

Cultivating Commitment: Survey Insights Reveal Key Drivers in Recruiting and Retaining Direct Care Staff

Compiled by the ACRC Research Committee



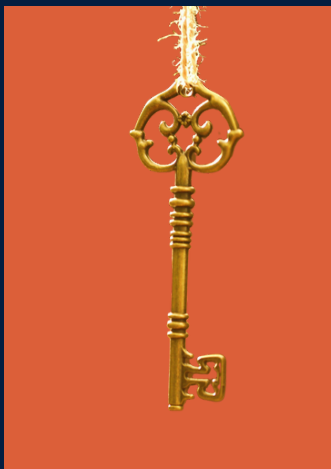
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Spring of 2022, the Association of Children’s Residential and Community Services (ACRC) conducted a compensation survey for their members to better understand hiring concerns and to see what, if anything, is helping agencies attract staff into the direct care roles. While hiring and retention of staff has long been an issue within residential treatment, the COVID-19 global pandemic put agencies in a moment of crisis, particularly with staff providing direct care to students in the residential setting. Many agencies reported staffing shortages so profound that their capacity to provide services diminished, leading to the closure of facilities or pausing of intake. It is clear that staffing shortages have exacerbated challenges in access to care for children, youth, and families.

Of the 190 ACRC members in 2022, 102 agencies responded to the survey, representing three countries and 32 states.

These agencies serve a wide range of ages and students and have many areas of specialization. Nearly all the respondents (95%) indicated that recruiting, hiring, and retaining direct care staff is a moderate to large problem within their agency, and more than 80% identified a significant change in turnover as a result of the pandemic.

Respondents identified several initiatives to increase hiring and retention, including bonuses, changes in wages and compensation packages, improvements in recognition, and development of a sense of workplace community. Some of these strategies were considered more effective than others.



KEY DRIVER:

While the respondents represented diverse agencies, it is evident that CULTURE is a key driver for retention of quality staff. As one respondent remarked, “money only talks for about a week or two - for us it has to be building positive relationships with our employees.”

INTRODUCTION

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This survey is part of a larger ACRC initiative to better understand compensation within the field; explore how ACRC can help agencies advocate for market-based compensation structures designed to attract and retain quality staff; and to provide insight for agencies as they look to improve their hiring and retention.



ACRC is an international association promoting innovation and best practices in the field of children’s mental health. Founded in 1956, ACRC has never strayed from its laser focus on quality interventions and has grown to a network of over 200 organizations and child-serving systems in the United States and around the world.

ACRC is focused on the intersection of research, policy, and practice, and how collective knowledge and expertise, including the voice of lived experience, can improve systems and access to services for children and families.

We welcome providers, researchers, public systems, leaders, individuals with lived experience, and all stakeholders to embrace ACRC’s vision to ensure access to quality interventions in communities throughout the world.

While hiring and retention of staff has long been an issue within residential interventions, the pandemic put agencies in a moment of crisis, particularly with staff providing direct care to youth in the residential setting. Many agencies reported profound staffing shortages.

This report provides the results of this survey and the insights and recommendations that can be derived from them. Nearly all of the respondents (95%) indicated that recruiting, hiring, and retaining direct care staff is a moderate to large problem within their agency, and more than 80% identified a significant change in turnover as a result of COVID-19. This makes this report important and timely as the sector grapples with the need for quality staffing in a time of high need.

AGENCIES IN OUR STUDY:

A total of 102 agencies responded to our survey, representing three countries and 32 states. The regional distribution is provided in the table.

Northeast United States	29.5%
Southern United States	12.5%
Midwest United States	34.1%
Western United States	19.3%
Outside of the United States	3%

AGENCIES IN OUR STUDY

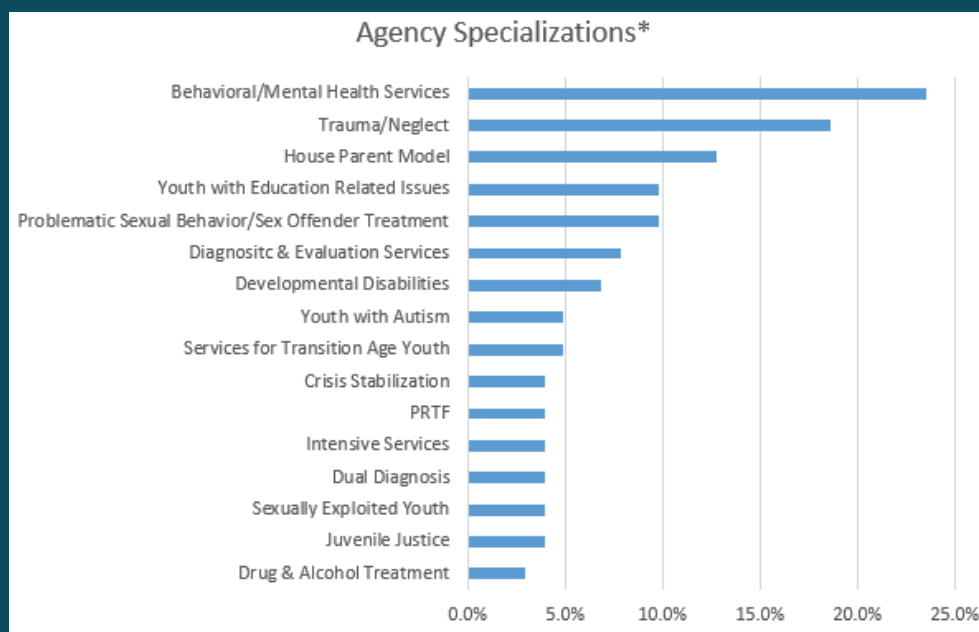
These agencies serve a wide range of ages, from age four to age 21. The majority of agencies (80%) serve all genders, either at the same site or at separate sites throughout the state. Gender specific agencies tended to focus on male populations (16%), with a much smaller proportion for females (4%). Some programs were small, with fewer than twenty (~10%) licensed beds while others are licensed to serve more than 200 youth at a time (~6%). As a result of these disparate capacities, there is significant variation in the number of youth served by the program.

