

# A System in Crisis: Stabilizing Florida's Child Welfare Workforce

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**One of the fundamental responsibilities of government is to ensure the safety and welfare of those in its care.** This includes our most vulnerable populations, such as children and families. Florida's child welfare system is designed to function as a partnership between the state Department of Children and Families (DCF), law enforcement and other agencies, the courts, service providers, and local communities. Of paramount concern is protecting the health and safety of the children it serves while minimizing intrusion into the families.

In 1996, after a media parade of horrors about needless child deaths, "lost" children, a critical lack of foster care beds, low adoption rates, and high case backlogs, the legislature began outsourcing child welfare services. In 1998, Florida became just the second state to mandate the outsourcing of all foster care and related services.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, under the leadership of Governor Jeb Bush, Florida completed its phased-in transition to a model of community-based care (CBC). Under this model, DCF contracts with CBC lead agencies (non-profits) to manage their local child welfare programs. The CBC lead agencies are then expected to enlist the support of a wide range of stakeholders to build broad community support for foster children. Each CBC lead agency (Figure 1) receives a portion of the state's child welfare budget and is required to provide all required services to all children and families referred to them for care, regardless of the impact on the agency's funding allocation.

## Workforce Instability in Florida's Child Welfare System

A child welfare case manager's job is both complex and difficult. The ideal candidates for case manager positions have a baccalaureate or advanced degree, usually in the field of social work, psychology, or other related discipline. Licenses and continuing education may be required to stay abreast of new techniques and legal requirements, or to develop or refine their skills and abilities. A premium is placed on communication, planning, organizing, and problem-solving skills. The development and honing of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to become an effective case manager often take several years.

## Case Manager Turnover

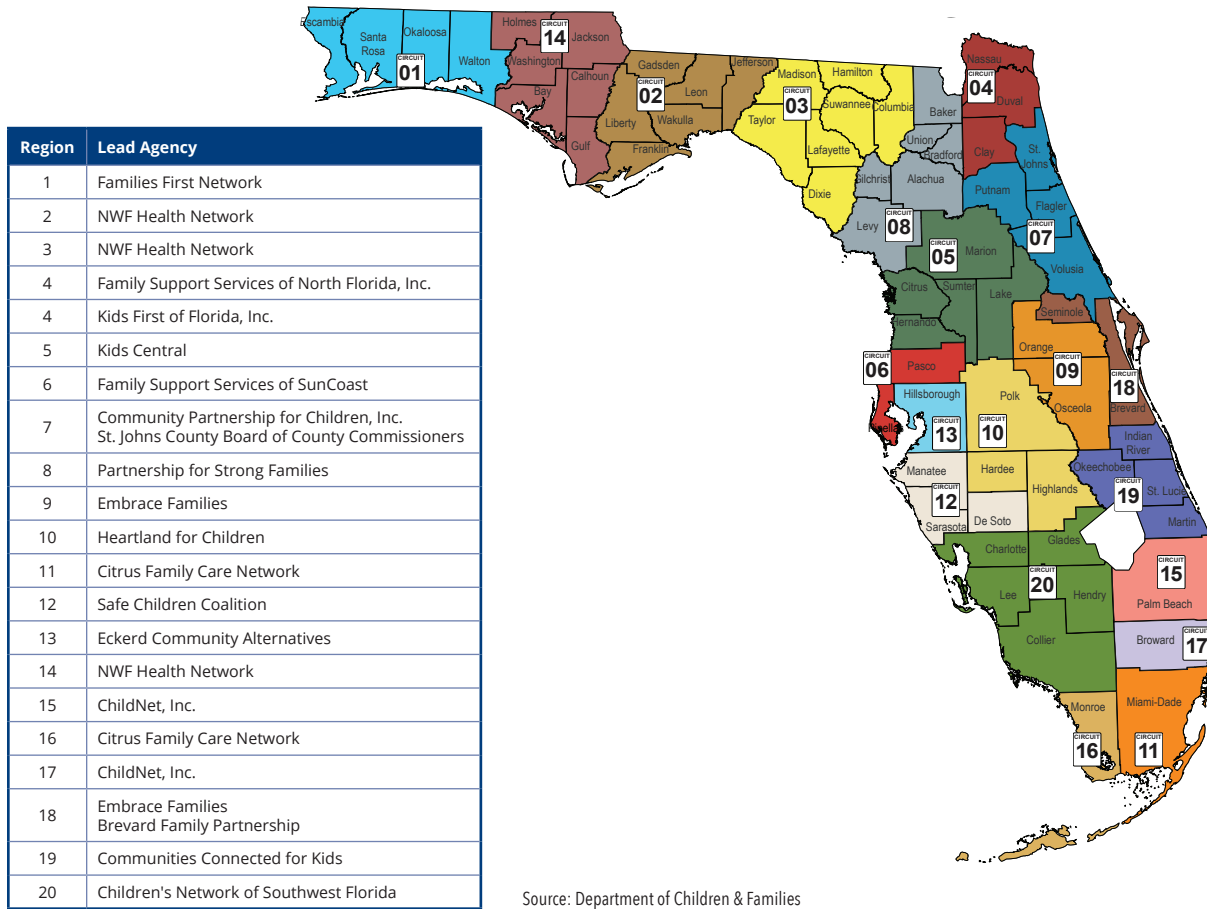
The problem is that many child welfare case managers leave the profession before developing and refining these skills. Turnover among child welfare case managers is a serious and expensive problem. A 2020 longitudinal study by the Florida Institute for Child Welfare found that 57 percent of new case managers had left their agency within their first 18 months of employment. After 3.5 years, approximately 81 percent of the new case managers had left their original child welfare agency.<sup>2</sup> Only 15 percent of Florida's child welfare case managers have tenure of three years or greater.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> American Children's Campaign, "The Elephant in Florida's Child Welfare," retrieved from <https://iamforkids.org/the-elephant-in-floridas-child-welfare/>, January 14, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Florida Institute for Child Welfare, "FY 2019-20 Annual Report."

