

Retention and Recruitment Solutions

For the Pennsylvania County Human Services Workforce

Introduction

The human services sector within counties strive to offer its services to as many people as possible. Some services that are provided include children and youth services, mental health services, victim services, intellectual disabilities services, and services for the homeless. However, many Pennsylvania county governments are finding it difficult to retain and recruit employees in the human services departments within the public sector. The list of difficulties impacting the county governments includes, but are not limited to, recruiting qualified candidates, retaining current employees, and preparing for the future retirement of employees.

The challenges stem from many causes with the main one being competition with the private sector due to the often more appealing pay rates and flexibility, lower stress levels, and fewer rules and regulations. Not only is the public sector struggling to offer the same pay rates to qualified candidates as the private sector, but they are also suffering from competition with other job sectors. Potential employees are choosing to work at grocery stores, convenience stores, and other retail stores due to the fact that they can offer higher pay, more flexible schedules, and are less stressful jobs. Although some counties are able to offer higher pay, this is not sustainable in the long run or an option for all the counties. Alternatively, some counties offer competitive benefits packages, but they are not always as attractive to younger candidates when compared to higher pay rates. Another struggle that some rural counties are facing is retaining or attracting potential employees to the area when they might find better opportunities in larger areas or cities.

While challenges with retention and recruitment have been seen for years by county human services departments, the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic greatly accelerated and amplified many of these issues. One aspect of retention that the pandemic has expedited is retirement as many of the employees that were considering retiring in the near future decided to do so early. Employees who faced health issues or concerns due to the pandemic also may have retired early to protect their health or that of their family. The many vacancies resulted in a loss of experience and knowledge that is difficult to replace in an already struggling workforce. The pandemic also allowed people to choose to collect unemployment benefits which are still preventing people from going back to work. If people did decide to work, they now can find the option to work from home which had not been offered by many employers beforehand. Many people prefer the remote lifestyle or are even dependent on it. Parents are facing issues finding daycare due to the pandemic and the option to work from home is a necessity in order to care for their children. All of these factors have greatly impacted the human services departments because they require workers in the field and do not have the ability to offer the remote option that many people have adjusted to which results in more people leaving the workforce.

The 67 Pennsylvania counties want to ensure that they are able to provide their human services to the people in need of them across the state. With a lack of workers, this is not feasible. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to synthesize information obtained from local leaders in the human services department of Lawrence, Blair, Bucks, and Northumberland County. The counties shared what has worked for them, what has not, and their own ideas on what could help these issues. Ultimately, this paper will report on possible solutions to successfully and sustainably retain and recruit workers in the county human services departments.¹

County Descriptions

Lawrence County is located in Western Pennsylvania. According to the 2020 US Census Bureau, the population was estimated to be 86,070 being the smallest county out of the four.² The county is specifically struggling to fill jobs in children and youth services, 911 facility, and the correctional facility.

Blair County is located in Central Pennsylvania and the US Census Bureau population estimate was 122,822 in 2020.² In their human services department, the children and youth services have many vacancies, especially with caseworkers due to the emotional weight of the role. They are also struggling with attracting people to their rural areas such as Altoona.

Bucks County is located in Eastern Pennsylvania and the 2020 US Census Bureau population estimate was 646,538 being the largest county out of the four. It is one of the richest counties in Pennsylvania.² They are doing relatively well with retention and have a low vacancy rate of only 2 – 5% but their provider agencies are suffering from staffing issues. The county has a few vacancies in children and youth workers due to the fact that they need to be in the field but are struggling the most to staff the department of corrections.

Northumberland County is located in Central Pennsylvania and the 2020 US Census Bureau population estimate was 91,647. It is one of the poorest counties in Pennsylvania.² Northumberland stressed the extent to which they are struggling staffing human services workers with a vacancy rate of around 8%. They gave a 6-month bump in pay but are still behind some of the local counties.

¹ Some of the same narrative appeared in an article written for the quarterly CCAP Magazine on workforce

² US Census Bureau Quick Facts <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/PA/INC910219>

Methods

Based on input from the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) on the successful programs in place, Lawrence, Blair, and Bucks County were chosen for the case studies. Northumberland County was also later added after a Blair County Director suggested them to be a further resourceful point of contact. The counties are representative of Pennsylvania because they vary in wealth and geographic location.

For each county, one to three key informant interviews were held virtually with local leaders in the human services department totaling 8 interviews. Aside from the Northumberland contact, the contact information was obtained from Melissa Gates, Government Relations Associate at CCAP who oversaw the project. The interviewees for Lawrence County included a County Commissioner, County Administrator, and Human Resources Director. Blair County interviewees included a County Executive Director and an Executive Director from the private sector. The Bucks County interview was with a Human Services Director and Northumberland County interviews were with a County Administrator and a Director. The goal of the interviews was to obtain information on what each county is doing with respect to retaining and recruiting workers in the human services department, why they are doing it, and how it is working for their county.

The information from the interviews was analyzed to identify solutions for retention and recruitment in the county human services workforce and synthesized into this report. Common themes and differences among the counties were noted in order to identify solutions that will work for the majority of counties across Pennsylvania as each county may differ in many aspects from each other.