Respondents identified a number of specialties within their programming and these themes are summarized in the table below.

Many agencies identified several areas of specialization.

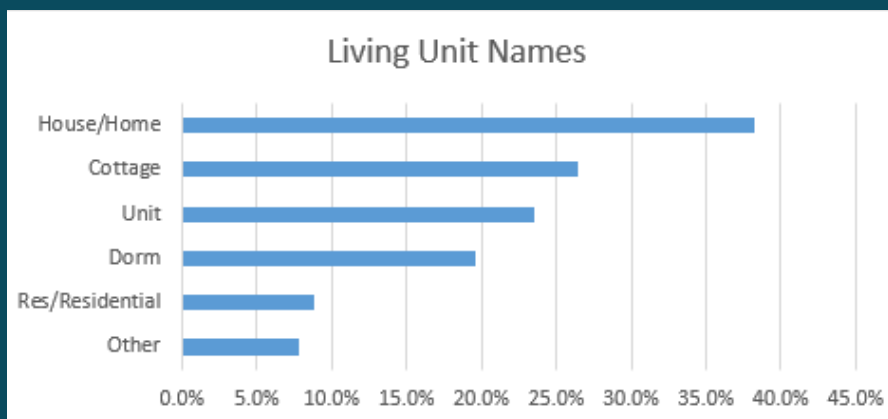
Agencies who responded to the survey ranged in size from less than 30 employees (10% of respondents) to more than 250 (17% of respondents). The median size of residential staff was 101 total staff members, which means more than half of the respondents reported a staff of 100 employees or less. All agencies reported that Direct Care staff make up more than 20% of their residential workforce, though typically Direct Care positions represented more than half of the employees in the agency.

Agencies use many different names to describe the places where the youth live, with overlap in theme, but little overlap in specific names. There is an apparent focus on using less institutional terminology to describe where youth live.



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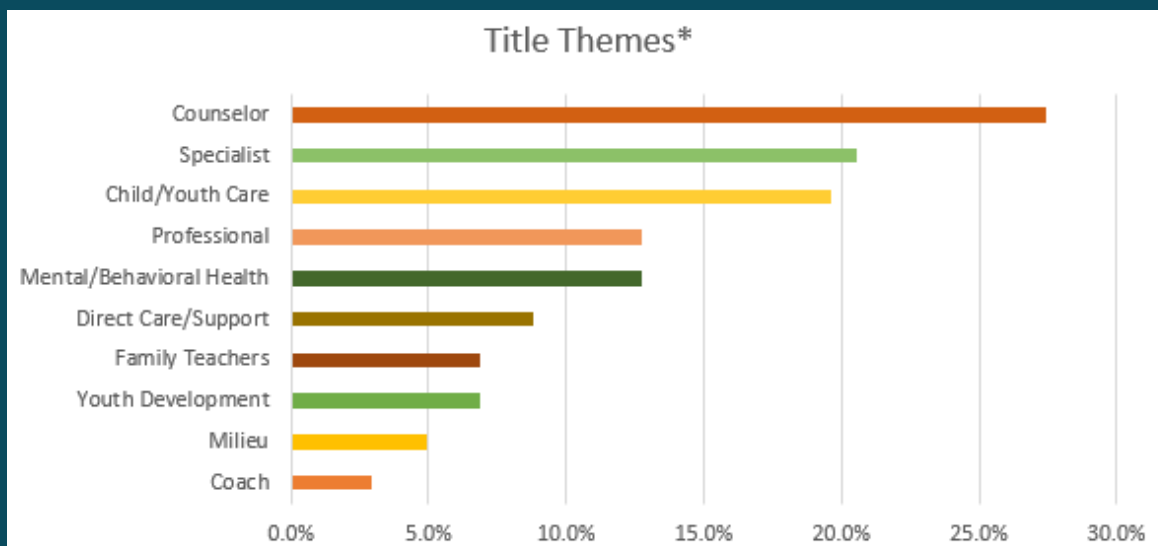
Title and Education Requirements

When asked what titles are used for Direct Care staff, responses were as diverse as the agencies who responded to the survey, and many agencies indicated that staff were called by more than one term. As a result, it is impossible to identify the most common title for Direct Care staff. What can be examined, however, are the themes within these names, which are presented below.