<sup>3</sup> Kinds Central, Inc., "CPA Workforce Recruitment, Attrition & Retention Issues—National Landscape & Florida Focus," Presentation to the Florida Coalition for Children Leadership Conference, July 12, 2021.

**FIGURE 1. FLORIDA DCF COMMUNITY BASED CARE LEAD AGENCY MAP**



Why then do so many case managers, many of whom undertake this profession because they genuinely want to help vulnerable children and their families, have such short tenures? In a 2021 survey of child welfare case managers, compensation (54 percent) and a lack of progressive salaries (68 percent) were identified by respondents as the top reasons for their job dissatisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

When a case manager leaves, their caseload has to be absorbed by the remaining staff, many of whom are less experienced, until a replacement is hired. Placing higher caseloads on less inexperienced case managers increases their job dissatisfaction and accelerates

turnover of the remaining staff. The second part of this answer lies in the speed in which Florida's economy rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic. Florida's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by 0.3 percent in fiscal year 2019-20 and increased by a modest 1.8 percent during fiscal year 2020-21. The Economic Estimating Conference expects the economy to expand at a rate double the pre-pandemic rate (4.8 percent) during fiscal year 2021-22 before dropping to 3.1 percent in fiscal year 2022-23.<sup>5</sup>

Florida's job market experienced an "unprecedented contraction" in the second quarter of 2020 when a large part of the economy either shut down or workers were sent home to slow the spread of the pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> Kinds Central, Inc., "CPA Workforce Recruitment, Attrition & Retention Issues—National Landscape & Florida Focus," Presentation to the Florida Coalition for Children Leadership Conference, July 12, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Economic Estimating Conference, "Florida Economic Estimating Conference, December 20, 2021,"

Employment decreased more than 1.2 million jobs (14.0 percent) from February 2020 to April 2020. To date, more than 91 percent of the lost jobs have returned, yet Florida still has almost 112,000 fewer jobs almost two years after the start of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

With the onset of the pandemic, Florida's unemployment rate spiked from 3.2 percent in December 2019 to 14.2 percent in May 2020. By November 2021, the unemployment rate had decreased to 4.5 percent.<sup>7</sup> The Economic Estimating Conference expects the unemployment rate to plateau at about 4.0 percent, at which the state will reach its "full employment" unemployment rate.<sup>8</sup>

What this means for Florida case managers is that there are more jobs looking for people in Florida than there are people in Florida looking for jobs. This means case managers who are experiencing stress and burnout have employment options that will pay about what they are currently earning, but without the stress and burnout.

