



A DEEP DIVE INTO SOCIAL WORK BURNOUT

(And What Your Human Services Agency Can Do About It)

Social work burnout and turnover have always been a significant problem in human and social services. But today the stakes are higher than ever.

Frontline workers are mentally, emotionally, and physically drained. Demanding work. High stress. Low pay. Secondary trauma. These factors have affected social workers for a long time.

On top of this, social workers have been quietly shouldering the burden of the pandemic for nearly two years now. The compounding collective trauma has impacted workers and human services leadership on multiple levels—themselves, their staff, and the populations they serve.

Now, influxes of need and turnover are coming to a head, creating a perfect storm that could crumble an already taxed system if not addressed quickly.

The time to address burnout and turnover is now since the negative impacts of high turnover on agency morale, productivity, and outcomes for children and families has long been established.

Keep reading to find out:

- **What causes social workers to burn out?**
- **How do social worker burnout and turnover impact the community?**
- **How can you help social workers manage burnout?**
- **What role does technology play in supporting social workers and supervisors?**



WHAT CAUSES SOCIAL WORKERS TO BURN OUT?

Burnout is not a new problem. Heavy caseloads, demanding work, organizational culture, and the weighty responsibility of serving at-risk children take a toll on every social worker at some point. A combination of historic and current factors is contributing to significant levels of burnout today.

Historic factors that continue to cause burnout.

The Ohio State University (OSU) College of Social Work and Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO) recently published [an analysis of Ohio's child welfare workforce](#) that summarizes some common and well-known factors:

"Long hours, the possibility of physical danger, secondary traumatic stress, low pay, and lack of respect contribute to high turnover. Add to that the copious rules and regulations that must be synthesized and put into practice along with sound judgment and critical thinking skills – primarily by individuals fresh out of college – and the result is a workforce constantly in flux."

While most people entering the field expect the job to be stressful, many never expect the added stress of paperwork and documentation. However, we consistently hear from social workers that they spend around 70% of their time on paperwork when they don't have proper tools for managing it—a number that's clearly problematic considering these workers would rather be spending that amount of time with children and families. When Northwoods conducted our own research in 2015, over a third of survey respondents cited paperwork, inefficient tools, and poor systems as reasons for burnout. (Today the number is even higher as [64% of child welfare burnout is said to be work-related.](#))


Lack of peer, supervisor, or agency support—along with the perceptions staff hold about their agency's organizational culture—have long been shown as chief contributors to burnout as well. Conversely when done right, those same factors can be strong reasons that workers choose to stay in this difficult work.

The pandemic intensified this problem. Workers felt increasingly isolated from their typical support structures, leaving agencies looking for tools to help their workforce connect and empower support networks. As more and more local and state agencies implement remote and hybrid work models to stay competitive in recruitment, these tools have become even more critical.

Increasing client need in the community.

From the opioid epidemic to COVID-19 and everything in between, workers continue to bear the burden. There's been no reprieve and minimal recognition—they've just kept working at the same pace, but under even more challenging circumstances.

For example, on top of their usual workload, social workers at child welfare agencies across the country have been [reaching out to families previously involved in the system to provide assistance](#) through diapers, formula, and other necessities to prevent children from entering foster care.



These same workers are now also stepping up to find supports and services for thousands of kids being affected by the youth mental health crisis, along with an increasing number of youth previously involved in other systems of care who are now being referred to child welfare instead. Lastly, substance abuse and addiction continue to increase, creating the ever-growing need for complicated case and treatment plans across all social services program areas. At the end of 2020, more than 40 states had seen increases in opioid-related mortality along with ongoing concerns for those with substance use disorders.

Clients' needs are greater than ever, and they aren't going to heal overnight. The need will just keep getting more complex. This burden weighs heavily on social workers who are already overwhelmed.

Ongoing turnover at all levels of the agency.

Not only are agencies struggling to retain quality workers, but now are also seeing longer delays in filling open positions. When positions do get filled, the workload waiting for them can be immediately overwhelming—which can in turn contribute to that new worker exiting quickly. (You can see how this would quickly add up when it costs an agency \$54,000 on average to replace an exiting worker.)