Analysis and Results

Recruitment

The counties described their current recruitment processes and how they have exacerbated all means of traditional recruitment. Some of the mentioned activities include attending job fairs, promoting in public places (i.e., grocery stores), visiting local schools' career days, and posting at universities. Additionally, counties invest in newspaper ads, radio ads, and billboards. Updating and improving websites, posting jobs on all recruiting platforms such as Indeed or LinkedIn, and accessibility on all forms of social media are also essential to recruitment as it offers the ability to reach the largest number of people. While some of these traditional methods of recruitment have not been enough on their own, they are still important to note since they can be beneficial at recruiting workers, especially when combined with the following solutions.

Higher Pay

The most common obstacle identified by all of the counties is pay. The most basic ways to address the issue of competitive pay would be to raise hourly wages and offer sign-on and/or referral bonuses which some counties have been able to do. However, these solutions are not possible or sustainable in the long run for every county making alternatives necessary. Blair County mentioned one option of paying employees more that do not take out health insurance. This could entice younger employees who often look for higher pay over strong benefits packages.

Another beneficial alternative would be assistance from the state. Northumberland County offered many ideas that the state could implement that could directly remove the pay obstacle. Specifically, creating a better statewide compensation plan could reduce the competitive pay issue the counties are facing. The state could provide tax write-offs or money for sign-on that would go directly into the worker's pocket. One other suggestion from Northumberland involved the Governor's recent plan to increase teacher salaries to \$45,000 per year. Raising the minimum wage by grouping social workers with teachers in this plan would significantly help the issue of pay by increasing the retention of workers who may leave the human services department for better pay.

Benefits Packages

An important aspect of retaining and recruiting workers includes offering a strong benefits package. Along with offering raised pay, benefits packages can include a number of other things. Lawrence and Northumberland County stressed the importance of offering strong health insurance which other county interviewees also commented on it. This will entice the workers that look for strong health insurance from an employer. Lawrence County also discussed that they withhold 8% of income and allow the employee to choose to withhold a larger amount. This provides them with a set amount for the rest of their lives so they will never run out of money and has worked at drawing some workers in. For the younger people who are likely to care less about health insurance and income holding, other aspects of a strong benefits packages can entice these workers. Bucks and Northumberland County mentioned the benefit of offering flexible scheduling along with holiday and vacation time. Bucks County also suggested creative ideas that can be included in benefits packages such as offering gym memberships.

Tuition Assistance

One of the strongest solutions mentioned by most of the counties would be to provide tuition assistance or reimbursement. Blair County's children and youth department will pay tuition assistance in the last year of a worker's schooling as long as it is in a related field. This draws in experienced workers who are looking for a way to further their degree in the field. For counties unable to provide their own tuition assistance or reimbursement it can also be provided at the State level. Lawrence and Northumberland County participate in the Child Welfare Education for Leadership program where workers can get their master's degree with a paid year off and benefits, as long as they commit to a certain number of years of work. Tuition assistance provides the county with more trained and qualified workers while also guaranteeing their work.

Internship Programs

Every single county discussed participation in internship programs with colleges and high schools. Lawrence County strongly expressed the success of their internship programs with Westminster College, the University of Pittsburgh, and nearby community colleges. They specifically stated how the programs have helped with recruitment. Blair County also mentioned internships with Penn Highlands Community College and potential internships in their children and youth services with Mount Aloysius College. Northumberland County's internship programs include Bloomsburg University, Susquehanna University, and Bucknell University. All of the counties' internship programs, along with Bucks County's, help with recruitment as they can hire out of the program while knowing the workers are already trained and have experience in the field. Other counties in Pennsylvania could benefit from implementing such programs with nearby community colleges, universities, or with seniors in high school. Not only does such a program provide counties with interns in the workforce, but it also is a way to recruit employees.

Employee Morale and Support

Bucks County focused on the importance of boosting employee morale through a strong support system. They achieve this by establishing a strong leadership team that provides support for the managers and directors. They also host "listening sessions" to hear out their employees' thoughts. This, along with investment in training, ensures that their employees with difficult jobs, especially those working in trauma are doing okay and have a designated time where they can share their thoughts and ideas. They also frequently show their appreciation for their staff by bringing in lunch or doing something special for the holidays. Bucks County expressed that they felt this support system is why their employees have a commitment to their work keeping their retention high. Bucks and Lawrence County also mentioned the benefit of unions as they are able to strongly negotiate for their members and guarantee raises and retirement further increasing support for their workers.

Conclusions

The issues that Pennsylvania counties are facing are causing a lack of human services workers that may result in a struggle to offer many necessary services across the state. Therefore, it is crucial that the obstacles are addressed to ensure the counties' ability to provide these services to the people in need of them. Many counties are struggling to offer pay competitive against the private sector or other higher paying job sectors. The Covid-19 Pandemic has not only accelerated the issues that were already present but also created new challenges. Despite the prevalence of these issues across the counties, there are solutions that can be implemented at the county and state levels that address these difficulties.

Some counties may be able to directly increase pay by raising hourly wages and by offering sign-on or referral bonuses. The state could also assist counties by offering a better statewide compensation plan including increasing the minimum wage for social workers. While increasing pay directly may be difficult for many counties, strong benefits packages could also entice workers. Different solutions include participating in internship programs with nearby colleges and universities which increase the workforce and recruit workers at no cost to the county. Tuition assistance from both the county and state could also retain qualified workers or recruit new workers who are looking to further their education. These creative ideas can also be paired with traditional recruitment tools and simple techniques to improve retention such as keeping positive employee morale.

While the counties of Pennsylvania are all unique and face their own specific challenges, these solutions offer tools to retain and recruit workers in any human services department. Counties can try combinations of different ideas to find what best fits their specific needs and take a step towards successfully improving the human services workforce.