



University of
Pittsburgh

School of
Social Work

THE PENNSYLVANIA CHILD WELFARE RESOURCE CENTER

**ANNUAL REPORT
2022-2023**



Message from the Director

With the support of our partners and guidance from our Steering Committee, the Resource Center continued its efforts to: build and sustain a strong workforce, build and sustain strong organizations, and build and sustain a strong child welfare system. We do this through our continuum of services, including training, transfer of learning, technical assistance, evaluation, and project management of a multitude of system improvement efforts.

Much of our work continued to center on stabilizing and strengthening the workforce. We advanced efforts to provide evidence-informed education and resources to child welfare leaders and other key partners. We provided county-specific and statewide infographics to lay a foundation for key metrics, such as turnover and vacancy. We provided county-specific technical assistance to address organizational challenges and improve workforce well-being. Over 600 new child welfare professionals completed the certification series, Foundations, and over 100 new supervisors completed the certification series, Foundations of Supervision.

The Resource Center continued to support numerous statewide initiatives, including Round 3 of the CFSR. Sixty-five in-depth qualitative reviews occurred in 7 counties across the Commonwealth. Despite many challenges faced by our system, the results demonstrated the workforce's commitment to maintaining meaningful visitation with children on their caseload, which allowed Pennsylvania to pass Item 14 – Caseworker Visits and avoid a federal penalty! Efforts to ensure youth and parents with lived experience are heard and inform decision-making continued through a variety of approaches, including the Youth Advisory Board, parent-led technical assistance, and the bi-annual FGDM conference.

Finally, The Resource Center continued forward in our journey toward becoming an anti-racist organization. While efforts continued to focus on strengthening our internal foundation, we have also started to make concrete enhancements to our services to integrate race equity principles. We hope you find the following highlights of our work a reflection of our shared partnership and commitment to support Pennsylvania's child welfare system and ultimately, its children and families. My sincere gratitude to all our system's first responders. On behalf of the entire team, it truly is our continued privilege to work in collaboration with you.

Mike Byers

The Resource Center Steering Committee (RCSC) meets to help guide our services and products, inform our priorities, and shape our future direction. We thank the following members for their time and dedication.

The Resource Center Steering Committee External Members:

**Brian Bornman • PCYA Executive Director •
County Commissioners Association of
Pennsylvania**

**Crystal Natan • Executive Director •
Lancaster County Children and Youth**

**Diane Michel • Human Services Analyst
Supervisor • DHS Office of Children, Youth,
and Families**

**Amanda Dorris • Director • DHS Bureau of
Policy, Programs, and Operations**

**Michelle Graziano • Administrator •
Susquehanna County Children and Youth
Services**

**Corrie Harold • Child Welfare Training
Supervisor • Allegheny County Department
of Human Services**

**Robin Chapolini • Deputy Commissioner
• Philadelphia DHS Policy Development and
System Enhancement Division**

**Andrea Rudek • CYF Training Department
Manager • Allegheny County Children,
Youth, and Family Services**

**Terry Clark • President & CEO • PA Council
of Children, Youth, & Family Services**

**Meredith Ketchum • Administrator •
Warren County Children and Youth
Services**

**Nadine Miller • Administrator •
Montgomery County Children and Youth**

**Rozalyn Burke • Administrator •
Wayne County Children and Youth Services**

**Rosa Stokes • Deputy Director • Chester
County Children and Youth**

**Maria Torres • Administrator •
Northampton County Children, Youth,
& Families**

**Erin Moyer • Administrator • Lebanon
County Children and Youth Services**

**Leah Raker • Director • Centre County
Children and Youth Services**



Building a Strong Workforce

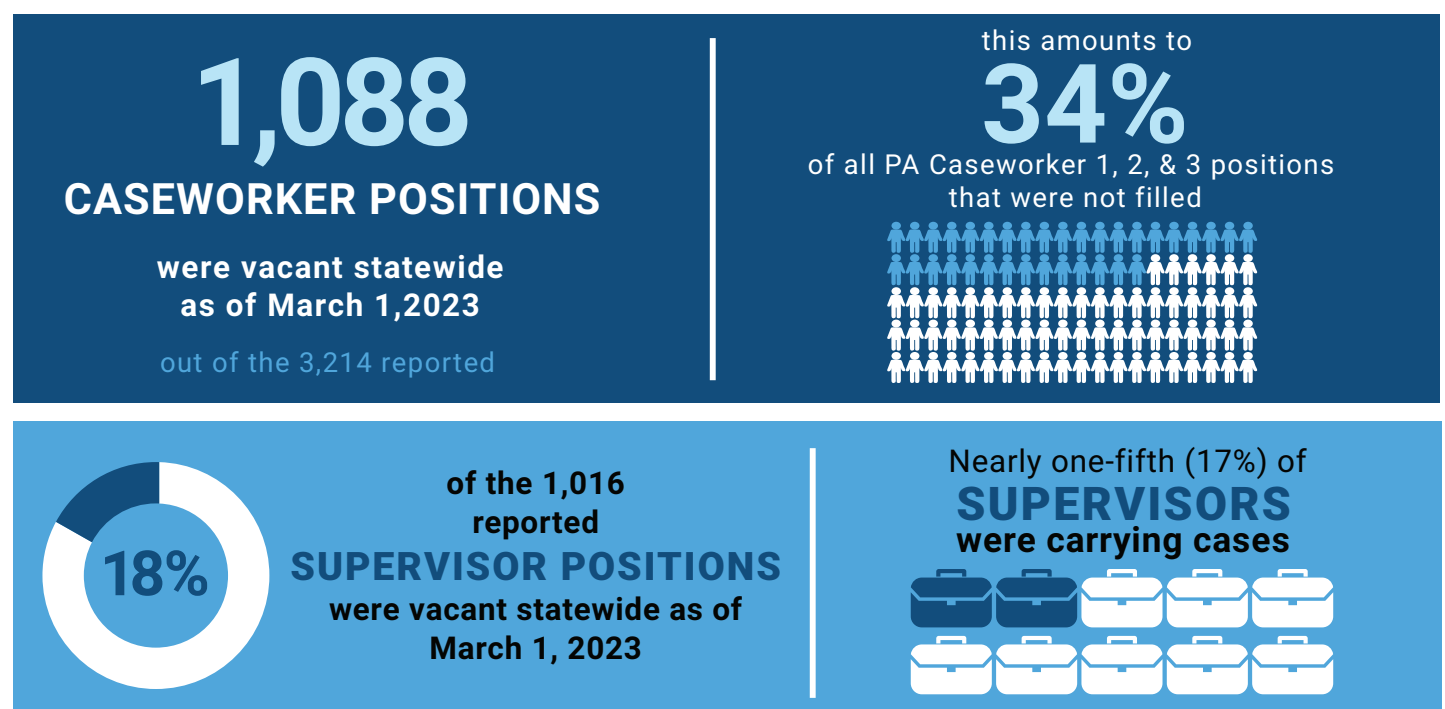
The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center's (CWRC) Mission is to prepare and support exceptional Child Welfare Professionals and systems through education, research, and a commitment to best practice. Over the last year, the workforce has needed substantial support as county children and youth agencies faced ongoing staffing challenges. CWRC regularly gathers information to improve understanding of the state of the workforce and uses this information to develop and deliver enhanced products and supports across the continuum of services to better support and sustain Pennsylvania's child welfare workforce.

CWRC's most recent analysis of data gathered via the Needs-Based Plan and Budget process shows that the public caseworker workforce turnover rate is growing. The median turnover rate between SFY 17-18 and SFY 20-21 ranged from 16% to 18% for publicly employed caseworkers. However, in SFY 21-22, this figure jumped to 23%, or approximately one in four staff leaving their agency. Some of this may be reflective of a more general workforce departure experienced during the COVID pandemic.

At the request of OCYF, CWRC gathered point-in-time data from CCYAs in March 2023 to learn more about the vacancy rate among staff and supervisors. As illustrated in Figure 1, approximately one-third of the public and contracted caseworker positions were vacant. In addition, 18% of the supervisor positions were vacant and of those supervisors who remained, nearly 20% were carrying cases.

PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE STATISTICS

A snapshot of public agency-employed and contracted case-carrying child welfare staff and supervisors*



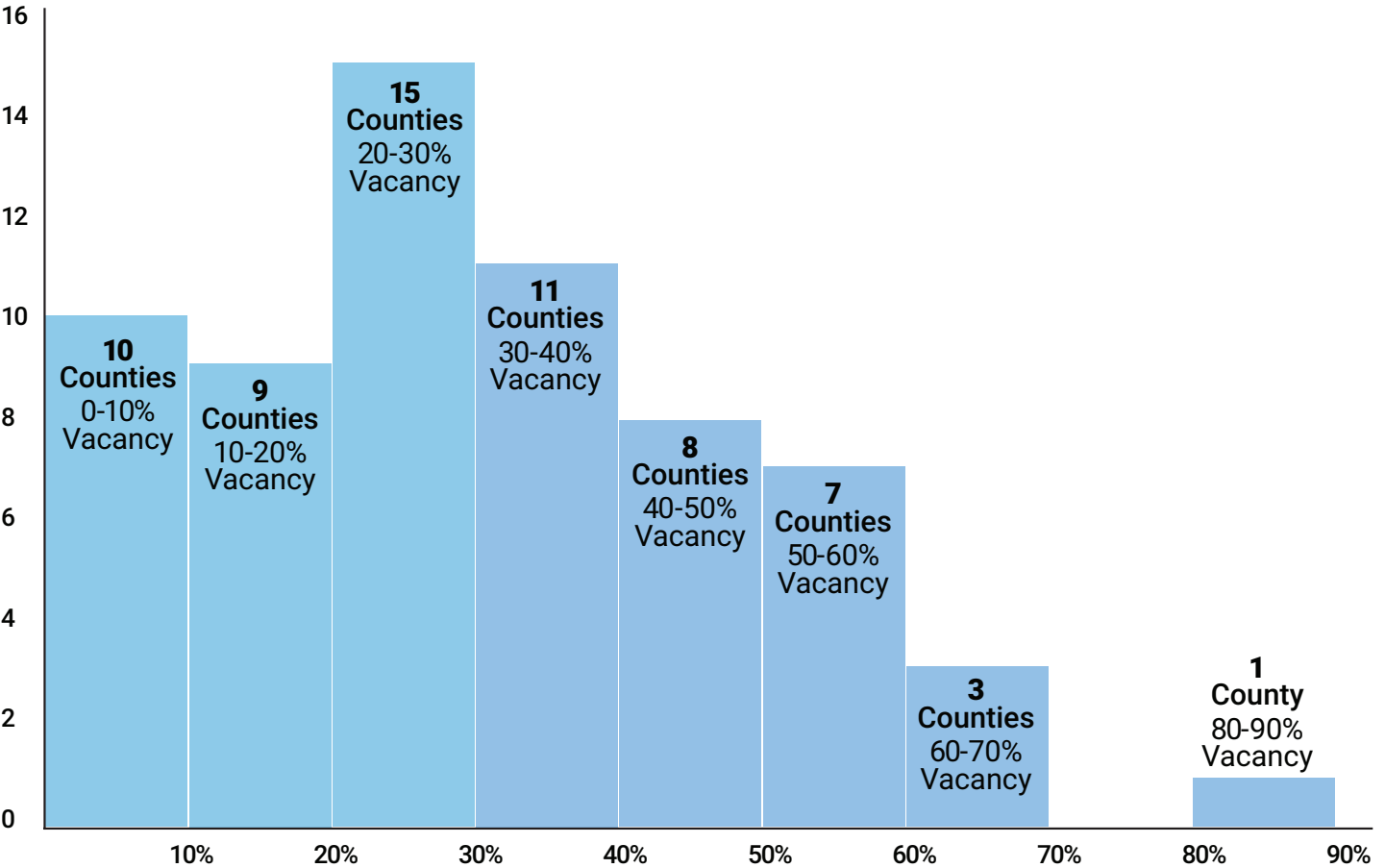
*Analysis includes data about contracted staff and supervisors from 8 of the 10 public child welfare agencies that utilize contracted staff