The problem is exacerbated because this turnover isn't just happening on the frontlines. Supervisors, program administrators, directors, and support staff are leaving too, which feeds the cycle. Here's one example: every time a social worker leaves, supervisors have to pick up their workload or redistribute it to another person who's already overworked. Neither option is ideal, which adds to their already high stress. Similarly, when a supervisor leaves, social workers lose a key job resource, coach, and mentor, which decreases their job satisfaction and increases the likelihood they leave.

A shrinking social services workforce spurred by the "Great Resignation."

Another contributing factor is a turbulent labor market. With so much shake-up across all industries, human services agencies are now competing with local retailers, fast-food chains, and other lower stress job alternatives to attract talent. It's also nearly impossible to compete with the private sector's ability to be flexible and increase wages.

Part of the issue is that workers aren't just leaving their agency jobs—they're leaving the field entirely. Yet the need for social workers is expected to increase 12% over the next eight years. (National organizations are taking notice. For example, the National Association of Social Workers recently concluded their "Time is Right for Social Work" campaign to target this exact issue.) The pool of experienced applicants just keeps shrinking, while the need keeps growing, which exacerbates the problem.

BURNOUT BY THE NUMBERS

- **64%**. Social workers experiencing burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **10%**. How much a social worker's odds of departure increase with each additional family case assigned in their first week of practice.
- **20-40%**. Annual turnover in child welfare for the last two decades.

HOW DO SOCIAL WORKER BURNOUT AND TURNOVER IMPACT THE COMMUNITY?


Burnout, and the turnover of staff that results from it, doesn't just impact social workers and case managers. It creates ripple effects across the entire agency and the communities it serves.

Here's one example of this cycle of negative outcomes:

- **Social worker burnout.** The helpers are tired and need more support. Social workers are mentally, emotionally, and physically drained.
- **High turnover.** Workers don't have the resources and community support to do the job they signed up to do and move families forward, so they leave.
- **Unmanageable caseloads.** Workers who stay lack the time, tools, and information they need to collaborate or manage complex cases, which results in the agency staying involved longer.
- **Diminished outcomes for families.** Families don't receive the services and support they need. Case continuity is disrupted, which lengthens the path to permanency.
- **Rising agency costs.** Agency costs relating to things like overtime, hiring, and training will rise, as will the costs of supporting kids in care as their length of stay increases.
- **Inability to meet your mission.** Mounting pressures and time spent trying to stay afloat negate your agency's mission and ability to quickly deliver high quality, holistic services.

Here's another way to break down the negative impacts of burnout and turnover. Each column on its own is troubling but seeing them together paints a more complete picture of why the cycle must be broken:

IMPACT ON WORKERS:	IMPACT ON CLIENTS:	IMPACT ON THE AGENCY:	IMPACT ON THE PROFESSION:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caseloads go up for workers who stay, causing even more stress and strain • Employee morale declines • Work-life balance becomes nearly impossible • Supervisors have to redirect their time to fill in and put out fires instead of coaching and mentoring workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families don't receive the level of service they need (or it takes longer to get services in place) • Cases drag out and kids stay in the system longer • Clients are forced to re-live trauma when repeating their story to multiple workers • Families are less invested in their own growth and outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing legal and financial risk if workers struggle to meet requirements • Increasing costs to support kids in care for longer • Costly and hard to advance practice models when constantly in training mode • Failure to deliver quality services creates lack of trust and support from community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer social workers are entering or staying in the field • Social work viewed as a stepping stone instead of a long-term career path • Social workers aren't considered a key professional by other stakeholders because there's always someone new



Tackling the current staffing and workforce crises will take a multi-pronged approach and a deep understanding of contributors of retention, along with innovative strategies for recruitment.

In the current landscape, many agencies are finding they are not able to “hire their way out” of their staffing crises.


Making an investment in workforce, along with innovative tools to support their work and collaboration with one another, can seem daunting when operating under crisis—but making bold moves towards workforce retention and recruitment may be the only path to stabilization.

HOW CAN YOU HELP SOCIAL WORKERS MANAGE BURNOUT?

You may not be able to control all the contributing factors of social work burnout, but you can certainly offer tools and strategies to help lessen the burden in a way that both helps individual workers find balance while improving your agency’s overall retention efforts.