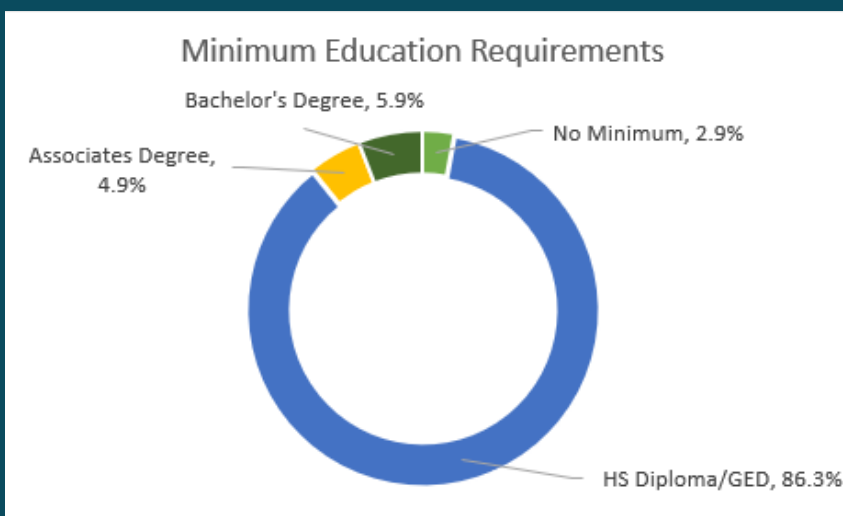
Counselor was the most common theme for Direct Care workers, followed closely by Specialist. Generally, each title was combined with other themes listed, such as Milieu Counselor or Behavioral Health Specialist, or Direct Support Professional.

While titles might not seem important on the surface, one agency mentioned that changing the title of employees was one of the most impactful initiatives for recruitment and retention.

As a result of oversight agencies, accreditation standards, and because it is good practice, there are many hiring requirements for Direct Care staff. Some of these are nearly universal, such as background checks and checking any exclusionary lists related to abuse and neglect. Education requirements are less universal, however. The distribution of responses are displayed in the figure below.



The most common education requirement for Direct Care staff is a HS Diploma/GED. More than 10% of respondents require some level of higher education. This may be due to licensing requirements, or it may be an agency policy. It is important to note that some accreditation standards include higher education as part of the evaluation of personnel competency.



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Staffing Models and Wages

Direct Care staff were deployed in diverse minimum staffing ratios from one staff for every two students to 1 staff to ten students during awake hours and up to one awake staff member for every twenty-five students during asleep hours. Night staff were typically reported to have higher ratios than during awake hours. Most agencies indicated that they required two staff on duty during overnight shifts. Scheduled Direct Care shifts typically varied from 6-12 hours, with most listed as 8-10 hour shifts. Respondents indicated that Direct Care workers are typically scheduled 4-5 days a week. Nearly two-thirds of agencies use set schedules for their staff, with one respondent explaining that they “try to set them for staff stability.” Nearly 15% of agencies employ a Family/Parent Partner, and 10% employ a youth advocate.



There are many factors that will impact both starting wages and average salary for direct care staff, including: state minimum wage, state reimbursement rates, grant funding structures, cost of living, and market forces.

A wide range of starting and average wages were identified, from less than \$10 an hour to more than \$20. Increased pay for holidays was reported by more than half of the respondents, and nearly a third offer differential pay based on shift worked. All but one agency allows for overtime at a higher rate of pay, typically 1.5 times their wage.

In most cases, wages were increased within the last 18 months to help with recruitment and retention, but it was not the only reason. Some agencies received changes in funding arrangements that allowed them to increase wages. A smaller group of respondents (8%) provides routine cost of living raise.

Perhaps the most impactful reason for increasing wages was “our direct care staff were classified as essential care employees yet were the lowest paid in the organization.” This focus on equity was identified by two other organizations, who echoed the sentiment with “because the staff are worth it and they have worked exceedingly hard during pandemic (and always)” and “because they deserve it.”