Figure 1: Workforce Statistics



As illustrated in Figure 2, caseworker vacancies differ across counties with rates ranging from no vacancies to a rate of nearly 90%. While the largest number of counties (15 counties) had a 20-30% vacancy rate, there were 30 counties with vacancy rates of 30% or higher and 11 counties had vacancy rates of 50% or higher. This means that these 11 counties had less than half of the staff necessary to serve their population.

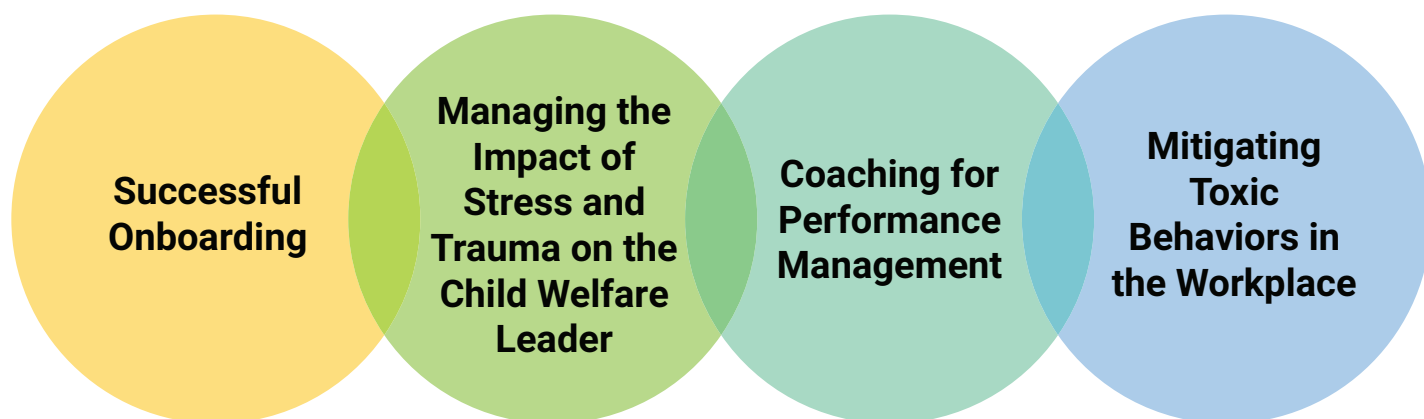
Counties in Pennsylvania are currently impacted by caseworker vacancy differently.
As of March 1, 2023, thirty counties had vacancy rates of 30% or higher



Percent of vacant caseworker 1, 2, & 3 positions
**Analysis includes data about contracted staff and supervisors from 8 out of 10 public child welfare agencies that utilize contracted staff*