Creating an environment that truly supports and empowers workers to stay connected and focus on the mission, no matter where they work, is critical. Here are some steps to get started:

- **Prioritize coaching.** Research has shown that supervisor and peer support are predictors of retention, even through high caseloads. Prioritizing mentorship and coaching can feel impossible when stuck in survival mode, but not doing so will only worsen the cycle. Work with agency leadership to carve out intentional time for quality supervision amongst the many other responsibilities. Rather than focusing solely on the case list, help staff take a beat, and a breath. Ask: What’s working? What’s not? Where are they getting stuck? What other tools or resources do they need?
- **Be intentional about creating community.** Set time each week to check in on how workers are doing separate from supervision, coaching, or case reviews, especially during times when it feels difficult to stay connected. Find times to encourage positive workplace climate too. For example, if workers can’t get together in the lunchroom like they used to, host a virtual meeting during work hours that’s dedicated to de-stressing and bonding instead. Or take the first 10 minutes of a virtual unit meeting to talk about workers’ lives outside the office. Even when you’re busy, it’s essential to prioritize this time to connect and re-charge.
- **Make time for mission-critical work.** Many caseworkers are driven by a desire to make a difference and take care of those who need it most, and job dissatisfaction is a strong predictor of intention to leave. Removing unnecessary work and administrative obstacles that stand in the way of doing so will go a long way in minimizing burnout.

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- **Embrace hybrid.** Recruiting workers in the current job market requires human services (which has traditionally been highly brick-and-mortar) to embrace the way workers want to work and know is possible with current technology. While remote workstations were initially scraped together due to necessity, now it's time to look at investing in the tools to fully equip your workforce to be successful in a hybrid model. Permanent flexible work policies (and the right tools to support them) are how you'll stay competitive to applicants, while retaining current employees looking for the work-life balance benefits of a remote/hybrid work model.
 - **Be flexible.** Trying to force caseworkers into only being problem solvers on a set schedule, Monday through Friday, is counterproductive (even with a physical office space!). Workers shouldn't be confined, but they also shouldn't have to be available and connected all day, every day, or else they'll burn out. The focus should be cultivating an environment where caseworkers feel they can be at their most creative. Do that, and quality outcomes are sure to follow.
 - **Move beyond self-care.** The literature is rich with [self-care tips and techniques](#), but sometimes self-care is just another thing on an already overwhelming to-do list. ("My safety plan is due tomorrow; I don't have time to listen to this Zen playlist on Spotify!") Invest in [holistic worker well-being care](#), in big and small ways. Mandate worker mental health and well-being PTO, bring in professionals that workers can process with in a safe space, practice breathing techniques at the start of the unit meeting, or carve out time in the work week for emotional care on an organizational level. This will help your staff prioritize their self-care without feeling like they have to sacrifice other responsibilities.


WHAT ROLE DOES TECHNOLOGY PLAY IN SUPPORTING SOCIAL WORKERS AND SUPERVISORS?

Technology that's purpose-built for human and social services plays a key role in reducing stress and burnout in both social workers and their supervisors.

For starters, technology that removes unnecessary work and administrative obstacles can help overwhelmed workers better manage their time and focus on spending more of it with clients. The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) summarizes [why time management \(and therefore the technology that supports it\) is so valuable](#):

"Employees who better manage their time are likely to experience higher job satisfaction and receive higher job performance ratings than employees who are less able to manage their time well (Aeon et al., 2021). They are also more likely to have lower stress, emotional exhaustion, and other types of psychological and physiological stress (Aeon et al., 2021)."

Think about all the administrative tasks that social workers are responsible for doing in a day. Filling out forms, completing documentation, sifting through disparate electronic or paper filing systems to find and retrieve critical files, getting signatures from clients, collaterals, and colleagues, copying documents, organizing files—the list goes on. Automating and streamlining these tasks gives workers more time to spend doing the work they love, making a difference, and taking care of those who need it most.



