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## Hiring the Right People in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

Runaway and homeless youth (RHY) work is challenging on many levels and requires staff with just the right knowledge, skills, and attitude. For that reason, organizations spend a significant amount of money recruiting, hiring, and training staff members. Yet despite all of this front-loading, RHY programs—and the human services field in general—tend to have high turnover rates, and the result is higher program costs and reduced quality of services. This tip sheet describes how to hire people who are a strong match for your RHY program by figuring out who is right for the job, as well as what immediate steps you can take to improve your hiring and training practices.

### Who Are the “Right” People?

The “right” people for RHY programs are those with the interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and field-specific knowledge that allow staff to build trusting relationships with young people and effectively support their healthy development. Ideally, RHY programs also prioritize hiring staff members whose social identities reflect the communities that they serve,<sup>1</sup> as well as people with lived experience of the challenges that RHY face (such as homelessness, past trauma, and addiction).<sup>2,3</sup> Successful youth workers tend to be non-judgmental problem-solvers and critical thinkers; they’re also passionate about helping young people. In this tip sheet, the “right” people are individuals who are dedicated to RHY work, with all of its ups and downs.

### What the Research Says

- The average beginning salary for a youth worker in the U.S. is less than \$13 an hour.<sup>4</sup> Average hourly salaries for human service workers range from \$12-\$17, depending on the position.<sup>5</sup>
- Staff turnover rates in settings such as RHY programs can be as high as 20-40 percent, with a typical tenure of under one year.<sup>6</sup> And replacing staff is expensive: it costs organizations an average of one-fifth of a position’s annual salary to hire and train someone new.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Philantopic. (Dec. 22, 2016). “How to attract and retain next-gen talent” [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://pndblog.typepad.com/pndblog/2016/12/how-to-attract-and-retain-nextgen-talent.html>

<sup>2</sup>Gagne, C., Finch, W., Myrick, K., & Davis, L. (2018). Peer workers in the behavioral and integrated health workforce: Opportunities and future directions. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, v54(6), pp. S258-S266. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749379718316374>

<sup>3</sup>Anderson, D. (n.d.). “How nonprofit organizations can hire great employees” [Blog post]. Recruiterbox. Retrieved from <https://recruiterbox.com/blog/how-nonprofits-npos-can-hire-great-employees>

<sup>4</sup>Indeed.com. (April 26, 2019). Youth worker salaries in the United States. Retrieved from <https://www.indeed.com/salaries/Youth-Worker-Salaries>

<sup>5</sup>Salary.com. (April 27, 2019). Hourly wage for human service workers in the United States. Retrieved from <https://www1.salary.com/Human-Services-Worker-hourly-wages.html>

<sup>6</sup>Casey Family Programs. (Dec. 29, 2017). How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention. Retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies/>

<sup>7</sup>Boushey, H. & Glynn, S.J. (Nov. 16, 2012). *There are significant business costs to replacing employees*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/16084443/CostofTurnover0815.pdf>

- Low salaries are not the biggest reason for high rates of turnover in the human services field—rather, stress and job satisfaction are.<sup>8</sup>
- Comprehensive training, supervision, workplace morale, and professional development opportunities are highly valued by human service employees.<sup>9</sup>

## Tips for Hiring the Right People

### Prepare with Intention

- Collect internal data regarding what drives your hiring and retention challenges. Measure how long employees stay with your organization; what position they hold when they leave (entry-level, management, etc.), how long positions remain unfilled, and which positions turn over frequently. Conduct and review exit interviews with former staff. Also consider feedback from candidates who turn down a job offer—what reasons do they give for choosing to work elsewhere? Breaking down and analyzing this information can inform new strategies.
- Revamp job descriptions for accuracy and detail. Include a breakdown of all expected tasks and what percentage of the work each represents; which populations are served; the overarching principles that guide practice; typical case load levels; and expected or required outcomes. Ask current employees to review their job descriptions periodically and suggest updates as needed.
- Identify key competencies necessary for success, and use them to assess candidates. Competencies go beyond teachable skills, such as case documentation, to desired attitudes and work styles. For example, RHY programs typically value qualities such as authenticity, flexibility, and perseverance. Focus on attributes that are important for organizational and program development, and that are shared by people who have thrived in your RHY positions. (See also Core Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Work Practitioners in the Additional Resources section.)
- Establish a competitive compensation package. If you can pay more, do, but research shows that pay is not the number one factor in staff retention. Human service workers know that the field is underpaid, but they choose it anyway. Still, they often look to other benefits to help make up the difference.<sup>10</sup> Research typical pay and benefits for similar positions in your region so that you know how your offer measures up against those of other prospective employers.

