



The Impact of Leadership Turnover on Child Welfare Workforce Initiatives

QIC-TAKE

This is the QIC-WD's take on child welfare workforce issues, based on our experience

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"We take leadership changes as a given, as if that's just going to happen. I think most child welfare leaders stay about 18 months...Does this turnover have to happen at the leadership level? What would it take for that to be more stable? But if leaders do leave... we heard about how important middle managers are to keep initiatives moving in a Title IV agency."

— Randi Walters, Capacity Building Division Director, Children's Bureau (Aug. 2022)

Turnover among public child welfare leaders is prevalent. Across the eight QIC-WD intervention sites, leadership turnover was one of the most common implementation challenges observed by the QIC-WD team. Leadership changes can disrupt the implementation of a workforce initiative by shifting agency-level priorities, the organizational climate, or key staff.

Child welfare leaders may be appointed or hired in many different ways in different jurisdictions. In some states, the Governor appoints a cabinet-level child welfare director who oversees a stand-alone agency. This means that child welfare leadership changes follow the political election cycle with new governors appointing new agency leaders every few years. In addition, when an appointed leader leaves, there may be a delay in appointing a new director due to the pending political election cycle. This process can leave the leadership role unfilled for a time or filled by an interim leader or someone with limited understanding of the complexities of the child welfare workforce. This QIC-Take summarizes what our QIC-WD sites and team members experienced as it related to managing leadership turnover and what strategies they used to help maintain an initiative despite leadership turnover.

What We're Seeing

Across the eight intervention sites, every one of them experienced at least one leadership change. Some sites experienced multiple leadership changes over the five to six years the QIC-WD was involved with them. The departing leaders and their direct impact on the project varied widely, but reports of "agency leadership

changes" were consistently reported by our sites in every year of project operations.

Leadership turnover can have a positive, negative, or neutral impact on a workforce project. If the outgoing leader took an active role in securing resources, advocating for the project, making key decisions, and keeping things moving, their departure can be a big loss for the project. Conversely, if the leader was not a big advocate for workforce changes their departure can create an opportunity for someone to fill the void and infuse new life into the project. Furthermore, a neutral leader may slow things down because the project lacks someone to advocate for funding or other types of support and keep the project on top leadership agendas.

We saw a mix of these new leaders.

Depending on where the initiative was in its implementation, a new leader may have

had a significant impact. In one site, for example, leadership turnover occurred at a time when hiring needed to be done and leadership decisions were necessary to authorize contracts. Their resignation resulted in the loss of project momentum and caused a significant delay in implementation. We saw that leadership turnover had less of an impact when implementation was under way and things were allowed to continue as planned. But when major decisions

"I'm the third administrator in the space of probably four years, maybe five. So I think we're getting to the place where we're stable now, but that leadership instability, that leadership turnover, played a lot into some of the challenges, culturally as well."

— Sarah Henery, Administrator, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

needed to be made, there was sometimes hesitancy on the part of a new or interim leader to do anything significant, especially if it involved a departure from a plan that preceded them. Even at the end of the project, leadership turnover can negatively impact a workforce initiative. For example, the leader needs to support any sustainability plans to either continue the project or adapt the process to inform other initiatives. The timing of leadership turnover can be good at certain stages but deadly at others, even if implementation is complete and the project is at the stage of interpreting results or making decisions about sustainability.

Leadership turnover impacts the entire workforce, not just those directly involved in a workforce initiative. The QIC-WD team observed the impact frequent turnover had on the organizational climate in an agency. In many places, caseworkers, supervisors, and even managers demonstrated a “just wait it out” mentality. This was most prevalent if the workforce initiative was not something that caseworkers or supervisors believed in or supported. They knew that the initiative was likely to fade away with the changing of leadership. Such attitudes can negatively impact workforce initiatives.

Looking Ahead

Leadership changes are inevitable, but there are tactics that can help workforce initiatives survive these changes. Some key strategies are highlighted below:

- **Be proactive** and expect leadership to change during the initiative. When teams expect and plan for leadership turnover they are better prepared for when it happens, which it will.
- **Evaluate and keep a formal record of workforce initiatives.** Agencies often try a lot of workforce strategies to attract and retain employees. When new leaders are brought into the organization they may not be aware of what has been tried in the past, and oftentimes, there are only anecdotal stories of the experience and related outcomes. It is important for agencies to evaluate and track their workforce initiatives, especially in light of leadership turnover. Having documentation of the problem, the potential solution, and related outcomes can help new leaders support existing efforts. The QIC-WD evaluation

team regularly reported on interim findings to the project team (and leaders, as appropriate) to build a wider base of support. When people see results (even early ones) and get involved in interpreting the information and discussing implications, it can build buy-in and support for the project. Data dashboards and visualizations are tools that can help engage people with the data and make it more accessible.

