



COVID-19 School Wellness Initiative Key Element: Workforce Strategies

Overview

Staffing was one of the most frequent challenges faced by CSWI partners throughout the grant. Delays in hiring qualified clinical staff and licensed supervisors and difficulties retaining existing staff affected the scope and intensity of services offered. Notably, **41% of grantees experienced obstacles in hiring bilingual clinical staff**, which limited access to culturally and linguistically responsive care.

The tiered CSWI framework allowed partners to adjust programming based on staff availability. For instance, when qualified clinical staff were limited, some grantees prioritized Tier 3 one-on-one interventions, which were Medicaid-reimbursable services. Staff turnover also required new clinical personnel to build trust and buy-in with parents, youth, and community partners, a critical step to sustaining program engagement.



82%
of grantees
reported staffing
as a challenge

Workforce challenges underscored a need for **creative staffing solutions and intentional planning**. By strategically aligning staffing to program tiers and each community's needs, grantees could continue delivering high-quality services despite a tight labor market.

Bright Spots

Several grantees implemented innovative strategies to address expected and unexpected workforce challenges. One example was how **Centerstone JC Parent Mentors** bridged youth and parent trust, helping families access services and build familiarity with staff. By addressing barriers such as parent hesitancy and scheduling challenges, they amplified the reach and effectiveness of clinical interventions, especially with limited staff capacity.

Additionally, the **Centerstone COVID Wellness/Recovery "Educator Rising Club"** created a pathway for high school students to explore social work careers. Over two years, 35 students will take dual-credit courses in education and social work through John A. Logan College, building a pipeline for the future behavioral health workforce.

Gateway Family Services expanded visibility through community workshops, drawing the attention of the University of Illinois School of Social Work. This connection is expected to lead to professional development opportunities and potentially a residency program to address regional mental health service demand.

Other promising workforce practices included:

- Internship stipends for emerging mental health care professionals.
- Hiring bonuses and increased salary allocations to attract qualified staff.
- Utilizing family resource specialists and community health workers to connect families with housing support, utility assistance, and food access.
- Expanding teletherapy to reach students and families facing transportation barriers.

Barriers & Proposed Strategies

Grantees reported **frequent challenges with hiring and retaining behavioral health staff**. Key barriers included shortages of qualified clinical staff and licensed supervisors in rural areas, difficulty recruiting bilingual staff to reflect community needs, high turnover requiring ongoing trust-building with families, and competition from remote work opportunities in other organizations.

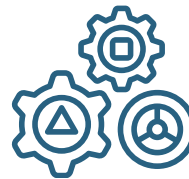
To address these barriers, grantees piloted a range of strategies:



Prioritizing
cost of living
and hiring
bonuses



Leveraging
resource
specialists to
reduce crises



Aligning
programming
tiers with
staff capacity

Lessons Learned & Summary

Workforce challenges were a defining feature of CSWI implementation, affecting the reach and frequency of services. Investing in staff—through financial incentives, pipeline programs, and innovative localized roles—not only helped grantees maintain service delivery but strengthened the **overall capacity to meet the needs of the community**.

Lessons from the workforce strategies highlight the importance of aligning staffing solutions to local community needs, using custom programming to flexibly deploy available resources, and building partnerships with educational institutions to grow the next generation of clinicians.

Supporting the workforce is inseparable from supporting children and families. When staff are skilled, well-supported, and culturally responsive, they deliver higher-quality interventions, build stronger relationships with families, and foster trust across schools, providers, and communities. Investing in the workforce strengthens not just individual programs, but the broader system, **laying the foundation for sustainable and equitable mental health support for all Illinois youth**.