Factors That Impact Starting Wages and Average Salary for direct care staff include:

- State Minimum Wage
- State Reimbursement Rates
- Grant Funding Structures
- Cost of Living
- Market Forces

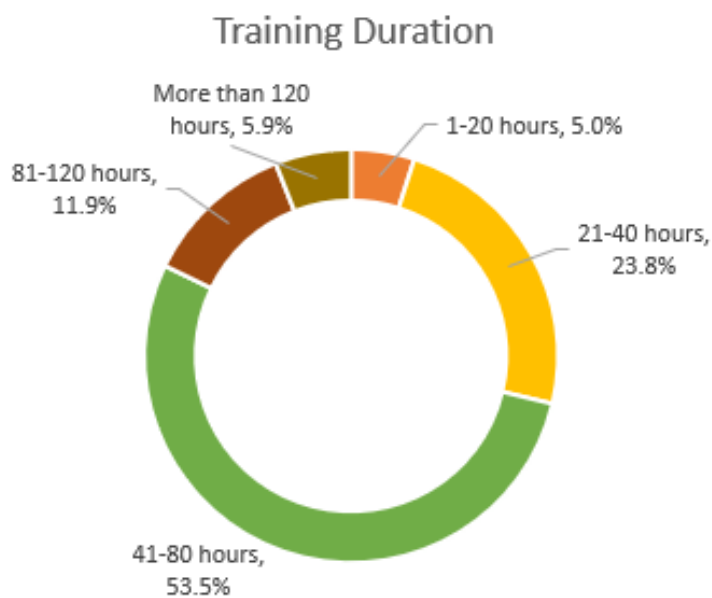


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Training and Probationary Periods

Once Direct Care workers are hired and are beginning to prepare for their roles, they require training. Training requirements vary based on licensing authorities and government regulations, so variation in training is expected, and reported training duration is displayed to the right.

As this graph demonstrates, most agencies' training lasted from 41-80 hours, typically 80 hours, or two full weeks of training. Some agencies (41%) allow for staff to have contact with youth before this training is concluded, while 58.82% of respondents indicated that direct care staff have to complete training before working on units. More than three-quarters of the responding agencies use a probationary period to assess and evaluate staff for job fit. This probationary period was between 30 days and 1 year. The distribution is presented below.



Duration of Probationary Period



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The COVID Impact

According to the respondents of this survey, there has been an extremely significant change in turnover during the COVID pandemic (81.87% or 83 respondents). One way agencies attempted to retain staff was to acknowledge their commitment and the inherent risk of working in an essential role with hazard pay either as a bonus or as a differential in pay rate.

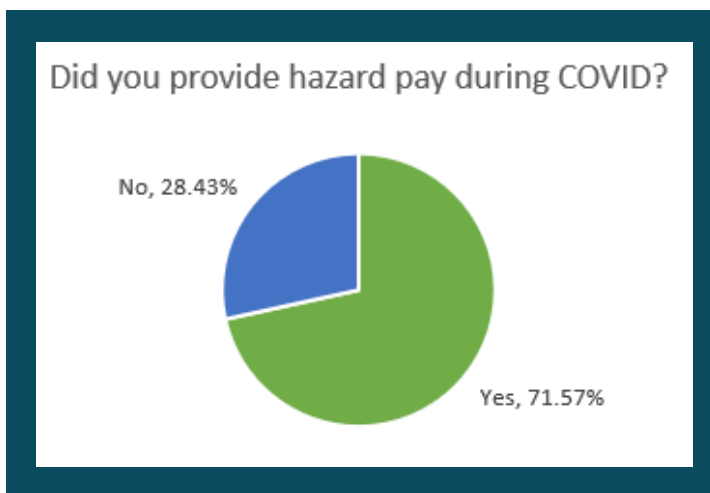
Nearly three in four agencies offered hazard pay at some point during the COVID-19 pandemic.