Although Florida's attrition rate for case managers has been an issue for a number of years, Florida's lead CBC agencies are currently reporting annual attrition rates greater than 50 percent.<sup>9</sup> Table 1 provides a 12-month rolling average of turnover rates for these lead agencies. This attrition generally occurs within the case manager's first three years, with an average tenure of two years.<sup>10</sup>

As shown in Table 1, seven of the lead agencies reported a 12-month rolling case manager attrition rate greater than 50 percent, with two agencies reporting a 12-month rolling case manager attrition rate greater than 75 percent. The median turnover rate is calculated at 47 percent.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Economic Estimating Conference, "Florida Economic Estimating Conference, December 20, 2021,"

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kurt Kelly, "Case-Manager Shortage Leaves Many Families in Dire Straits," Guest Commentary, Orlando Sentinel, December 17, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The median represents the midpoint -- one half of the lead agencies reported rolling turnover rates above this percentage and one half of the lead agencies reported rolling turnover rates below this percentage.

**TABLE 1. 12-MONTH ROLLING CASE MANAGER TURNOVER RATE (NOVEMBER 2021)**

Agency	Turnover Rate
Brevard Family Partnership	1.4%
Child Net Broward County	13.4%
Child Net Palm Beach County	17.4%
Children's Network of Southwest Florida	64.8%
Citrus Family Care Network	4.5%
Communities Connected for Kids	66.9%
Community Partnership for Children, Inc.	30.0%
Embrace Families	63.3%
Families First Network of Lakeview	47.0%
Family Support Services of North Florida, Inc.	58.3%
Heartland for Children	90.3%
Kids Central, Inc.	52.6%
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	33.3%
Northwest Florida Health Network	37.6%
Partnership for Strong Families	49.6%
Sarasota YMCA Safe Children Coalition	77.9%
St. Johns County Family Integrity Program	16.6%

Source: Florida Coalition for Children

## Case Manager Caseloads

Higher caseloads make it more difficult for the case managers to cultivate and maintain healthy working relationships with the children and their families. High caseloads, long hours, punishing caseloads, and frustrating outcomes all contribute to child welfare case managers' stress and burnout. A 2014 meta-analysis of 22 studies identified those variables that have the greatest effect on a case manager's decision to stay in the job or leave. Variables that have the greatest effect include stress, emotional exhaustion, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

The Department of Children and Families recommends caseloads for case managers be capped at 10-12 children. As shown in Table 2, all but one of the lead CBC agencies have average caseloads above this range. In fact, six of the reporting lead agencies have average caseloads greater than 20 children per case manager.

**TABLE 2. LEAD AGENCY CASE MANAGER  
CASELOADS (NOVEMBER 2021)**

Agency	Caseload
Brevard Family Partnership	16.3
Child Net Broward County	12.5
Child Net Palm Beach County	18.1
Children's Network of Southwest Florida	8.4
Citrus Family Care Network	16.1
Communities Connected for Kids	18.6
Community Partnership for Children, Inc.	27.9
Embrace Families	23.9
Families First Network of Lakeview	20.8
Family Support Services of North Florida, Inc.	17.1
Heartland for Children	29.8
Kids Central, Inc.	19.5
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	26.0
Northwest Florida Health Network	22.1
Partnership for Strong Families	25.0
Sarasota YMCA Safe Children Coalition	16.0
St. Johns County Family Integrity Program	18.8

Source: Florida Coalition for Children

High caseloads and attrition rates are not good for the at-risk child, not good for the child's family, and not good for the case manager. High caseloads and attrition translate to lower quality of services provided to dependent children and their families. This, in turn, reduces the levels of confidence and trust between the dependent child and their case manager and creates greater instability (e.g., more changes in placement, longer stays in foster care, lower permanency rates, etc.). Manageable caseloads and workloads can make a real difference in a case manager's ability to stay in their job, engage families, deliver quality services, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes for dependent children and their families.

