



## **Enhancing Workforce Wellbeing through the New Jersey Department of Children and Families Office of Staff Health & Wellness**

September 13th, 2024

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families was formed in 2006 as New Jersey's first cabinet level state agency dedicated to the safety and well-being of children, families, and communities. In the years since its creation, DCF's mandate has expanded well beyond the protection of children to include: design and delivery of New Jersey's public children's behavioral health care system; provision of public services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families; provision of public services for children with autism and their families; and the administration of a network of services and coordinated supports aimed at strengthening families, preventing and interrupting child maltreatment, and supporting transition-aged youth as they exit foster care. Over the last 12 years, concurrent with this growth, the Department has stabilized, grown, and developed the infrastructure needed to effectively serve children, women, and families in the 21st Century. Today, DCF serves over 100,000 constituents each month through a combination of programs provided directly by its state offices, and programs, via a contracted network of community-based organizations. DCF is responsible for providing numerous services for approximately 6,300 employees.

The DCF's strategic plan outlines the major values, strategies, and priorities of the Department. When DCF examined the feedback from the Commissioner's Listening Tour, it was determined that concrete resources were necessary to support employees' morale, mental wellness and safety. The Listening Tours were conducted by Commissioner Beyer and was an opportunity to engage with staff and stakeholders about topics that were impacting the work. The Office of Staff Health and Wellness (OSHW) was created to improve the health, safety, and wellbeing of all DCF staff. Staff health and wellness was determined to be one of the department's transformational goals in the Strategic Plan. The Office's purpose is to engage staff in resources and supports that foster overall physical and emotional well-being, strong morale and a culture of inclusivity and empowerment. Staff's professional and personal wellness is critical to fostering a safe work environment and also helps to cultivate and sustain a passionate and productive workforce.

This Concept Paper is intended to communicate the Department's strategies and goals about effective health and wellness support for DCF staff. Stakeholders and members of the public are invited to submit written comment by emailing [DCF.Wellness@dcf.nj.gov](mailto:DCF.Wellness@dcf.nj.gov) by **December 31, 2024**.

### **II. BACKGROUND**

The New Jersey DCF plays a vital role in protecting and supporting at-risk children and families across the state. However, the demands of child welfare work can take a significant toll on employees, leading to high levels of stress, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. Recognizing these challenges, the DCF established

the Office of Staff Health & Wellness to address the holistic well-being of its workforce. This white paper explores the strategic importance of OSHW, its key initiatives, and the measurable benefits of prioritizing staff health and wellness. Research shows that employees in good overall health are more likely to deliver optimal performance in the workplace. Emotionally healthy employees have a better quality of life, and they benefit from having a lower risk of disease, illness, and injury, as well as increased work productivity and a greater likelihood of contributing positively to their communities.

#### **OSHW's MISSION:**

To establish and maintain an atmosphere that encourages a healthy lifestyle, and to promote employee health and wellness programs that encourage their well-being through education and initiatives that:

- Expand knowledge and participation of wellness activities.
- Inspire, empower, and enable DCF employees to prioritize their own health and well-being by giving them permission to do so.
- Promote easy access to initiatives that will help employees feel supported and desire to make good choices.

#### **VALUES:**

Staff working in fields such as child protection, behavioral health, prevention and treatment of sexual violence and intimate partner violence are at high risk of experiencing vicarious and secondary trauma. The DCF Office of Staff Health and Wellness will focus on:

- Creating a safe and stable workforce to ensure that staff working with highly traumatized populations have support.
- Creating work environments that set staff up to succeed in engaging children and families, while encouraging collaboration and enthusiasm.

#### **PRINCIPLES:**

Our work is guided by the principles that DCF staff should:

- Work in an agency of excellence that always promotes the health and wellness of its employees, treating each employee with respect and dignity.
- Be empowered to take ownership of their own health and wellness.
- Be offered opportunities to have healthy communication across divisions and with DCF leadership.
- Be able to experience examples of overall healthy workplace culture.
- Contribute to and be a part of a healthy workplace culture.