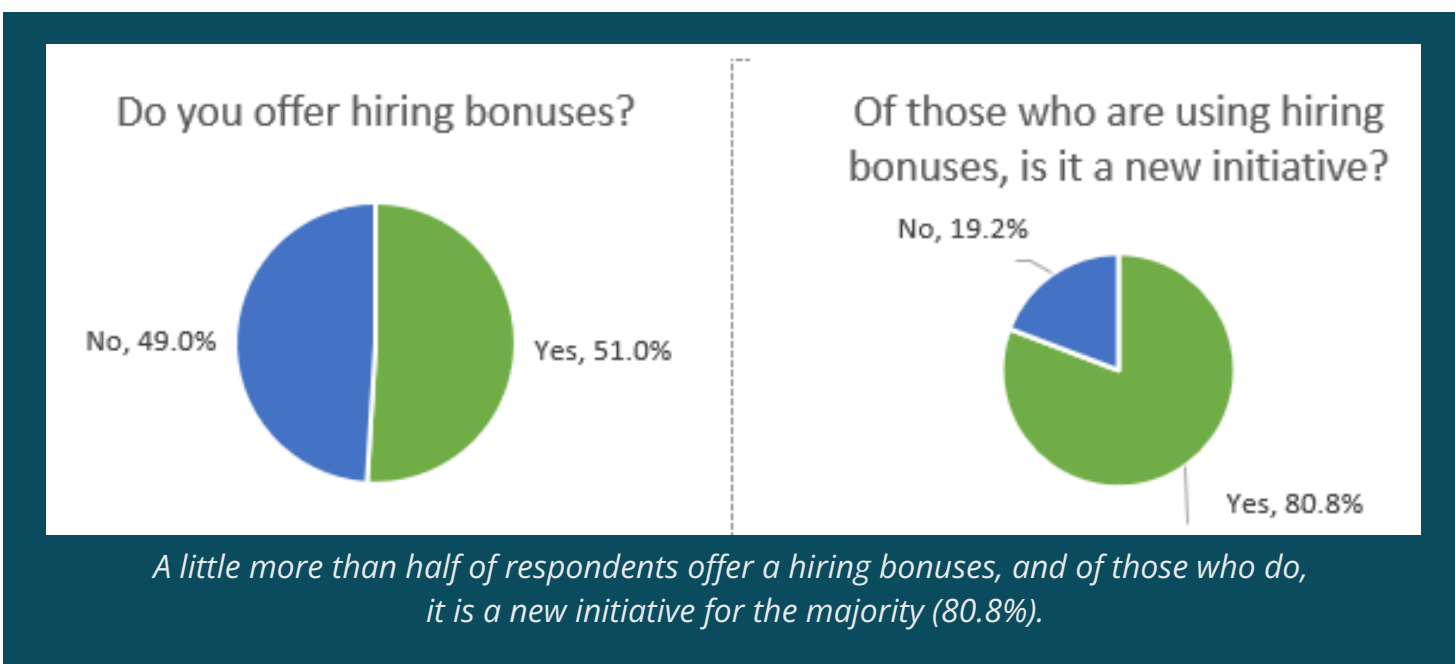
Bonuses were the more popular form of hazard pay during COVID (over 50%), however, a little over 30% of agencies who offer hazard pay changed their pay rate for Direct Care staff. Several agencies still pay a differential rate for any staff working with youth who have tested positive for COVID.

In addition to attempts to retain staff, many agencies began using new initiatives to increase recruitment, including hiring bonuses and referral bonuses.

A little more than half of respondents offer a hiring bonuses, and of those who do, it is a new initiative for the majority (80.8%). Agencies that did implement hiring bonuses offer them at varying increments from 30 days to 2 years. The most common increment was at the 6-month mark (40.38%). Pay for hiring bonuses ranged from \$175 to \$4000 depending on the agency, position, full or part-time, shift, and commitment.



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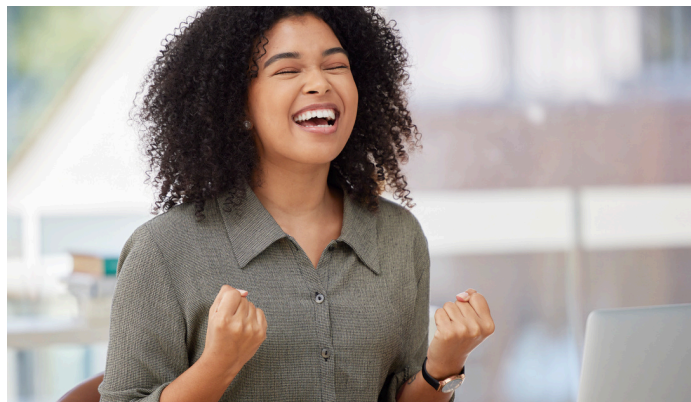
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The COVID Impact

One agency offered bonuses of up to \$10,000, but strongly recommends and prefers a two-year commitment. Hiring Bonuses were implemented as early as 2020 at the beginning of COVID and many were still in effect at the time the survey was administered in May of 2022. Of the agencies that offered hiring bonuses as a new initiative, 38.7% began in 2020, 42.9% began in 2021 and 21.4% began in 2022.

The vast majority of respondents offer referral bonuses, and this was a new initiative for more than one in three agencies. Referral bonuses were typically paid 90 days or 6 months after a successful hire. The referral bonuses ranged from \$50 to \$5000; though the typical referral bonus based on this data is \$250, \$500, and \$1000. Referral bonuses can also vary depending on the position or if the new hire was a full or part-time hire. **For those agencies where referral bonuses were a new initiative, 21.9% began using them in 2020, 46.88% began in 2021 and 31.25% began in 2022.**



Out of the 42 agencies that have implemented additional hiring initiatives beyond those listed above, there are almost 30 different initiatives being implemented. These include hosting job fairs (in-person and virtual), improving recruitment strategies, flexibility in work schedules and working from home, implementing differentials, and improving their social media presence. Social media is pertinent in marketing and advertising through the creation of websites and video campaigns that can really help with digital marketing for the betterment of hiring people for direct care positions.

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Do you offer referral bonuses?

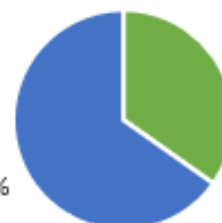
No, 9.8%



Yes, 90.2%

Of those who offer a referral bonus, is it a new initiative?