## Case Manager Compensation

Attracting and retaining qualified candidates into the case manager profession in Florida is difficult in light of the very low salaries being offered. Florida offers an average statewide starting salary of \$37,064. Florida case manager salaries increase modestly to an average annual salary of \$39,646, which is \$9,173 (18 percent) below the national average of \$48,859. Florida's average case manager salary roughly translates to an average hourly wage of \$19.06. A living wage is the hourly rate that an individual in a household must earn to support him or herself and their family. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) developed a living wage calculator that provides information for individuals and households with one or two working adults and zero to three children. The only scenarios in which an hourly wage of \$19.06 provides a living wage for a child welfare case manager in Florida are households comprised of:

- One adult and zero children;
- Two adults (both working) and zero children; and
- Two adults (both working) and one child.<sup>12</sup>

## Costs to Florida Taxpayers

High caseloads and attrition rates are costly to Florida taxpayers. When a case manager leaves their job, the child welfare agency incurs costs associated with:

- Staff overtime, employee separation, and hiring/training new staff;
- Increased paperwork and case management, emotional exhaustion, supervisors redirecting time to providing direct service;
- Processing changes in placement (staff meetings, new reports, identifying and placing a child in new placement, paperwork, etc.);
- Increased time in foster care as a result of reduced permanency and decreased chances of reunification;

<sup>12</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Living Wage Calculation for Florida," retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/12>, January 17, 2022.

- Recurrence of abuse and neglect, including the cost of investigation(s) and foster care placement(s); and
- Failure to meet established performance standards.<sup>13</sup>

The average cost to the child welfare agency to replace an exiting case manager is about \$54,000.<sup>14</sup> Using 2,795 statewide case managers<sup>15</sup> and an average annual salary of \$39,686, Florida TaxWatch calculated an estimated range of costs to lead agencies for different turnover scenarios (see Table 3). As shown in Table 3, an annual case manager turnover rate of 50 percent, for example, or greater, costs the state somewhere between \$75.5 million and \$150.9 million annually. Every ten percent reduction in case manager turnover rates saves the state between \$3.32 million and \$22.16 million.

**TABLE 3. COST OF ANNUAL CASE MANAGER TURNOVER RATE**

Turnover Scenario	Estimated Cost (\$ Millions)
10%	\$15.09
20%	\$30.19
30%	\$45.27
40%	\$60.36
50%	\$75.45
60%	\$90.54
70%	\$105.63
80%	\$120.72
90%	\$135.81
100%	\$150.93

<sup>13</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, "How Does Turnover Affect Outcomes and What Can Be Done to Address Retention?" Updated October 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Top Causes of Staff Turnover at Child Welfare Agencies – and What to do About It," March 4, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/blog/top-causes-of-staff-turnover-at-child-welfare-agencies-and-what-to-do-about>, February 9, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Florida Department of Children & Families, "Case Management Efficiency Project (CMEP) Executive Leadership Briefing," November 15, 2019.

## Looking Ahead

A July 2021 Leadership Summit comprised of representatives from Florida's child welfare community, state leadership, and policy makers developed a framework for advancing Florida's system of child and family welfare.<sup>16</sup> One of five areas of focus was case management recruitment and retention. The Leadership Summit recognized the critical need to develop a model for case manager recruitment and retention that supports an "adequately compensated, well-trained, equipped, and supported workforce."<sup>17</sup> Strategies to develop this model include:

- Securing funding to ensure case managers are adequately compensated;
- Building and refining tools, testing, and screening assessments;
- Working to increase workforce stability by decreasing caseloads and enhancing supervisory culture; and
- Exploring the development of a salary progression model.

It is important that we not take our eye off the prize --- achieving the best outcomes for the vulnerable children and families that are served --- for one minute. An adequately compensated, well-trained, equipped, and supportive workforce of case managers is the cornerstone of Florida's child welfare system.

Without it, Florida's child welfare system will have a difficult time achieving those best outcomes, and with it, more case managers will remain on the job, leading to improvements in child welfare outcomes and cost savings for the lead agencies.

Given these factors, Florida TaxWatch supports additional funding for child welfare case managers.

<sup>16</sup> 2021 Florida Coalition for Children (FCC) Leadership Summit.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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## ABOUT FLORIDA TAXWATCH

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