

# Well-Being and the Child Welfare Workforce

The U.S. workforce is experiencing a mental health crisis.

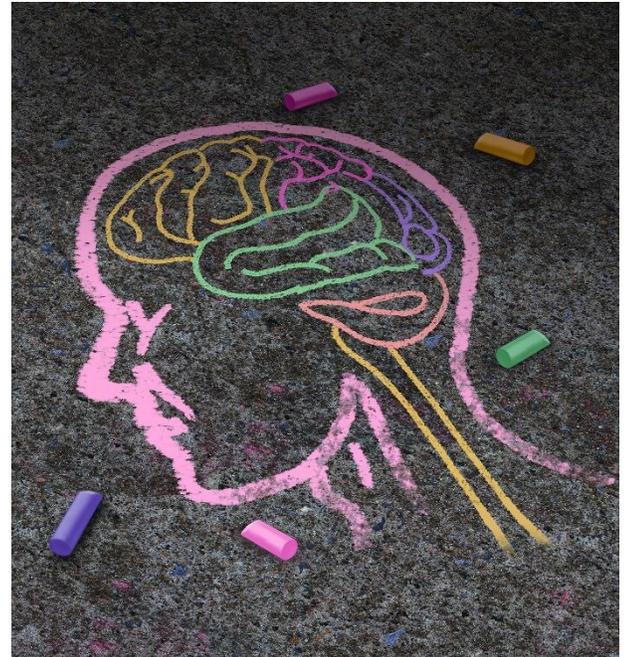
- 86% of U.S. workers report at least one mental health challenge, but only 33% receive treatment or support.<sup>1</sup>
- The rate of workers experiencing mental health issues is on the rise:
  - Depression, anxiety, and PTSD doubled from 4% in 2021 to 8% in 2023.<sup>1</sup>
  - Severe or chronic depression or anxiety increased from 8% in 2021 to 10% in 2023.<sup>1</sup>
  - 70% of workers report at least one symptom of secondary traumatic stress (STS).<sup>2</sup>

The Child Welfare workforce is also impacted.

- A report of workforce health found that, among 2,000 child welfare caseworkers, almost half met the threshold for secondary trauma, indicating they experienced PTSD-level symptoms related to secondary trauma.<sup>3</sup>
- Research suggests that child welfare workers might experience higher levels of job burnout than those in other fields. A study of social workers in California found that those employed in the public child welfare field reported higher levels of depersonalization (i.e., cynicism) and lower levels of personal accomplishment (i.e., self-efficacy) than those in other settings.<sup>4</sup>
- The high prevalence of occupational challenges such as psychological stress, burnout, and mental health concerns are well-documented in the legal field. While we do not have data specific to child welfare attorneys, we do know that attorneys generally suffer from higher levels anxiety, depression, and substance use-disorder when compared to other professions.<sup>5</sup> Attorneys are also at risk for secondary trauma and burnout with lawyers leaving or consider leaving their legal employer or the legal profession due to burnout or stress.<sup>6</sup>
- A recent American Bar Association study revealed that 30% of judges attributed their stress related difficulties to being exposed to dockets involving evidence of severe trauma.<sup>7</sup>
- Among a small sample of foster parents, it was revealed that 20% reported moderate to severe secondary traumatic stress symptoms, and 12% met criteria for PTSD related to their exposure to the details of their children's traumatic experiences while in the caregiving role.<sup>8</sup>

Not supporting mental well-being is costly.

- Workers experiencing mental health issues are at an increased risk for other health problems. They are also more likely to miss work and are less engaged.<sup>9</sup>
- Turnover leads to direct and indirect costs. Hiring new employees cost more than retaining them, ultimately costing U.S. businesses \$1 trillion yearly due to employee turnover.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, 86% of HR professionals report that offering workers mental health support can improve retention.<sup>11</sup>
- Employers that support mental health see a return of \$4 for every dollar invested in mental health treatment.<sup>12</sup> However, disregarding the mental well-being of child welfare workers could put the entire child welfare system at risk.<sup>13</sup>



## How can child welfare organizations support mental health and well-being?

Creating a supportive environment is the essential first step. Organizations and supervisors can transform the work culture and cultivate a place where individuals can thrive by:

- Fostering a positive work culture that prioritizes well-being versus productivity and includes a culture of support, collaboration, and empathy where individuals feel valued, respected, and supported by their colleagues and supervisors.
- Modeling and encouraging employees to prioritize their well-being by taking breaks, vacations, and mental health days.
- Training managers and supervisors to promote mental health and foster positive staff relationships via team building, employee engagement, and peer support.
- Wholeheartedly embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion values and offering ongoing training, dialogue, and support for staff from underrepresented groups.
- Providing adequate resources and support by ensuring individuals have access to the resources they need to effectively manage their workload and cope with stress.
- Identifying and addressing systematic issues within the organization that may contribute to burnout and secondary trauma, such as high caseloads, inadequate staffing levels, or a culture of perfectionism.
- Fostering a culture of recognition and gratitude by acknowledging and appreciating employees' hard work through celebrating achievements and milestones to foster a positive and supportive work culture.