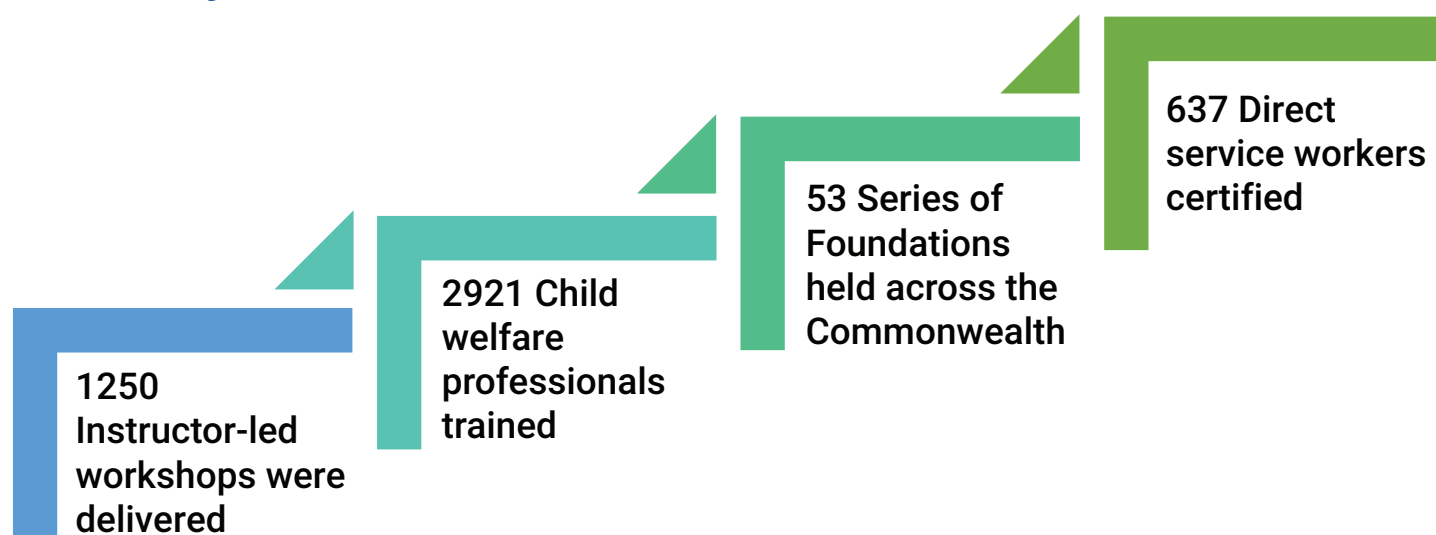
Figure 2: Caseworker Vacancies

In order to support counties and the state, understand the extent of the workforce crisis, work to identify solutions/strategies, and communicate and advocate for support, CWRC shared the data referenced above directly with counties and OCYF and shared data at PCYA and the Child Welfare Council. Given the numerous workforce challenges highlighted above, the CWRC prioritized the delivery of recruitment and retention-focused training to leaders throughout the state. Offerings included training to service providers, county commissioners and county children and youth administrators among other leaders. Topics included:



CWRC continued to develop and deliver a wide array of training to support and build competence, confidence, and compassion among Pennsylvania Child Welfare Professionals. Training offered ranges from short, online asynchronous courses on specialized topic areas to instructor-led courses that prioritize skills practice in the context of a supportive learning environment. Instructor-led delivery methods are primarily Team-Based Learning™ (TBL™) and simulation. Select the link to view a snapshot of TBL™ and simulation in CWRC training: [CWRC TBL™ and Simulation Training](#)

From July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023



From July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023, CWRC delivered 1,250 instructor-led training workshops to a total of 2,921 child welfare professionals. Many of the 2,921 child welfare professionals attended multiple trainings offered by CWRC throughout the year. Among the array of trainings offered are two certification series: Foundations of Pennsylvania Child Welfare Practice (Foundations) and Foundations of Supervision (FoS).



Foundations of Pennsylvania Child Welfare Practice (Foundations) is the 124-hour certification series for Direct Service Workers (DSWs). Foundations is delivered using TBL™ and includes simulation in four of the eight instructor-led modules. The [Foundations Landing Page](#) and [Foundations Advisor Hub](#) contain information and resources on the series for counties.

CWRC strives to provide accessible and realistic training environments for child welfare professionals. From July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023, CWRC delivered trainings in 8 locations across the Commonwealth, including 6 sites with realistic environments to support simulation-based training. The CWRC held 53 series of Foundations across the Commonwealth. This does not include Philadelphia and Allegheny, as they schedule and provide most of their Foundations trainings. A total of 637 DSWs completed Foundations and were certified from July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023.

Feedback from our Learners:

“After 34 years in the mental health/ social work field, I was amazed at what I actually DIDN’T know about the child welfare system. This training was most welcome and valuable.”

“I enjoy the simulations (even though I complain about them before going...) because it gives us a chance to get feedback on how we are doing when first meeting with families and attempting to build rapport and gather information from them.”

“I really enjoyed having the ability to testify in front of real life attorneys during the simulation. It made it as real as it could possibly be without actually being in a court room.”

Based on feedback from our partners, we made considerable efforts to provide more new Child Welfare Professionals with the opportunity to attend their first Instructor-led Module (2) within three weeks of hire. Figure 3 displays the percentage of DSWs for the SFY who completed Module 2 within three, four, and five weeks of their Position Effective Date. The data indicates improvements in each quarter over the past year.

Start of SFY 23

37% of DSWs completed Foundations Module 2 within 3 weeks or less of their position effective date.

End of SFY 23

62% of DSWs completed Foundations Module 2 within 3 weeks or less of their position effective date.

As previously noted in this report, 18% of county supervisor positions were vacant as of March 1, 2023. For all newly hired or newly promoted supervisors, CWRC continued to offer the supervisor certification series, Foundations of Supervision (FoS). Like Foundations, FoS is delivered using TBL™, and includes simulation in two of the six instructor-led modules. FoS is comprised of 11 hours of online preparation work, 6 hours of field work and 48 hours of instructor-led training delivered remotely via Zoom. From July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023, a total of 17 FoS series were delivered, and a total of 102 supervisors were certified. More information about FoS can be found on the FoS Landing Page. Here is a snapshot of the feedback from supervisors who attended FoS this year:

“[The instructor] provoked my thinking to really self-reflect on my own biases and how that affects my approach to clients in the community and how to have meaningful conversations with my supervisees.”