Yes, 34.8%



No, 65.2%

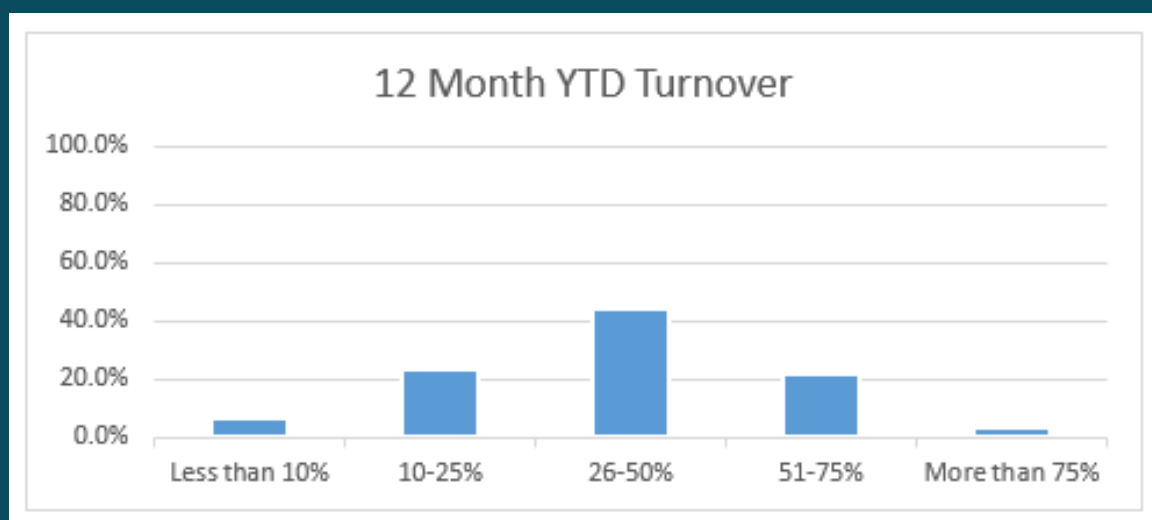
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Recruitment, Retention and Recognition

Many agencies indicated that recruitment and retention was an ongoing issue they were attempting to remedy. As described in the introduction, nearly 60% of respondents felt that staff turnover is a large problem that has worsened as a result of the COVID pandemic. There was a wide range of reported year to date turnover, with most agencies reporting 26-50% turnover. Some agencies indicated that they have experienced more than 100% turnover in the last year.

In an attempt to combat low staffing, agencies have enacted initiatives to improve recruitment and retention with many agencies enacting more than one initiative in hopes of attracting and retaining quality staff. These strategies are summarized in the figure below. Sadly, more than 10% of the respondents indicated that they have yet to find a strategy that works for improving recruitment and retention.



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Recruitment, Retention and Recognition

Effective recruitment tools identified included using online recruiting/job board services, such as Indeed.com and Zip Recruiter, including using sponsored jobs and targeted recruitment tools that these websites provide. Social media was also identified as an effective online tool for recruiting new staff members, as was a user-friendly website that allowed potential applicants to see available positions and learn more about the agency. Another way that agencies tried to help job-seekers learn more about available positions and the work that they do through job fairs and visits to college classes. These tools were often combined with bonuses, either sign-on bonuses for the new staff member, or referral bonuses for current staff who recommended a qualified applicant. Most of these bonuses were distributed in two parts: one bonus when the applicant was hired and an additional bonus was given if the new employee stayed at the agency for a certain amount of time (usually 6 months). [Add detail from Abbie here]. Finally, streamlining the process for hiring, including sponsorship for hiring expenses (e.g. physical), an onboarding specialist, or text messaging systems helped move people from applicant to employees.

Providing a wide range of benefits to the compensation package of employees was another way that agencies have tried to recruit and retain staff. The word cloud lists the most common benefits. The larger the word, the more often it was identified by respondents.



Unsurprisingly, most agencies identified health, dental, and vision insurance as part of their benefits package. There was some variation within how these packages were offered, however. Some agencies pay the entire premium, while others pay percentages. Some agencies pay 100% for individual coverage, but less/none for family coverage. Many agencies indicated they also offered a wide range of supplemental insurance, sometimes partially or entirely employer funded, such as cancer insurance, or Accidental Death or Dismemberment protection. Paid time off was identified by most agencies, though the duration varied pretty significantly, but was typically 2-4 weeks, but some offered 6 weeks or more for PTO. Similarly, while most agencies offer some kind of retirement package, there was a lot of variation on the details. Some agencies have 403(b) plans while others have 401(k) plans, which is typically due to the legal status of the business. There was wide variation in the amount of employer matching provided as well, with up to a 9% match, though 3-5% was more common.

Effective recruitment tools identified included:

- **Online recruiting/job board services (like Indeed.com and Zip Recruiter)**
- **Social Media**
- **User-friendly websites**
- **Job Fairs**
- **College Visits**
- **Sign-On Bonuses**
- **Referral Bonuses**
- **Streamlining the hiring process**
- **Onboarding Specialist**
- **Text messaging system**

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Recruitment, Retention and Recognition

It is possible, and even probable that agencies under reported these types of benefits, as they are often considered to be typical for full time employers; one respondent referred to “all the usual” and another called them “core.” Respondents tended to focus on those benefits that made them different as an employer.

