support suggests that these peer support models benefit workers in terms of improved confidence and employment and social connections.⁹ This body of evidence has fostered a paid workforce with relevant lived experiences across the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.¹⁰ Within this workforce, staff draw on their own lived experience that transverse experiences of disability, addiction, homelessness, parenting and mental health issues.¹¹

International recruitment

In response to difficulties around recruitment, child protection agencies are increasingly recruiting social workers from overseas to backfill the shortage of frontline practitioners available in Australia.¹² In 2016, 28% of Australian care workers were born in other than 'the main English-speaking countries'.¹³ International recruitment to address labour shortages in this sector is not unique to the Australian context. Migrating social workers practicing in the child welfare space have been examined in research from New Zealand, the UK and Canada.¹⁴

While transnational workers are filling critical gaps in the service industry, they are expected to understand and respond to the local historical, political and practice

Working Group Members

Lead:

- DCJ

Working Group Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- AbSec
- Peaks
- NGOs
- Talent Acquisition professionals
- HR Experts

"It's just about talking to your staff and getting really right down to what it is that they think they've been employed for ... They didn't know it was going to be admin. A lot of our workers have said that they didn't realise they weren't going to be so hands on with the kids for more than an hour or two hours a month...you have to say 'this is what it looks like. Is it something that you want?' And have them actually say 'well actually it's not what I was looking for, [it] was more youth work I was looking for' ... So, it comes back to the recruitment process."

Child & Family Services Manager, sector focus group.

"We can't attract them because of the payment, but also this work is really hard. I'm one of the last people standing from my cohort. I reckon all my friends are in private practice now because it pays well and it's easy."

Child & Family Services Manager, sector focus group.

context in which they are placed. Little is known about the extent to which international recruitment works and/or its impacts on domestic and transnational child welfare practitioners. One qualitative study into the lived experiences of transnational workers practicing in the Australian child protection space found that despite extensive prior experience working in overseas jurisdictions, transnational workers were not adequately prepared for the lack of recognition of their professional identity, the migrant experience or the new practice context in Australia.¹⁵ Workforce consultation participants shared examples of barriers to gaining employment in the sector for those with overseas qualifications and suggested that greater support was needed to improve access to employment.

Recommendations

- Develop clear, consistent recruitment messages.
- Use professional marketing techniques to positively influence public perceptions about child and family welfare work.
- Promote positive messages about working in the sector and career opportunities.
- Consider strategies to address barriers to employment for those with overseas qualifications. This may include identifying the issues that come under the State Government jurisdiction and those which would require Federal government intervention.

Induction

Another challenge for the sector is the lack of consistency and standards for inducting staff into the workplace. The initial onboarding period can provide a valuable opportunity to impart the values of the organisation and prepare new recruits for their role, including support programs and staff to equip them for practice.

During consultations with the child and family workforce, concerns were voiced about poor induction practices driven by an urgency to fill vacant positions and allocate workers to children. Participants described how established timeframes for onboarding were being cut short, resulting in new staff missing out on access to adequate information and support prior to, and in the early stages of commencing their positions.

The workforce shortages are likely to increase with a predicted rise in vacancy rates.¹⁶ A well-defined induction program can position agencies to stand out in the market and provide an opportunity for assessing the capabilities of new staff, identifying their professional development needs, and establishing a personalised plan for their progression. This may be one of the strategies agencies can offer to attract and retain their workforce. Participants in workforce consultations consistently emphasised the importance of getting the induction and onboarding process right through strategies such as early training as well as mentoring and buddy systems for new recruits. When done well, staff induction is a process that assists workers to settle into their role and become productive and committed.

Feedback from Child & Family Services focus groups:

“In our sector, often people's inductions are very short because we're so desperate for staff, you know, they might get 4 hours watching a screen rather than having on-the-job induction supervised as a secondary person over a week.”

“I know that like with DCJ, even if you have, for instance, worked in an appropriate field with years and years of experience, you're still looking at six months of training with their people and their content, if you join their casework team, but we don't have that same expectation for our not-for-profits. We expect to be able to drag and drop people quite often.”

“The reality of what's happened in the last year or so has been within two weeks staff have a full caseload of nine or ten kids ... I think it's all about the onboarding process and how quickly caseworkers get their kids and I understand that you can't have kids without caseworkers. But the reality of it is, is that we have here a 16-week onboarding process and that 16-week process is pretty much thrown in the bin because we have kids without caseworkers.”

“I definitely noticed as soon as we started to refine our induction procedure and we really tied in the training and the timing of the training and we got management to help enforce that that we stick to things, we could already see a drop in numbers of staff turnover. Because people were much more confident about what they were doing while they were doing it. They had a buddy, they knew who to talk to, and so there was a much more of a process that gave them a better foundation. I'm not saying this is, you know, a smooth system, but I can definitely say with confidence that, you know, good staff induction and well-timed training makes such a big difference in how they feel from the start.”
Child & Family Services Manager, sector focus group

Recommendations

- Develop consistent approaches for staff induction across agencies, appropriate for the key professional roles.
- Adopt a standard framework for the initial mandatory training required for staff to understand the workplace policy and procedural requirements, including obligations under NSW legislation.
- Promote the induction process as an opportunity to identify staff skills and learning needs and to link new staff to the on-the-job support available to them.
- Incorporate principles and resources for cultural awareness and competence into induction programs and training modules.
- Provide access to flexible, self-directed training modules and resources that cater to individual learning styles and needs.

For more information

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- ¹⁴ Above n. 30, Modderman, Threlkeld & McPherson.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 653.
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