“Diversity- I was able to process the scenarios out with peers in other counties and in different units.”

“Having conversations with other staff members and hearing what their county does to operate during the [staffing] crisis was very helpful.”

A key strategy in Pennsylvania's efforts to build and sustain a strong child welfare workforce is professional education. Our CWEB and CWEL programs have been in operation across 17 schools of social work and throughout 99% of Pennsylvania counties for over two decades. In the prior fiscal year, we added a follow-up component to our undergraduate CWEB program to enhance support during the transition to county agency employment. The first year on the job often determines longer-term retention as individuals become fully immersed in the work and assume full caseloads. We engaged a former child welfare agency administrator who was a graduate of the CWEL program to conduct interviews with CWEB graduates at 3-, 6-, and 9-months post-hire. These voluntary, semi-structured interviews were designed to provide additional support to graduates and identify both challenges and factors promoting success, with the goal of increasing the likelihood of retention following the work commitment. To date, 242 interviews have been conducted with 60% of eligible graduates. Over 75% of individuals who participated in an initial interview continued with subsequent follow-ups. Preliminary analyses indicate that graduates who completed the follow-up interviews show an increase in retention rates compared to those graduates who did not participate in the follow-up study. Qualitative findings highlighted the importance of supervisor and co-worker support as a factor influencing the decision to stay beyond commitment which is consistent with the literature on workforce retention. Graduates appreciated the opportunity to talk with someone outside of their child welfare agency who had knowledge of the field and the nuances of child welfare organizational culture. The follow-up interview protocol will be expanded to CWEL graduates beginning next year with the goal of challenging these more seasoned staff to explore unique opportunities to use their advanced skills in the field and promote social work values to their peers and in their work.

Building Strong Organizations

Child Welfare Professionals exist within the context of their respective organizations. Strong organizations provide a foundation for their staff's growth and development. CWRC provides intensive county-specific technical assistance to facilitate positive change within organizations. The following are examples of specific services provided to two counties.

Wayne County

Wayne County Children and Youth Services (CYS) requested technical assistance from the CWRC Organizational Effectiveness Department to enhance recruitment and retention efforts. As a result, Wayne County CYS completed the Organizational Readiness for Change® (ORC) survey in June 2022. Based on that data, Wayne County Leadership decided to engage their staff in a formal OE structure including a Sponsor Team and a Continuous Improvement (CI) Team.

Based on the results of the ORC, the Sponsor Team chose to lead changes in "Leadership" with a goal to create a safe work environment that is committed to learning and practicing skills where mistakes can be viewed as growth opportunities and will further provide for consistent practice, clear expectations, and accountability across all levels of the agency. Within this environment, the goals are to have leadership function in their respective roles and have sufficient time to do so, allowing



for adequate supervision and training. The outcome would be to have staff feel valued and become competent and confident in their position and in themselves. The county will have an optimal work environment that empowers staff, creates a mastery of skill, generates stability, increases retention, and expands overall job satisfaction.

They charged the CI Team to lead changes in “Communication” with a goal to model and deliver meaningful communication to foster competent and confident staff.

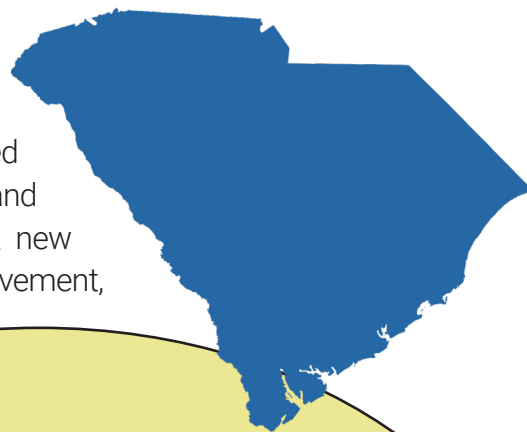
Up to this point, Wayne County CYS Sponsor Team was able to define and implement “Quality Supervision” and are currently working towards a plan for consistent and continuous professional development for all the staff. The CI Team has created a standardized meeting agenda that provides consistency for all meetings, and they are currently working on a plan that is intentional about making sure all voices are at the table, specifically when discussing cases.

“Working collaboratively with the CWRC Organizational Effectiveness Department has been instrumental in enhancing our team’s communication and leadership skills, fostering a more cohesive and empowered work environment. For that, I am truly grateful.”

- Rozalyn Burke, Administrator

Lancaster County

Lancaster County Children and Youth Agency (CYA) has partnered with CWRC for over a decade, using a systemic approach and framework of continuous quality improvement (CQI) to support new initiatives, address challenges, identify areas of strength and improvement, and guide decision-making. Along with other counties throughout the commonwealth, Lancaster County CYA experienced workforce staffing turnover and shortages in SFY 2022-2023. The Sponsor Team developed strategies for the entire agency focusing on how to successfully and effectively retain seasoned staff and onboard new staff. Strategies within these focus areas include all staff understanding compliance standards, having clarity of their roles and responsibilities, being inclusive in the agency culture, and developing connectedness to the agency and one another. During SFY 2022-



“This partnership has been critical for our Agency in managing organizational challenges and giving staff a voice and role in the process. The CQI process allows us to prioritize change efforts and gives us the needed support and direction with the planning and implementation. This process would be significantly more challenging without the guidance and collaboration of the CWRC. It makes a difference for us and the families we serve.”