Many hope that these kinds of benefits can help round out compensation for staff when increases in pay are not an option. Tuition assistance and student loan assistance programs were common as well, which are likely particularly good for recruitment and retention of staff in positions with college-level educational requirements. Many agencies describe some form of “wellness programming” as well, such as gym memberships, walk/run clubs, discount programs for healthy eating/activities, and employer paid wellness apps. There were a few entirely unique benefits including staff being able to bring their dog to work, free after school care, financial literacy programs, and discounts on cell phone plans. One program indicated that they hired an “employee recreation and wellness specialist” who could act as a personal trainer for staff. Another indicated that they were able to provide off-site housing for staff.

As discussed previously, changes in pay to make compete in the job market was common for agencies. For some agencies, this has proven to be the most successful strategy, but it has been less useful for others, which is exemplified in this quote: “Money only talks for about a week or two - for us it has to be building positive relationships with our employees. People quit bosses/co-workers many times, not necessarily jobs,” which is probably why culture was the most commonly identified strategy.

“Money only talks for about a week or two - for us it has to be building positive relationships with our employees. People quit bosses/co-workers many times, not necessarily jobs,”



“In terms of retention, relationships again appear to be key. Our staff consistently tell us that their favorite aspects of their roles are the relationships built with those they serve and with coworkers. They also report that they enjoy the freedom to design their own programming initiatives, bringing their own interests and passions to the table. Connections to a team are incredibly important for retention, as are recognition and support.”

Culture and the agency’s reputation in the community was identified as both important to recruitment and to retention. Respondents felt that a positive culture would be palpable to anyone who stepped foot on campus and would be an enticement to join the team and a positive reputation in the community would also attract applicants. Culture was also the most common response to what makes staff want to stay. This was exemplified in the following comment:

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Recruitment, Retention and Recognition



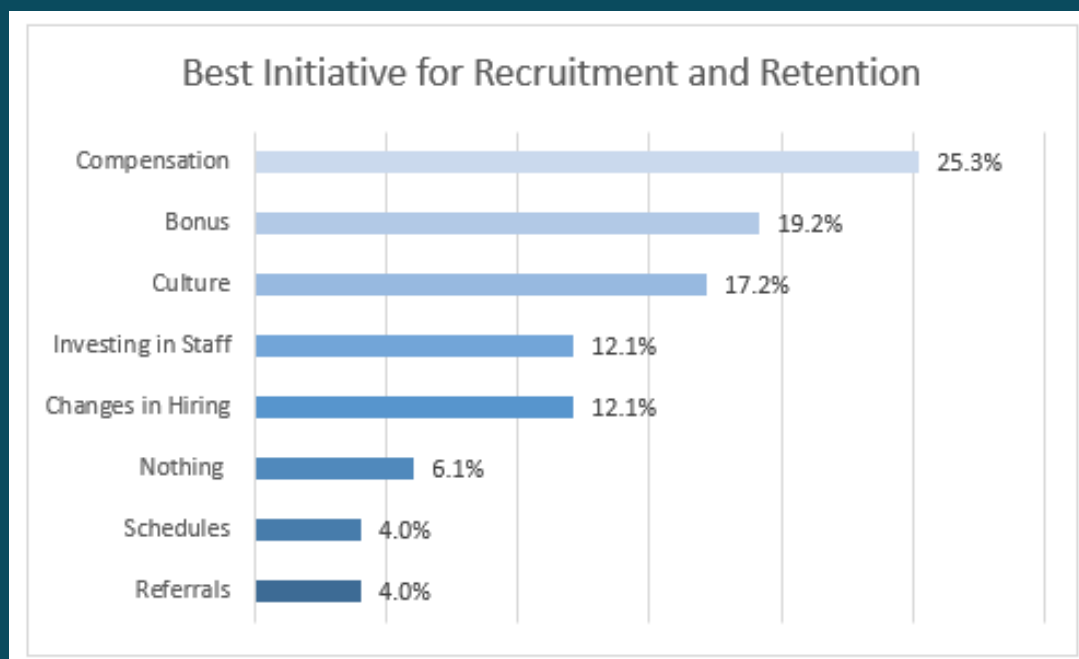
When asked what one initiative has been most helpful for recruiting and/or retaining direct care workers, compensation was key, but not to the level one might expect, as shown below. The majority of respondents described non-financial initiatives as the most successful.

Like the previous question, compensation is key, but agencies described this in several ways.

Naturally, overall pay rate was important, but respondents also talked about shift differentials, as some agencies had been struggling with filling overnight positions.

Others mentioned incentives throughout the year as a way to increase retention. Bonuses were also considered useful, particularly for recruitment and short-term retention.