### **III. OBJECTIVES OF OSHW**

The objectives of the Office of Staff Health and Wellness revolve around promoting the overall well-being of DCF employees and creating a supportive and healthy work environment with a resilient workforce. Here are key objectives that the OSHW continues focus:

1. **Enhance Employee Wellbeing:** Provide comprehensive support services that promote the physical, mental, and emotional health of DCF employees.
2. **Reduce Burnout and Stress:** Implement strategies to mitigate burnout, stress, and secondary trauma among staff, particularly those in high-stress roles.
3. **Provide Resources for Crisis and Emergency Support:** Ensure that employees have access to resources and support in times of personal or professional crises. Some of the strategies include collaboration with W2W, developing crisis intervention protocols, provide access to immediate

counseling and support services, and offer assistance with work-related issues that arise during emergencies.

4. **Foster a Positive Work Environment:** Collaborate with the Office of Diversity, Equity and Belonging and create a workplace culture that values well-being, encourages open communication, and supports psychological safety.
5. **Promote Retention and Engagement:** Boost employee engagement by fostering a work environment in which employees feel connected, motivated, and supported, leading to higher retention rates. Use resources from US Surgeon General Framework to increase employee retention and engagement by improving job satisfaction and providing opportunities for professional growth and self-care.
6. **Support Organizational Resilience:** Build organizational resilience by equipping staff with the tools and resources they need to cope with the demands of their work. This will be supported by OSHW, Office of Resilience, Office of Training and Professional Development and W2W.
7. **Measure and Improve Workplace Wellness Programs:** Collaborate with Offices of Applied Research and Evaluation and Human Resources to continuously assess the effectiveness of wellness initiatives and to make data-driven decisions to improve them by conducting regular surveys and assessments, analyze participation and outcomes, and adjust programs based on employee needs and feedback.

These objectives ensure that the Office of Staff Health and Wellness addresses immediate health and wellness needs and also contributes to the long-term well-being and success of the department and its employees.

#### **IV. GOALS**

Grounded in three core approaches, the Office of Staff Health and Wellness continues to focus on developing standard operational and business procedures while also coordinating and hosting monthly activities in which staff can participate. Since the office's creation, OSHW has focused on three key metrics that we believe can have the biggest impact on improving the well-being of our workforce. These metrics are workforce wellbeing, workforce retention and workforce development. The OSHW has developed a range of initiatives aimed at achieving these objectives:

##### **1. Comprehensive Wellness Programs**

Physical Health: Promoting regular wellness check-ups through NJ WELL, fitness challenges and workshops focusing on nutrition, exercise, and chronic disease management.

Mental Health: Access to counseling services through Worker2Worker, mental health webinars and workshops on stress management, mindfulness, and resilience-building. DCF Connect Calendar that focuses on mental health resources. Collaboration with Employee Assistance Services (EAS) to provide confidential support for personal and professional challenges.

##### **2. Building a Trauma-Informed/ Resilient Department**

Training: Ongoing training for staff on recognizing and managing secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma. Trauma-informed supervision and peer support groups to foster a supportive community.

Support Services: Access to specialized trauma debriefing sessions after critical incidents. Development of a peer support network to provide mutual aid and understanding among staff.

Wellness @ Work: Support for new workers who enter DCF and provide them with tools and resources they need to thrive in their work.

### **3. Work-Life Balance Initiatives**

Flexible Work Arrangements: Implementation of flexible work schedules and remote work options to help staff balance personal and professional responsibilities.

Time-Off Policies: Encouraging the use of vacation time and other leave time. Development of policies that promote work-life balance.

### **4. Leadership Development and Training**

Leadership Training: Programs focused on developing empathetic, supportive leadership practices that prioritize employee well-being. Training on how to create and maintain psychologically safe work environments.

Mentorship Programs: Initiatives to pair new employees with experienced mentors to provide guidance, support, and professional development.