- **Use tools to document the process.** Regardless of the initiative, how it is conducted is important. QIC-WD teams used team charters, risk assessment plans, communication plans, succession plans, sustainability plans, and formal agreements to safeguard some elements of the project. In sites that had contracts in place (e.g., financial agreements, memorandums of understanding, data sharing agreements) the contracts provided project continuity when a new leader joined, even if they had other agency priorities. Simple tools such as a agendas and meeting minutes that record key decisions over the life of the project can also help an initiative sustain when leadership changes.
- **Establish an implementation team to guide the workforce initiative.** The implementation teams guided the selection and implementation of their workforce intervention. All QIC-WD implementation teams created charters to guide their work and develop a plan to carry on in case of leadership changes. Everyone on the implementation team agreed to be an advocate for the initiative within the agency which helped support sustainability despite leadership changes.
- **Identify a project sponsor** (as part of the implementation team). This person was often a director or someone with decision-making authority who was regularly engaged in project planning, implementation, and evaluation. This was important because some workforce interventions involved human resources support, union buy-in, financial resources, external partnerships, or other critical elements that require the support of a high-level leader with authority. It was also important for this person to stay involved over time as budgets and agency priorities can shift and influential individuals

can help keep a project moving forward. Having a project sponsor as part of the implementation team allowed the team to have a designated person to advocate for the initiative in meetings and conversations at the highest level. In one site, for example, they had several leadership changes during the five years of the QIC-WD project, but the project sponsor remained constant. The project sponsor kept leadership informed of the project design, status, and next steps so that the QIC-WD project continued without any noticeable impact from the changes. In some locations the team had co-sponsors to help with continuity.

- **Identify and support project champion(s)** (not part of the implementation team). A champion was often a person with some authority who believes in and supports the project and can help maintain it. Advocates and champions embedded throughout the organization can help build awareness, which can help the project withstand leadership turnover. Oftentimes tenured managers in the child welfare system were essential to keeping the workforce project moving forward and often proved to be very adept at managing leadership turnover.
- **Build buy-in from caseworkers and supervisors** so the initiative has more widespread support than just the implementation team. Gaining buy-in with both leadership and staff is essential and was highlighted by our sites as a [key to successful implementation](#). Keeping staff informed of project progress and interim findings helped keep people engaged and support the workforce initiative. This is especially important when there is a research element and staff need to complete ongoing surveys or participate in an intervention. Otherwise, they may treat the project as a “flavor of the month” initiative that will pass with or without their involvement.
- **Get new leaders on board with the project as quickly as possible.** Implementation team members

can provide project history/context, the work plan, and the theory of change to new leaders to help build understanding of the problem being addressed and the strategy to address it. QIC-WD sites used meetings, developed messages to keep new leaders informed of progress, and shared documentation of the decisions made and next steps with new leaders. Implementation teams understood that they may have to use persuasive messaging to convince new leaders of the value of this effort. In many cases, teams relied on middle- or upper-level managers to act as the messenger. These individuals were often involved in briefings or presentations to inform new leaders about the initiative. At one QIC-WD site, the implementation team was not able to engage a new agency leader quickly and that individual made decisions that negatively affected project implementation. Furthermore, because the new leader was not knowledgeable of the workforce intervention, they did not communicate their decisions to the implementation team, which had a further negative impact on the project.

- **Build buy-in from Human Resources, IT or other relevant agency partners.** In some QIC-WD sites it wasn't the child welfare leader, but the HR leader, or a higher-level deputy or director, who played an important role in the project. It became evident that implementation teams needed to have a plan ready and succinctly share information on the goals of the project, progress toward those goals, and next steps with these leaders as well.

The QIC-WD worked directly with sites for five years (or more) to address persistent child welfare workforce issues related to turnover. Leadership turnover was a consistent challenge and impacted project operations in multiple ways. Thinking about leadership turnover is important for any project with external funding and a timeline that exceeds one to two years, such as a research project.