## What can individuals working in the Child Welfare workforce do to support their mental health and well-being?

Preventing secondary trauma and burnout is crucial for maintaining well-being, especially for individuals working in demanding or emotionally taxing environments. Part of prevention involves implementing self-care practices and setting healthy boundaries. Individuals can benefit from:

- Prioritizing self-care activities such as exercise, meditation, hobbies, and spending time with loved ones.
- Establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life. This may involve limiting work-related communications outside of designated hours and avoiding bringing work-related stress home.
- Building a support network of colleagues, friends, and family members who can offer emotional support and understanding. Consider joining support groups or seeking counseling if needed.
- Reflecting on your experiences and emotions regularly. Journaling can be a helpful tool for processing difficult emotions and gaining insight into your thoughts and behaviors.
- Recognizing when you're feeling overwhelmed or burnt out and take proactive steps to address it. This may involve delegating tasks, saying no to additional responsibilities, or seeking additional support.
- Making time for activities that bring you joy and fulfillment outside of work. This could include spending time in nature, pursuing creative interests, or volunteering for causes you're passionate about.
- Reminding yourself of the reasons why you entered your field or profession in the first place. Connecting to your sense of purpose can help sustain motivation and resilience in the face of challenges.

- Educating yourself so you understand the impact of trauma and how resilience plays a role in learning specific coping strategies for your own experiences.
- Seeking help when you need it. Therapy or counseling can provide valuable tools for coping with stress and trauma. Don't hesitate to seek professional support if you're struggling.

## Definitions

- **Burnout** is a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress often Associate with work.
- **Secondary Trauma** is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.
- **Compassion Fatigue** is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others.
- **Compassion Satisfaction** is the amount of pleasure derived from helping others.

## Annotated Resource List

1. Lyra Health. (2023). *State of workforce mental health*. <https://bit.ly/3orxDjt> and <https://www.lyrahealth.com/2023-state-of-workforce-mental-health-report/>
2. Mota Muniz, S. (2021). *Mental health in child welfare social workers* (Publication No. 1197)[Electronic Projects, California State University, San Bernardino]. Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations; Office of Graduate Studies. <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2339&context=etd>
3. He, A. S., Grenier, A., & Bell, K. (2020). *Comprehensive organizational health assessment public Workforce Excellence Sites: Cross-site summary report: September 2020*. Albany: National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. <https://ncwwi.org/document/comprehensive-organizational-health-assessment-public-workforce-excellence-sites-cross-site-summary-report/>
4. Kim, H. (2011). *Job conditions, unmet expectations, and burnout in public child welfare workers: How different from other social workers?*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(2), 358–367. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S019074091000335X?via%3DiHub>
5. P. R. Krill, R. Johnson, & L. Albert (2016). *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*. *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, 10(1):p 46-52 [https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/Fulltext/2016/02000/The\\_Prevalence\\_of\\_Substance\\_Use\\_and\\_Other\\_Mental.8.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/Fulltext/2016/02000/The_Prevalence_of_Substance_Use_and_Other_Mental.8.aspx).
6. Augenbraun, S., Freij, M., Rasky, R., Sawyer, J., Sirkin, J. (2022). *Lawyer Well-Being in Massachusetts*, NORC at the U. of Chicago. [https://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/legaldocs/lgpdnlazvo/NORC\\_MA%20Lawyer%20Well-Being%20Report\\_Final\\_2023\\_2\\_1.pdf](https://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/legaldocs/lgpdnlazvo/NORC_MA%20Lawyer%20Well-Being%20Report_Final_2023_2_1.pdf)
7. Bibelhausen, J., Buchanan, B., Shaheed, D., Swenson D., Yetter K. (2020) *Stress and Resiliency in the U.S. Judiciary*. The Professional Lawyer. American Bar Association. [https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/profeslwr2020&id=7&men\\_tab=srchresults](https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/profeslwr2020&id=7&men_tab=srchresults)

8. Carew, NM (2016). *Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Foster Parenting Experience*. Michigan State University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://d.lib.msu.edu/etd/4160>
9. Allen, T. D., Cunningham, C., Fisher, G. G., Hammer, L., McHenry, J., Metzler, J., Oswald, F., Stolle, D. P., & Warner, R. (2022). *5 ways to improve employee mental health*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/topics/healthy-workplaces/improve-employee-mental-health>
10. McFeely, S., Wright, B. (2019) *This Fixable Problem Costs U.S. Businesses \$1 Trillion*. Gallup Workplace. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx>
11. SHRM Foundation. (2022). *Mental health in America: A 2022 workplace report*. <https://bit.ly/3MxCFmz>
12. National Safety Council (2021) *New Mental Health Cost Calculator Shows Why Investing in Mental Health is Good for Business*. <https://www.nsc.org/newsroom/new-mental-health-cost-calculator-demonstrates-why>
13. Boyas, J. F., Moore, D., Duran, M. Y., Fuentes, J., Woodiwiss, J., McCoy, L., & Cirino, A. (2022). Exploring the health of child protection workers: A call to action. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, 12(4), 381–390. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9958233>

#### Additional Resources List

1. Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. (2022). *The U.S. Surgeon General's framework for workplace mental health & well-being*. <https://bit.ly/4114cSG>
2. National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention. (2018). *Mental health in the workplace*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/pdfs/WHRC-Mental-Health-and-Stress-in-the-Workplac-Issue-Brief-H.pdf>
3. National Center for State Courts Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness (2022) *Judicial Wellness*. National Center for State Courts. [https://www.ncsc.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0040/79699/Judicial-Wellness.pdf](https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0040/79699/Judicial-Wellness.pdf)
4. Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL). Resources relating to Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, and Compassion Fatigue. <https://proqol.org/>. You can find self-care tools for organizations and individuals relating to burnout here: <https://proqol.org/burnout>. You can find self-care tools for organizations and individuals relating to vicarious trauma here: <https://proqol.org/secondarytraumaticstress>.