



Addressing Workforce **Turnover** and **Retention** in Child Welfare

Hosted by: Amelia Franck Meyer & Kate Luster

—INTRODUCTION—

Workforce turnover in child welfare is not just a challenge—**it's a crisis**. Some systems are experiencing annual turnover rates as high as 80% (with pre-COVID averages hovering around 40%). These numbers are more than statistics—they reflect a field under incredible strain.

Co-hosted by Amelia Franck Meyer (Alia) and Kate Luster (Rock County Wisconsin Human Services), this roundtable convened system leaders for a confidential, solution-focused conversation on what is working now—and what it will take to build a sustainable workforce culture where people stay because they want to.

This UnSystem Roundtable took place on August 13, 2025.

—PARTICIPANTS—

- **Bobbi Johnson**, Director, Office of Child & Family Services (ME)
- **Jackie Hoover**, Director of Fiscal Policy & Compliance, PA DHS
- **Sheila Donaldson**, Deputy Director of Social Services, Wake County (NC)
- **Mollie Warren**, Director, Family & Children's Services, Boulder County (CO)
- **Karen Johnson**, Senior Director, Change in Mind – Social Current
- **Kate Luster**, Director, Rock County Human Services (WI) – Co-host
- **Amelia Franck Meyer**, Executive Officer, Alia – Co-host

—KEY INSIGHTS—

1. Make workforce well-being the strategy, not an afterthought

- Consider the impact of investing first in staff well-being and safety (emotional, psychological, organizational). That early focus—paired with continuous leadership coaching and a standing “needs → response → feedback” loop—creates the conditions for stability and better practice.
- Anchoring on staff well-being, aligning leadership, and improving culture sets the stage for remarkable retention gains, with one county experiencing 98% retention.

2. Prioritize values alignment, understanding that not all turnover is bad

- Realignment is part of change. There’s value to helping misaligned staff move on while retaining and supporting those aligned to the vision of partnering with families. This reframing changed “turnover” to a step toward a healthier culture.
- When you actively name values (i.e. working with families) and manage them, that clarity improves practice and retention.

3. Co-design with parents and hire lived experts

- Engaging parents with lived experience as co-designers (and colleagues) shifts culture, strengthens trust, and reconnects staff to their “why.” Staff often report they don’t want to work elsewhere if it means losing this authentic partnership.
- Parent partner roles, co-designed practice standards, and lived-experience hires across prevention and behavioral health make the work feel meaningful—and worth staying for.

4. Invest in leaders (they regulate the system)

- Leadership development and coaching—modeling self-regulation, vulnerability, boundary-setting, and aligned behavior—are key retention drivers.
- Staff have a much lower tolerance for unhealthy leaders than structural inefficiency or excessive workloads.

5. Pair culture with structure to stabilize teams

- Offer incentive (hazard) pay to reduce internal transfers.
- Reallocate roles toward prevention.
- Eliminate vacancies via attrition (not layoffs).
- Maintain healthy caseloads/supervision ratios.
- Keep in mind that when jurisdictions reduce out-of-home care, workloads will ease and staffing needs will drop accordingly—further stabilizing teams.

6. Make your well-being trainings authentic and meaningful

- Prioritize face-to-face sessions to build trust, practice regulation skills, and create real psychological safety—far more effective than webinars for sensitive content.
- Train leaders alongside frontline staff to model vulnerability, build a shared language, and align expectations; include “train-the-trainer” to sustain and scale.
- Teach stress physiology and trauma basics with clear guardrails and practice reps (e.g., regulation tools, boundary setting), and track behavior change—not just attendance.

—KEY INSIGHTS (CONT.)—

7. Don't only ask why people leave—ask why they stay

- Exit interviews are useful, but stay interviews are the secret ingredient to retaining your staff. Ask “Why have you stayed?” and design responses around those answers.

8. Empower staff to solve real problems

- Create education-to-practice pathways (e.g., tuition-supported internships, residencies, apprenticeships) to recruit and develop future caseworkers and supervisors.
- Invite cross-role staff to identify bottlenecks and co-design fixes.
- Implement staff-sourced solutions, share results, and iterate—driving buy-in, retention, and measurable improvements in timeliness and outcomes.

9. Clarify scope and build community pathways

- Codify what belongs to child welfare vs. behavioral health, juvenile justice, housing, and education. Use MOUs, decision trees, and clear after-hours ownership so child welfare isn't always the default responder.
- Build and map community pathways—mobile crisis teams, family resource centers, respite/kinship emergency beds, housing mediation, and youth stabilization options—to end “hoteling” and route needs to the right door the first time.
- Establish shared intake/routing, data-sharing and braided funding, plus joint huddles to troubleshoot flow. Track metrics (diversions from CW, days of hoteling avoided, response times, staff hours reclaimed, family outcomes) and iterate.

Seven Practical Moves You Can Make **Right Now**

- Stand up **stay interviews** and respond visibly to what you learn.
- **Co-design with families** and hire lived-experience roles across units.
- **Invest in leaders** (coaching, strategy cadence, feedback loops).
- Address **structure**: hazard/incentive pay, caseload ratios, attrition-based right-sizing, prevention roles.
- Train **in person**; mix staff and leaders; use brain science; teach new skills and meet staff where they are.
- Create staff-designed “**strike teams**” to solve pain points and build ownership.
- **Clarify scope** across systems (after-hours, placement crises) to protect the workforce.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO SYSTEM LEADERS

Stabilizing the workforce is possible—even now.

Start with people and values, pair culture with structure, and keep the work human. Progress rarely comes all at once; it comes in aligned steps, owned across the organization, and shared with community partners.

You're not alone in this work—and what you build will last.

- Bobbi, Jackie, Sheila, Mollie, Karen, Amelia, and Kate.

About UnSystem Roundtables

UnSystem Roundtables are a new initiative from Alia to bring together child welfare leaders, current and former, who have faced transformational challenges. These invite-only, small group conversations create a confidential space for honest reflection, shared learning, and strategic insight. This is a space for real talk—**not theory, not posturing, but the lived complexity of leading change when the stakes are highest.**

If you would like to participate in a future roundtable, or have a topic you'd like to see discussed, visit: aliainnovations.org/roundtables