- Crystal Natan, Administrator

“As a member of Lancaster’s CQI team and the liaison between our Sponsor Team and our CQI team, I have found the work we have been tasked with addressing during this fiscal term to be engaging, productive, and valuable. The opportunity to serve on the CQI team in this capacity has given me the opportunity to build stronger connections with my fellow co-workers from across our organization, gain leadership skills, and most importantly has allowed myself and other team members the opportunity to have a voice in improving practices within the agency so that we are better able to serve the children and families in our community.”

- Morgan Yoder, CI Team Member

2023, Lancaster County CYA collaborated with CWRC and other local community organizations to provide agency-wide training through all staff meetings and the annual staff retreat, as well as booster session training days and engagement standards for all staff through development and implementation of the Lancaster County CYA Family Engagement Policy.

The Sponsor Team requested that the CI Team focus all efforts on onboarding and retaining staff in alignment with other agency efforts by examining the job shadowing and supervision plan processes to determine if they are meeting the needs of casework staff and developing recommendations to inform and enhance these areas. The CI Team reviewed and assessed the job shadowing process to determine what updates were needed to align with the current onboarding process, including CYA Orientation

and the CWRC’s Foundations Certification Series. The assessment included determining areas of strengths and gaps, as well as a crosswalk of the job shadowing experiences with content provided in orientation and Foundations. The CI Team developed recommendations for the Sponsor Team to inform planning and implementation that would continue to ensure all new caseworkers received a full complement of job shadowing opportunities, as part of their onboarding.

CWRC Organizational Spotlight

Race Equity

The CWRC has also been working to build a stronger, more equitable organization. The Child Welfare Resource Center has made a long-standing commitment to becoming an anti-racist organization. Over several years now, we have spent time educating our staff, as well as other partners, about the history of racism in our system, why this issue is one of great importance within the workplace and outside of it, and the harmful effects that racism can have on the children and families we serve. We have been intentional in our efforts to align our vision of becoming an anti-racist organization with our internal goals, structure, and expectations.

A few highlights:

- Updating our processes in Bridge to ensure we can input and update demographic information such as Race and Ethnicity to training participants to ensure people have control over how their identity is defined.
- Our work with the OCYF/CWRC CQI project team on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the CFSR.”
- Discussions with OCYF regarding inclusion of race and ethnicity data elements in Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) CQI outcome monitoring.

- By conducting a new Citizen Review Panel member orientation that included Implicit Bias Training and individual assessment, sharing diversity, equity, and inclusion resources, and outlining how Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will be woven into the panel's work and recommendations.
- Providing the Diversity Task Force Event: Raising Children of Color in Rural Pennsylvania.
- Collecting Personal care items for youth of color.
- Approximately 45 team members, including all of leadership, participated in a leadership series conducted by our partners at the Center for the Study of Social policy to learn a framework (self, people, organization, system) for advancing race equity within our organization and across our system.

An Enhanced Approach to Older Youth

Over the past year, the Child Welfare Resource Center has undergone a significant transformation in its approach to providing support to counties and their Independent Living Programs. This transformation involved the establishment of Specialized IL Practice Improvement Specialists who concentrate on improving services for older youth transitioning out of foster care. The Specialists conducted Independent Living Program Site Visits with county staff and partners that have resulted in program enhancements that have strengthened services for older youth. Post site visit reports continue to be used to gather statewide themes and identify program strengths and challenges. The data collected helps identify statewide systemic issues to address gaps in services for older youth. The information is also used to inform county training needs and the State's review of the counties' Needs-Based Plan and Budget.

This restructuring has led to a significant increase in county technical support along with helping Pls establish connections beyond their respective regions. An illustrative stance of this is a collaboration that transpired between the IL Networking group in the western region and their counterparts in the northeast region, enabling them to pool resources for a housing webinar.

Furthermore, the restructuring fostered collaborative partnerships throughout the state. In the ongoing IL site visits, SWAN Technical Assistance (TAs), OCYF Regional office staff, and youth are consistently invited to participate in site visits in conjunction with CWRC. This collaborative effort with partners is designed to streamline services and ensure positive outcomes for youth. Technical Assistance representatives from SWAN, CWRC, AOPC, ABA, and OCYF Regional Offices continue to cultivate robust collaborative relationships, enhancing their ability to assist CCYAs in planning for increased SWAN services utilization, National Youth in Transition Database support, and enhanced older youth services. The overarching objective is to bolster the knowledge and skills of child welfare agencies and SWAN affiliate agencies, ultimately resulting in the expansion of services provided to older youth.

The Older Youth CI Team is an additional layer of support and partnership for the Child Welfare Resource Center, Counties, Private Provider agencies and other partners. This year, the Older Youth CI Team successfully launched the Adolescent Certification Series intended to provide individuals working with adolescents the knowledge, skills, techniques, and confidence to effectively engage with youth. This training was a direct response to recommendations outlined in the 2018 Older Youth Needs Assessment. The series covers a range of subjects, from youth engagement to implicit biases.

https://www.e-learn.pitt.edu/visitor_class_catalog/category/113362

Building a Strong System

Organizations exist within systems. The functioning and effectiveness of the system impacts organizations in critical ways. The CWRC supports numerous statewide initiatives intended to strengthen Pennsylvania's child welfare system. The following are highlights from a few of those efforts.