Most respondents identified non-financial initiatives as the most successful for recruiting and retaining direct care staff. Culture covered a wide range of aspects within an agency. As one respondent pointed out, it can be “Hard to deduce to one as it takes so much to make it work. Culture takes so many ingredients from communication to clarity, etc.” Several agencies mentioned the importance of strong mid-level management and “effective and consistent supervision.” From one respondent’s perspective, “if they are supported and trained well, they will do the same for their teams.” The category “Investing in Staff” is similar to culture, though it focused more on activities like mentoring, job shadowing, professional development and “providing promotional opportunities to meet their interest in continued career growth while staying at the agency.”



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Recruitment, Retention and Recognition

Recognition was identified as a key component of retention, and like recruitment and retention, agencies are using many strategies to recognize staff for their good work and build a sense of community within the agency. These could be grouped into six broad categories: Events, Routine Staff Recognition Programs, Raises, Bonuses, Gifts, and Shout Outs.

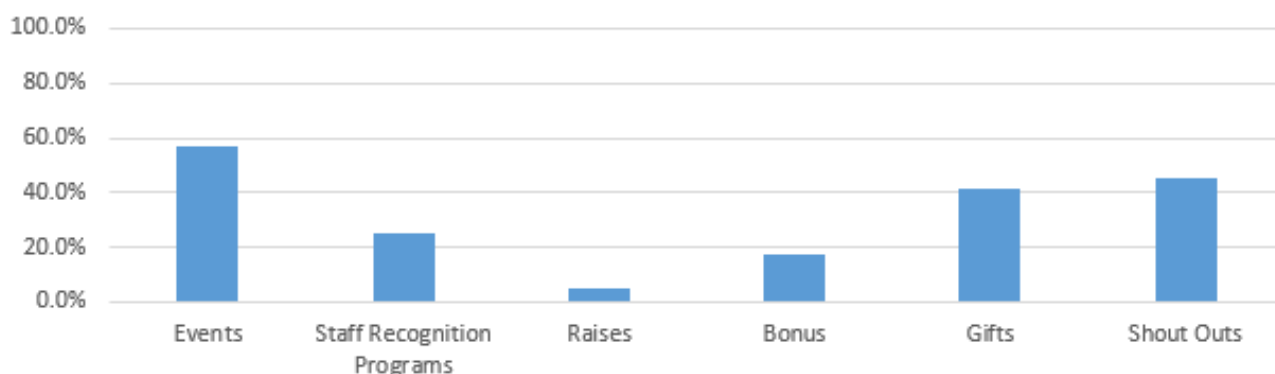
Events included yearly staff appreciation parties, company sponsored luncheons and BBQs, as well as smaller get-togethers and potlucks to foster a sense of community.

One agency indicated that the yearly event included a paid hotel room for each staff member and a guest, dinner, appreciation video, game with prizes, raffles, a couple of drink tickets, and a DJ. A small percentage of agencies used raises as a way to show recognition to staff. Included in some of these events were Routine Staff Recognition Programs, such as Employee of the Year, Employee of the Month, or some other named award. Some agencies provided a tangible form of recognition, such as raises, though those were rare. It was far more common for agencies to indicate that they provided staff with bonuses or gifts as a way to show recognition for a job well done.



Gifts varied significantly by institution, and included things like gift cards, gas cards, agency branded merchandise and clothes. The final group, Shout Outs encompasses all the ways that staff are recognized, particularly by management and administration, both internally and externally. Many agencies mentioned internal recognition programs, such as an intranet, "kudos" board, or weekly/monthly employee newsletter where the accomplishments of staff are discussed. Other agencies use social media to publically recognize staff for the hard work that they do. Some agencies also identified private thank you notes and/or emails as an aspect of their plan to recognize staff.

Staff Recognition Techniques*



Like the previous question, compensation is key, but agencies described this in several ways.

CONCLUSION



This report was created by ACRC to provide insights and recommendations for the hiring and retention of Direct Care workers at agencies who provide out of home care for youth. While staffing has always been an issue for agencies in our membership, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 has created a staffing crisis, and agencies are in the position of potentially reducing capacity as a result of the inability to hire quality staff.

In our opinion, the biggest takeaway from this survey is the importance of culture for the retention of staff. While there were a number of initiatives designed to help get people in the door and turn applicants into new hires, it is evident that the feeling of community that an agency can provide is a key component to why people stay in the field. Providing staff with a sense of purpose and a feeling of connection both with the youth and with each other is far more important than pay. Most think of compensation as the pay and benefits that an employee has access to, the opportunity to be a part of something greater is something that not every employer can provide. While it is definitely true that agencies cannot often pay Direct Care staff what they are truly worth, for what value can we place on positively changing the trajectories of youth and family, ACRC members can provide something even more meaningful to staff if they focus on building community.

IN OUR OPINION, THE BIGGEST TAKEAWAY FROM THIS SURVEY IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE FOR THE RETENTION OF STAFF. ~ ACRC

***Many agencies provided more than one response, so percentages total more than 100%**