### Make a Good Impression

Remember that it's not just about the pay. Health benefits, retirement plans, vacation time, and education reimbursement are all ways in which you can show workers that they are valued. Flexible schedules and paid family leave are also important; employers with family-friendly policies help retain valuable employees who need to balance work and family. Research also suggests that workers are attracted to environments that foster professional growth and development,<sup>11</sup> provide quality supervision,<sup>12</sup> reward positive job performance, and seek staff input on organizational decision-making. Highlight your RHY program's best features in order to attract quality applicants. (Learn more in the Creative Compensation in RHY Programs Tip Sheet in this series.)

<sup>8</sup>The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2018). *Five steps to a stronger child welfare workforce: Hiring and retaining the right people on the frontline*. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/m/resource/doc/aecf-fivestepstostrongerchildwelfare-2018.pdf#page=5>

<sup>9</sup>Annie E. Casey Foundation. (April 9, 2015). *A child welfare leader's desk guide to building a high-performing agency*. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/10-practices-part-one>

<sup>10</sup>Family & Youth Services Bureau. (2019). *Creative compensation in RHY programs*. <https://www.rhyttac.net>

<sup>11</sup>Casey Family Programs. (Dec. 29, 2017). How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention? Retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies>

<sup>12</sup>Barbee, A., Antle, B., Sullivan, D. Heubner, R., Fox, S. & Hall, J. (2009). Recruiting and retaining child welfare workers: Is preparing social work students enough for sustained commitment to the field? *Child Welfare*, 88(5), pp. 69-85.

## Spread the Word

- Establish a multi-pronged approach to recruitment. For example, ask staff, board members, and community partners to share your job posts and refer friends; publicize all job perks and benefits (health care, training, flexible scheduling, time off, etc.); and offer hiring bonuses or relocation support for the right candidates.
- Use targeted advertising for particular positions. Consider posting on nonprofit-specific job boards.<sup>13</sup> Looking for a multilingual youth counselor? Write your ad and conduct interviews in multiple languages, and promote on culturally diverse print, radio, and online platforms.<sup>14</sup> Describe the position in ways that are attractive to your target audience. Finally, make the prerequisites clear in your advertisement so that you have fewer unsuitable submissions to process.
- Leverage volunteer opportunities for clients and students interested in entering the field in the future. By establishing meaningful opportunities for interns and peer leaders to demonstrate their skills and abilities, RHY programs broaden the internal pipeline for hiring. In addition to allowing programs to assess a potential employee's fit over time, this approach also saves money by making hiring and on-boarding processes more efficient.
- Reach out to local colleges and share job postings on bulletin boards/online hubs, through student services offices, via professors in relevant departments, and through graduate or certificate programs.
- Communicate openly and share relevant materials (job descriptions, benefit descriptions, etc.) by posting them on the organization's website or sending them via email upon request. Hosting materials on your website is an efficient way to make all relevant information available on demand—and also to have it on-hand the next time a position opens. Don't forget to promote openings via the organization's social media platforms using relevant hashtags as well.