Let's look at a few more specific examples of how technology helps manage social worker burnout by empowering social workers to fully focus on families:

- **Building trust.** While some workers fear the introduction of technology in their day-to-day work may distract them from building relationships, technology can allow workers to engage and have meaningful conversations with families in new ways. The right tool can help workers partner with clients to efficiently collect and make use of necessary documents, forms, photos, and other content, without disrupting their interactions or causing discomfort, which gives them more time to focus on helping families reach their goals in a timely manner. Additionally, workers and families can collaborate on case plans, safety plans, or referrals for services, and route the documents to the pertinent parties in real time, which adds a layer of transparency to the process and increases the likelihood that parents will be more forthcoming and cooperative. Knocking down barriers that stand in the way of engaging families goes a long way in helping social workers feel more fulfilled.
- **Empowering staff with information.** With the right tools, social workers and their supervisors can quickly uncover timely and relevant case information, including those critical details that were previously hidden or buried. (With technology that works from anywhere, this is true whether they are accessing files in the office, at home, with a family, or even in their car in a fast-food restaurant's parking lot.) Social workers can have more confidence in their ability to make and conclusively support decisions, which lowers their stress and helps boost morale, and supervisors have better visibility into case content to provide more impactful support.
- **Supporting collaboration with co-workers.** Technology can also help workers, their colleagues, and supervisors stay connected, share information, and share work. Consider a complex case where workers and supervisors from multiple teams need to come together to make a decision. When only one person can access the case file at a time, it greatly slows down the team's ability to move the case forward. But with the right tools, everyone who is involved can see and discuss the same photo or document, or complete, sign, or review the same form, at the same time. They can ask creative, probing questions and propose new or different approaches to supporting that specific family.
- **Supporting collaboration with clients and providers.** Reducing the time it takes to exchange information with clients and providers is another way that technology allows social workers to focus on planning and providing the right care for the people they serve. For example, with the help of a client engagement portal, workers can share documents and forms with people outside the agency who have a stake in the case. External collaborators, whether the clients or another member of their care and treatment provider teams, can use any device to securely submit the requested information electronically. Today just the simple task of collecting medical records or getting a client signature to move forward with services can take a significant amount of a worker's time, reducing the time they can focus on working to affect change. With the introduction of tools that ease the everyday cumbersome tasks, workers can process applications, collect documentation, get forms signed, and connect clients to services faster.

- **Enhancing supervision.** Supervisors often try to know everything about everyone on every case assigned to their workers—a daunting task. Technology allows supervisors to quickly surface key information within each case to get an overview of a family’s story. They can spend more time providing counseling and support or validating workers’ decisions instead of always having to get caught up and relearn important case details. Easing administrative burdens created by systems that do not serve supervisors well will allow them to tackle the bigger picture initiatives, like vetting and implementing new evidence-based practice models or providing professional development opportunities for the agency’s next generation of leaders. These are the tasks an agency wants their supervisors to be able to focus on and may also help reduce supervisor burnout by helping them feel more effective at their role as mentor.
- **Assisting in recruitment.** Younger workers coming into the field have different expectations for their employers. They are looking for workplaces that embrace remote and hybrid models, while keeping them connected to peers and supervisor support. Technology is second nature to these workers, so they expect intuitive tools that support their work (and will quickly grow disheartened with inefficiencies of paper-based or antiquated systems). Investment in tools designed to assist the frontline work will serve to aid in recruitment and retention.
- **Onboarding new social workers.** New social workers must be able to quickly acclimate to new cases that they’ve often inherited from previous workers. Technology helps make the knowledge transfer more efficient by allowing new workers to easily sift through files and quickly familiarize themselves with the key details of each case, including what happened before they got involved. Everything previous workers knew, they know now too. They can pick up the conversation with a family where the previous worker left off, which reduces their burden of constantly feeling two steps behind. Technology with embedded support features (think in-app help guides, in-app video training, or live chat) is especially helpful here so that new workers can quickly learn to use the tool (without a significant time investment from supervisors or senior peers), so they can start to tackle their casework.

CONCLUSION

Burnout and turnover always have, and likely always will be, challenges in human and social services.

The good news? You can do something about it.

The right strategies for supporting social workers paired with purpose-built technology to empower meaningful social work will go a long way in successfully recruiting and retaining a workforce that is happy, healthy, and able to help families. Get in touch to discuss how Northwoods can help.

Additional resources: <https://info.teamnorthwoods.com/social-work-burnout>