The Child and Family Services Review

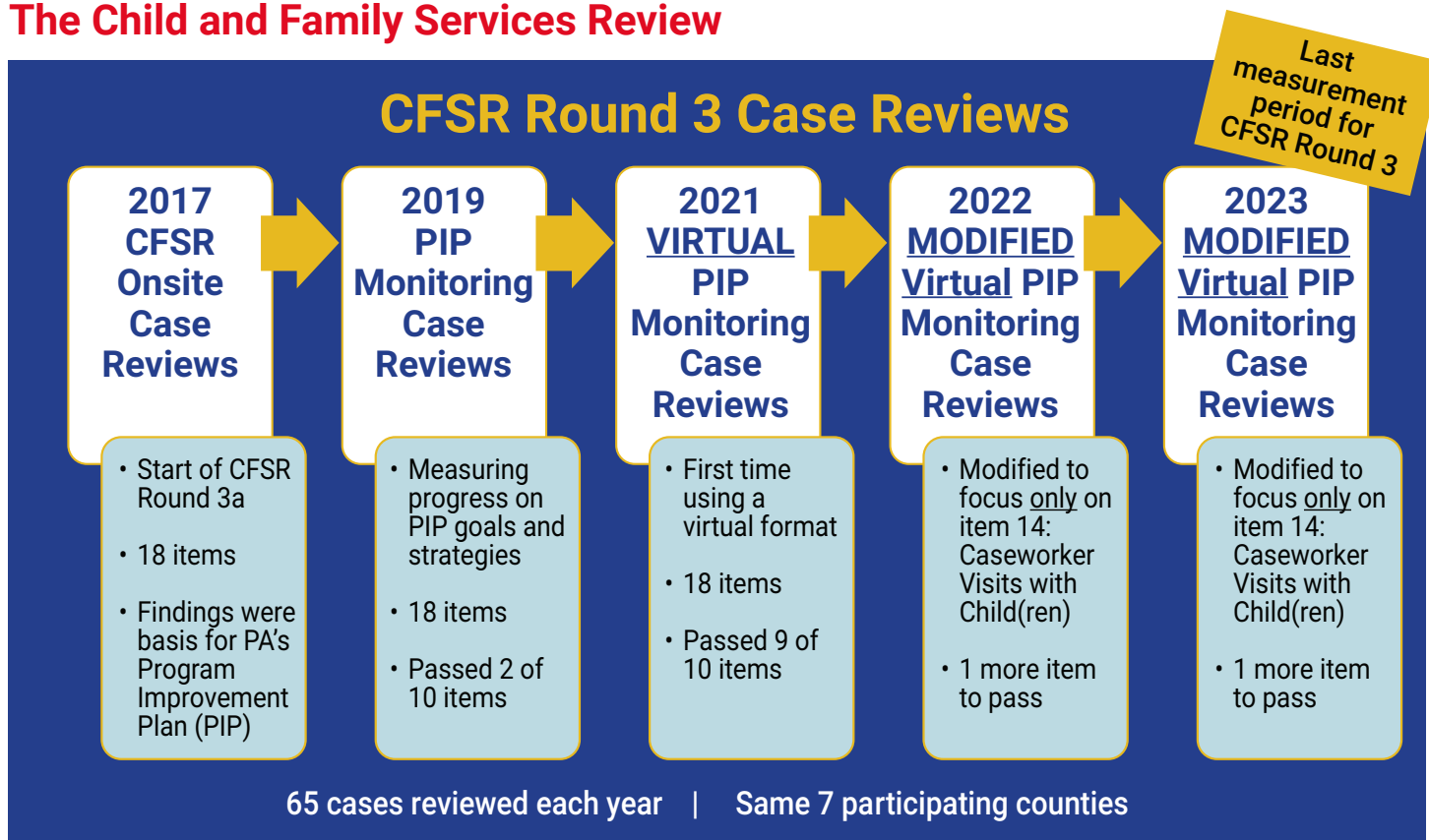


Figure 4: CFSR Round 3 Case Reviews

The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) are a federal-state partnership, which focuses on continuous quality improvement efforts that are designed to help ensure that quality services are provided to children and families. For more background on the CFSR, please review [Pennsylvania's CFSR Final Report](#) and [Pennsylvania's Program Improvement Plan \(PIP\)](#). The four key areas that drove overarching strategies of Pennsylvania's PIP included focus on workforce support, engagement of children and families, quality assessments, and improved planning/monitoring efforts.

As seen in Figure 4, Item 14: Caseworker Visits with Children was the only remaining CFSR item for which Pennsylvania had yet to achieve its PIP goal (84% strength) in 2023 and this was the final measurement period for Pennsylvania to achieve that PIP goal.

From April – August 2023, the Child Welfare Resource Center, in collaboration with OCYF and the seven CFSR counties, supported the successful implementation of virtual PIP Monitoring case reviews focused on Item 14: Caseworker Visits with Children. The implementation of a virtual case review included activities in which certified CFSR reviewers reviewed the case record and conducted interviews with key case participants on a total of 65 random cases that were selected for the case review. Interviews were conducted with children, biological parents, kin, extended family, foster parents, private provider staff, caseworkers, and supervisors, as denoted in Figure 5.