## Maximize the Hiring Process

- Incorporate behavioral-based interview questions that specifically ask about how applicants have responded to the unique situations that they might encounter on the job.<sup>15</sup> For example, you might ask, "Tell us about a time when a teen approached you with a personal problem, and how you handled it," or "When was the last time you went the extra mile for your job? How did you do it?" Include scenarios that were challenging for staff members who didn't work out in the past.
- Involve youth from the program in the interview process in order to observe how prospective candidates interact with them, and get feedback from young people about how they rate prospective employees. This is a skill-building opportunity for youth, but also an opportunity for you to see applicants through their eyes. Make space for young people to ask their own questions during the interview, and take their private feedback about the candidate into account before making a job offer. Ask candidates to spend several hours at a drop-in or with outreach staff, and observe how the young people respond to them.
- Give candidates a realistic preview of the work, either by shadowing other employees or via job preview videos, such as those that are used in child welfare settings.<sup>16</sup> New hires who have realistic job expectations are prepared to better manage stress on the job—or, conversely, to drop out before committing to a role for which they are ill-equipped.

<sup>13</sup>Foundation List. (2019). 24 nonprofit job boards for finding employment. Retrieved from <https://www.foundationlist.org/news/list-of-nonporift-job-boards-made-for-the-nonprofit-sector>

<sup>14</sup>Breezy. (Jan. 17, 2019). "The top 20 job boards for diversity hiring" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://breezy.hr/blog/top-20-job-boards-diversity-hiring>

<sup>15</sup>Society for Human Resource Management. (2016). *A guide to conducting behavioral interviews with early career job candidates*. Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/LearningAndCareer/learning/Documents/Behavioral%20Interviewing%20Guide%20for%20Early%20Career%20Candidates.pdf>

<sup>16</sup>Child Welfare Information Gateway (n.d.). Realistic job preview videos. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/learningcenter/rjps>

- Wait for the right person, if possible, even if it's difficult. With a staffing shortage, managers feel pressured to hire quickly, but hiring the wrong person can hurt a program's reputation with young people and negatively affect staff morale.<sup>17</sup> Fill short-term gaps with per diem workers or part-time staff who agree to a temporary increase in hours. Resist the urge to interview applicants who are clearly unqualified, and instead spend that energy on finding stronger prospective employees.<sup>18</sup>
- Check references. Focus personal reference checks on work style and social-emotional skills by asking questions directly related to the RHY role. Taking a strengths-based approach leads to more honest, and less defensive, responses. Try asking this question: "This job requires being flexible and non-judgmental. What have you observed about this candidate that could tell us whether they would be flexible and non-judgmental on the job?"
- Tailor orientation and training based on the new employee's level of experience and the expectations of the role. Research shows that comprehensive new-hire training is critical to retaining new employees.
- Don't forget the exit interview. When an employee leaves your organization, find out why they are moving on. Ask direct questions, and make clear that you welcome candid responses. Honest feedback will help you to improve the quality of your workplace, making it easier to retain high-quality workers over time.

## Additional Resources

Changing Lives as a Direct Support Professional [Videos]. These realistic job previews by Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health feature experienced staff members describing their daily work activities, the populations they serve, typical challenges, important skills, and how they experience the work environment. <https://jobs.devereux.org>

Get the Right People on the Bus: Attracting, Training and Hiring Youth Development Staff. This free online training module from the University of Minnesota REACH Center includes tools and strategies for hiring and supporting youth workers. <https://reachfamilies.umn.edu/prodev/lm/cm/right-people>

*Core Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Work Practitioners.* (2010). This updated publication from the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice and the Child and Youth Care Certification Board describes foundational attitudes and competencies required for professional-level practitioners seeking the CYC-P credential. [https://www.cyc-net.org/pdf/2010\\_Competencies\\_for\\_Professional\\_CYW\\_Practitioners%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.cyc-net.org/pdf/2010_Competencies_for_Professional_CYW_Practitioners%20(1).pdf)

*RHY Staff Retention Tip Sheet Series* (2019). This set of five tip sheets from the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes strategies for retaining quality staff in RHY programs by focusing on self-care, organizational culture, hiring, compensation, and career pathways. <https://www.rhyttac.net>

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<sup>17</sup>Chang, C. (Sept. 29, 2011). Three nonprofit hiring mistakes to avoid. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/three\\_nonprofit\\_hiring\\_mistakes\\_to\\_avoid](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/three_nonprofit_hiring_mistakes_to_avoid)

<sup>18</sup>Annie E. Casey Foundation (April 9, 2015). A child welfare leader's desk guide to building a high-performing agency. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/10-practices-part-one>