### **5. Employee Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms**

Surveys and Assessments: Regular employee surveys to assess well-being, job satisfaction, and workplace culture. Use of data to inform policies and initiatives.

Feedback Loops: Creating opportunities for staff to provide input on wellness programs and suggest improvements. Regular listening sessions to ensure staff voices are heard.

### **6. Recognition and Rewards**

Employee Recognition Programs: Initiatives to acknowledge and reward staff for their hard work and dedication. Programs may include awards, public recognition, and other incentives. OSHW will also recognize staff who have been employed with DCF for 1, 5, 10, 20, 25, and 30 years and more.

## **V. Impact of the Office of Staff Health & Wellness**

The initiatives led by the OSHW have a direct impact on the well-being of DCF employees, contributing to a more resilient and effective workforce. Key benefits include:

### **1. Improved Employee Health and Wellbeing**

Employees report higher levels of physical and mental health, leading to reduced absenteeism and healthcare costs. Enhanced resilience helps staff manage the stress and demands of their work more effectively.

### **2. Reduced Burnout and Increased Job Satisfaction**

Staff experience lower levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress, leading to increased job satisfaction and a greater sense of fulfillment in their roles.

### **3. Enhanced Team Cohesion and Communication**

Programs promoting psychological safety and open communication lead to stronger team cohesion, better collaboration, and a more positive workplace culture.

#### **4. Higher Retention Rates**

Improved employee well-being and job satisfaction contribute to higher retention rates, reducing turnover costs and ensuring continuity of care for the families and children DCF serves.

#### **5. Increased Organizational Effectiveness**

A healthier, more engaged workforce leads to higher productivity, better service delivery, and ultimately, improved outcomes for children and families across New Jersey.

### **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING OSH&W INITIATIVES**

While the OSHW has made significant strides, there are opportunities for further enhancement by:

#### **1. Expanding Access to Wellness Resources**

Increase access to wellness programs and resources for staff.

#### **2. Enhancing Mental Health Support**

Expand mental health services. Consider offering on-site counseling services and increasing the availability of mental health days.

#### **3. Continuing Collaboration w/ The Office of Diversity, Equity and Belonging**

Ensure that wellness programs are inclusive and culturally sensitive, addressing the unique needs of a diverse workforce. Provide training on cultural competence and inclusive practices.

#### **4. Measuring and Sharing Outcomes**

Regularly measure the impact of wellness initiatives and share the results with staff. Use data to continuously improve programs and demonstrate the value of wellness investments.

#### **5. Promoting a Wellness-Oriented Culture**

Embed wellness into the organizational culture by making it a core component of the DCF's mission and values. Encourage all levels of leadership to prioritize and model wellness in their daily practices.

### **VII. Conclusion**

The New Jersey DCF Office of Staff Health & Wellness plays a critical role in supporting the well-being of its employees. By prioritizing health and wellness, the OSHW enhances the quality of life for DCF staff and improves the department's ability to serve New Jersey's children and families effectively. Continued investment in staff well-being is essential for building a resilient, effective, and compassionate workforce, ensuring that the DCF remains a leader in child welfare services.

To further this mission, DCF will continue to expand and refine its wellness initiatives, regularly assess their impact, and engage employees in the ongoing development of a workplace culture that values and supports health and well-being. By doing so, the DCF will create an environment in which employees can thrive, and, in turn, provide the highest level of service to those in need. Building a comprehensive wellness program will be an extensive process and DCF welcomes written comments on this paper via email at [DCF.Wellness@dcf.nj.gov](mailto:DCF.Wellness@dcf.nj.gov) by **December 31, 2024**.

[https://www.nj.gov/def/childdata/nj federal/NJ\\_CFSR\\_FinalReport\\_2017.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/def/childdata/nj federal/NJ_CFSR_FinalReport_2017.pdf)

[Engaging Employees in Their Health and Wellness \(cdc.gov\)](#)

[Office of the Surgeon General - Framework for Workplace Mental Health&Well Being \(hhs.gov\)](#)