Key Case Participant	Number of Interviews
Target Children	111
Mothers	32
Fathers	6
Relatives	2
Foster Parents	45
Residential/Facility Staff	3
Caseworkers	88
Supervisors	71
Juvenile Probation Officers	2
Total	360

Figure 5: Key Case Participants

The purpose of assessment for Item 14 consists of two distinct factors which focus on whether the frequency and quality of the visits between the caseworker (or other responsible party) and the child(ren) were sufficient to address issues pertaining to the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child(ren) and promote achievement of case goals.

Despite struggles that the workforce has been navigating due to caseworker staff turnover, the 2023 PIP monitoring case reviews revealed that of the 65 cases reviewed, 55 (84.6%) received a strength rating in 2023, meeting Pennsylvania's PIP goal of 84% strength (Figure 4). It is a true testament to the ongoing efforts of the workforce in the seven CFSR counties to ensure that they are meeting with children at a sufficient frequency and quality that ensures that they are addressing the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child(ren) while also promoting the achievement of case goals.

Community Engagement and Cross-System Collaboration

The Child Welfare Resource Center assisted Pennsylvania's Children's Justice Task Force (Task Force) by bringing together different entities and systems, to develop a comprehensive state assessment designed to identify strategies to improve the investigation, prosecution, and judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect.

As a result of the assessment process, the Task Force decided to focus on developing and enhancing the child welfare workforce. Their assessment also identified gap areas in providing services to the State's underserved populations. The Child Welfare Resource Center used this information to assist in the writing of grant applications to obtain federal funding to support training for cross-system partners and improve access to CACs in underserved communities.



Another notable area of work is supporting PA's Citizen Review Panels (CRP). CRPs facilitate citizen participation and provide opportunities for citizens to partner with local child protection systems to ensure that these systems provide optimal services; prevent and protect children from abuse; meet permanency needs of children; and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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CRPs operate regionally and look for diversity of members in race, gender, background, socioeconomic status, and their connection to the child welfare system. Some examples of roles of members include:



There are three regional CRPs that rotate throughout the state every five years.

This year, many of the panels opted to dedicate their time to supporting efforts that the counties see as their biggest challenges.

The entire CRP report can be found by clicking on the following link: [CRP Annual Reports](#)

One such effort includes supporting the workforce. Their focus is generating ideas for positive campaigns to improve the image of child welfare workers by placing a larger focus on the ways in which caseworkers keep families together. They are seeking to promote success stories about supportive services provided by CCYAs to families in their communities, reunification and family preservation services, and the success of locating family members to help support their family in times of need.

Bringing it All Together

In closing, we wanted to share the journey of a young adult with lived experience in the child welfare system. You'll see how individuals, organizations, and the system impacted his journey in positive and challenging ways. It's important to recognize our successes as we strive for continued improvement to do right by Pennsylvania's children, youth, and families.



Older Youth Spotlight: Robin Braum

Meet Robin, Youth Ambassador with the Child Welfare Resource Center and a sophomore at Gannon University. Robin was born in China, adopted into the United States at the age of three and entered the foster care system at age 16. At age 17, Robin was fortunate enough to meet his second adoptive family, providing him with the permanency we seek for all our older youth in Pennsylvania.

Robin's experience has been a journey of personal growth, focused on forming new friendships, nurturing connections with fellow students, and building meaningful relationships. As a foster care youth, transitioning to college can be tough. When he first stepped into the world of college, he was immediately confronted with the pressure to meet deadlines and the pressure he placed on himself to excel in coursework. Many of these deadlines revolved around critical financial aid requirements, such as the FAFSA and CHAFEE deadlines. Navigating these forms and knowing whom to contact for assistance could be bewildering. Robin found that "closely reviewing the financial aid forms and not hesitating to seek guidance from my Independent Living Program manager, the financial aid department at my college, or a trustworthy individual, like his caseworker, proved to be immensely helpful. My IL worker has been a guiding light when it comes to deciphering these complex forms and processes."

One of Robin's biggest challenges was finding the right balance between his work life, academics, social life, and various extracurricular activities he was passionate about. To prevent burnout and maintain his grades, he decided to consult with his IL case manager for support. "Together, we crafted a well-structured schedule that allowed me to allocate time for studying, working, and enjoying my social life." Prioritizing what mattered most to Robin played a crucial role in this balancing act. "I realized that my family and social life were at the top of my priority list since they've been the foundation of my journey." Following that, school, work, and extracurricular activities fell in line. "Understanding your priorities is, I believe, one of the most crucial aspects of being a successful college student."

Unlike many freshmen who reside on campus, Robin opted for a different living arrangement. This introduced its own set of challenges, particularly in finding an affordable apartment close to the university in a safe neighborhood. Yet again, he turned to his IL worker for guidance. Together, they navigated the process, ultimately securing a suitable apartment and utilizing programs like the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative for assistance. "Through this experience, I learned the value of government assistance programs, particularly my participation in FYI, which offers rent support for up to three years. There's an array of options available to foster care youth, spanning from assistance with groceries, bills, transportation, and more. Accepting support is not a sign of weakness; rather, it's a demonstration of strength and practicality."

Robin finds the value in maintaining open lines of communication with his support network and utilizing resources to the fullest. "Whether it's your resource parents, case manager, teacher, coach, or a trusted friend, these individuals are there to help you succeed. As foster care youth, we've faced unique challenges, and these resources are provided not because we lack intelligence or capability, but because we've had a difficult hand dealt to us in life, and we are determined to improve our circumstances."

*“There can be no keener revelation
of a society’s soul than the way in
which it treats its children.”*

– Nelson Mandela



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