



## Protect Ohio's kids by investing in frontline staff and upstream treatment services

Every child has tremendous potential, and we all have a shared obligation to foster and protect that potential. State and local policies, investments, services, and priorities must work together to build communities where families can thrive.

When child abuse or neglect occurs, children deserve a timely response from their county public children services agency (PCSA). Best practice should focus on strengthening the family while keeping the child safe from harm, elevating healing and building relationships. With effective services designed to support families' strengths, many children can remain safely in their homes.

When removal from the home is necessary to ensure safety, children deserve to be placed in the most family-friendly and supportive environment possible to limit further trauma. That means placing with relatives or friends (kin) first and placing in family foster care only if kin placements are not available. Placement in a qualified residential treatment program or group home (congregate care) should be rare and of short duration. Every effort must be made to reunify children with their families as swiftly as possible.

Availability of community-based services, including prevention and mental health services, alongside a well-trained, competent children services workforce, are key to achieving this vision. Gov. DeWine's proposals to strengthen family supports and expand mental health services, together with the General Assembly's goal to build a 21st century workforce, will lead to better outcomes for Ohio families.

### Placement challenges:

Nearly 1 in 4 youth who came into PCSA custody in 2021<sup>1</sup> were diverted from juvenile corrections or entered primarily due to behavioral health needs or developmental/intellectual disabilities. Lack of community alternatives pushes these youth with multi-system needs into the children services system, even when abuse and neglect are not factors. PCSAs are nevertheless required to secure timely, appropriate placements for these youth with high-acuity needs. Nearly half of PCSAs report making 51-100 calls to private foster care networks and at least 11-50 calls to children's residential facilities before

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<sup>1</sup> Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO) (2022). Placement Crisis Affecting Children Services Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.pcsao.org/pdf/advocacy/PCSAOPlacementCrisisReportFeb2022.pdf>. Total number of children in care was calculated by some respondents to include those who came in and out of care, a few may have used the total number of children in care vs. came into care that year, and a couple may have included where custody remained with parent. PCSAs used actual and estimated numbers to account for the youth. According to ODJFS Public Facing Dashboard, there was a total statewide of 13,105 removals in 2021.

securing a placement. This increases stress for the child sitting in the agency waiting for placement and diverts limited staff time and resources from abused and neglected children.

When a placement cannot be identified in a timely manner, PCSAs are left with the only other option: for the youth to stay at the agency. An estimated 6% of youth who came into care in 2021 had to spend at least one night at the county agency; some youth stayed for multiple nights. The top three reasons PCSAs cite for these placement challenges are lack of viable treatment foster homes, staff shortages at private provider agencies, and lack of step-down placements for youth who have met their treatment goals and no longer require such an intensive environment, limiting space for youth with more serious needs.

## Opportunities

Medicaid's OhioRISE specialty managed care program and development of a new tiered foster care system by ODJFS will help. With the proper infrastructure, new prevention services that can be partially funded with federal dollars will address the needs of youth who could be better served in their homes rather than in out-of-home care (foster home, residential facility). However, these options will take time to mature and grow to scale. Thus, today's challenge will not go away anytime soon, especially with the workforce shortage impacting these sectors.

## Workforce Challenges

High levels of workforce burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and associated turnover are particularly prevalent within PCSAs<sup>2</sup>. Nationally, an average of 30% of workers leave their position each year; in Ohio, this average appears to be higher, with 38% of workers leaving their position in 2020<sup>3</sup>. Within children services, worker turnover is often driven by burnout and the psychological toll of the work<sup>4</sup>. Turnover is costly for taxpayers and can compromise the quality of services delivered to children and families, increasing the length of foster care placements and the risk of child maltreatment recurrence<sup>5</sup>.

## Opportunities

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<sup>2</sup> Graham, J. R., Bradshaw, C., Surood, S. and Kline, T. J. B. (2014). Predicting social workers' subjective well-being. *Human Service Organizations Management, Leadership & Governance*, 38(4), 405-417; Goodwin, L., Ben-Zion, I., Fear, N. T., Hotopf, M., Stansfield, S. A. & Wessely, S. (2013). Are reports of psychological stress higher in occupational studies? A systematic review across occupational and population based studies. *PLoSone*, 8(11), 1-22. <https://doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0078693>; Mor Barak, M. E., Nissly, J. A. & Levin, A. (2001). Antecedents to retention and turnover among child welfare, social work, and other human service employees: What can we learn from past research? A review and metaanalysis. *Social Service Review*, 75(4), 625-661.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, R., Bunker, A., & Parmenter, S. (2022). *Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Children Services Workforce*. The Ohio State University College of Social Work, 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Casey Family Programs (2017). *How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention?* Retrieved from: <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Ohio must take a comprehensive and coordinated approach to improving recruitment and retention of the children services workforce. Fortunately, a 2022 study, [Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Children Services Workforce](#), outlines such an approach with recommendations at both the state and local levels.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services recently made \$15 million available to county agencies to recruit and retain frontline staff. This grant funding, administered by PCSAO, is available for a flexible menu of interventions through June 30, 2023, and will help inform ongoing workforce strategies and investments.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendation

### Address Ohio's treatment and placement crisis.

- State leaders must demand a shared commitment across state government that includes joint accountability and ownership at both the state and local levels for these youth with multi-system, high-acuity needs and their families.
- State and local leaders representing relevant systems, service providers, and areas of expertise should be convened with a sense of urgency and a clear timeline to develop and implement a comprehensive, child-centered, trauma-informed, multi-system, rapid-response approach for youth with high-acuity needs. This approach must factor in the contributing causes of the current crisis, including the complex needs of youth, the relevant market forces, and workforce constraints, as well as potential new resources, such as OhioRISE, tiered foster care, and expansion of intensive crisis services.

### Stabilize and build the children services workforce.

- **Cut red tape associated with children services casework.** Children services workers want to increase their direct interactions with families and provide more prevention services to keep kids out of foster care, while spending less time on paperwork and rule compliance.<sup>6</sup>
- **Build understanding and public value for the children services workforce.** Caseworkers report frequent experiences of being disrespected and belittled by interagency professionals, who simultaneously expected them to resolve issues far outside their scope or capacity.<sup>7</sup>
- **Continue investing** in the children services workforce using proven strategies, including recruitment and retention bonuses, educational incentives, supervisor supports, workplace culture enhancements, and workload efficiencies.

This issue brief was authored by PCSAO

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips, R., Bunger, A., & Parmenter, S. *Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Children Services Workforce*, 19-26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.