Building a Diverse Home Visiting Workforce: Nurturing and Supporting Staff

Hiring is only the first step to achieving a stable, productive, and diverse workforce. Retaining that workforce requires intentional effort and real investments in pay equity, professional development, and employee supports. It requires an organizational culture that welcomes differences in perspectives, experiences, and ideas, and that creates a sense of belonging among staff from different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, identities, and beliefs. It also requires policies and practices that reflect an understanding and commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and belonging (see box). These strategies are critical to the success of MIECHV awardees and local implementing agencies (LIAs) in reaching underserved communities and providing high-quality home visiting to families.

Despite the recognized benefits of an experienced and diverse workforce, home visiting programs face enormous challenges with staff attrition. Home visitors and supervisors are committed to their work and the families they serve, but this commitment is not enough to keep them in their jobs when they feel unsupported.[1] An estimated 25–30 percent of

> The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children up to kindergarten entry. Home visiting helps prevent child abuse and neglect, supports positive parenting, improves maternal and child health, and promotes child development and school readiness.

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1   Sandstrom, H., Benatar, S., Peters, R., Genua, D., Coffey, A., Lou, C., Adelstein, S., & Greenberg, E. (2020). *Home visiting career trajectories: Final report. OPRE report #2020-11*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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home visiting staff leave their jobs each year.[2] According to surveys of home visitors, factors that contribute to these high turnover rates include low pay, lack of leadership support, poor communication within the organization, limited opportunities for promotion, paperwork burden, poor relationships with coworkers, and workload.[3] Factors related to worksite culture and acceptance—such as real or perceived discrimination, bias, and lack of acceptance—can also contribute to attrition. Not surprisingly, staff recruitment and retention, and development of culturally responsive systems of care, were among the top priorities identified by MIECHV awardees in their 2022–2023 technical assistance priorities scans.

This is one of two checklists intended to support MIECHV awardees and the home visiting programs they fund in attracting and retaining a diverse workforce. The first checklist, *Building a Diverse Home Visiting Workforce: Recruitment Strategies*, provides guidance for awardees and LIAs seeking to improve their hiring processes and broaden their pool of applicants. This resource addresses common barriers and practices identified by awardees and LIAs that contribute to staff attrition. It presents strategies for overcoming these challenges based on the best practices of awardees and LIAs, and on the work of the home visiting equity and staff recruitment and retention CoIINs.
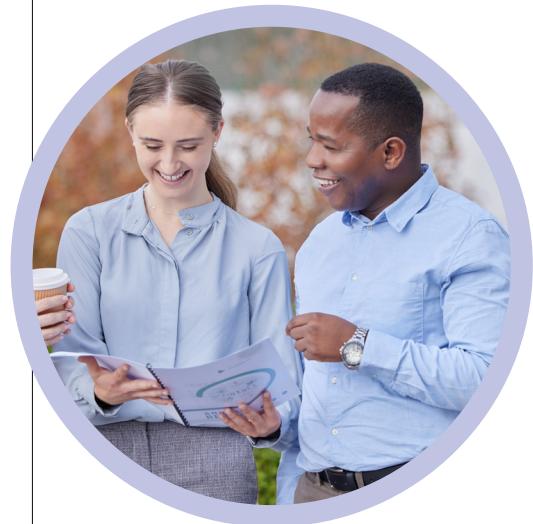
Supporting and Retaining a Diverse Workforce: Why It Matters

Nurtured, well-trained, and well-supported staff are essential to the success of home visiting programs in serving historically excluded families, including building the trust needed to support these families in achieving their health and well-being goals. Simply put, if home visitors are not supported, they will

2   Franko, M., Schaack, D., Roberts, A., Molieri, A., Wacker, A., Estrada, M., & Gann, H. (2019). *The Region X home visiting workforce study*. Denver, CO: Butler Institute for Families, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver.

3   Sandstrom, H. et al. *Home visiting career trajectories*.

have difficulty supporting families experiencing trauma and other challenges. Without ongoing support, home visitors, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, are at risk of experiencing secondary trauma and burnout—key factors contributing to staff turnover.

This turnover is costly for programs, as evidence-based home visiting requires significant upfront investment in training. Turnover also directly affects families. Two-thirds of home visiting programs responding to a national survey reported reducing the frequency of visits, graduating families early, or terminating them from service altogether when a home visitor leaves.[4] Some of these families may experience retraumatization due to feelings of abandonment and a loss of trust.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

Diversity: Variations of characteristics in a group of people. Includes everything that makes us unique (e.g., cognitive skills, personality traits) and shapes our identity (e.g., race, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, cultural background).

Equity: Ensuring that everyone receives what they need to succeed. While *equality* emphasizes sameness, fairness, and justice by giving everyone the same resources, *equity* highlights the importance of providing people with access to the same opportunities.

Inclusion: The active practice of inviting diverse perspectives and voices by intentionally creating space, acknowledging unequal power in relationships, and making appropriate accommodations for people to meaningfully participate.

Belonging: When people of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and identities feel accepted and celebrated for who they are and feel comfortable expressing their authentic selves.
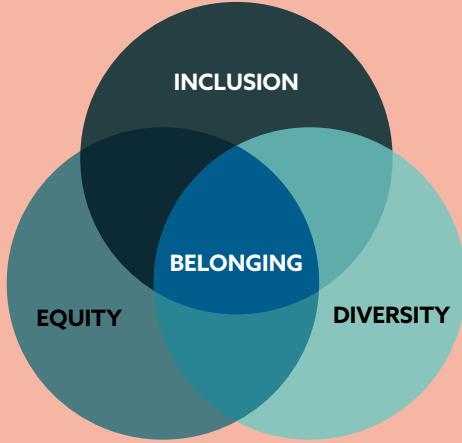
Sources: "Glossary of Health Equity Terms," *Health Equity in Home Visiting: The HV Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN) Health Equity Toolkit; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Definitions*, David and Lucile Packard Foundation; Graphic adapted from Progressive AE.

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4   Sandstrom, H. et al. *Home visiting career trajectories.*

Belonging: The Intersection of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

A culture of belonging is critical to building resilience and increasing connectedness in a diverse workplace. This is particularly important for home visiting, where staff work independently most of the time and frequently juggle multiple personal and professional stressors. Employees with a sense of belonging feel accepted, valued, included, and encouraged to be themselves. They feel safe in contributing their ideas without fear of discrimination or reprisal. They feel supported by their peers, supervisors, and leadership. They are afforded opportunities to be successful, advance professionally, and thrive in their jobs. And most importantly, they are recognized and rewarded for their efforts.

According to a recent survey of employees across a variety of sectors, a high sense of belonging is linked to a 50 percent drop in turnover risk and a 75 percent reduction in sick days.[5] This translates into a workforce that is stable, professionally and personally satisfied, and engaged in their work—all key attributes of a workforce equipped to meet the complex needs of families served by home visiting. Creating a sense of belonging is critical to efforts by MIECHV awardees and LIAs to retain a diverse home visiting workforce as they sit at the intersection of DEI.

Presented below are some ideas and examples of how MIECHV awardees and LIAs can foster belonging and improve retention in support of a diverse home visiting workforce.

Compensation and Advancement

Low pay is the number one reason home visitors and supervisors leave their positions. While salaries vary by region, organization, and model requirements, only 13 percent of home visitors and 18 percent of supervisors perceive

5   Carr, E. W., Reece, A., Kellerman, G. R., & Robichaux, A. (2019). The value of belonging at work. *Harvard Business Review*.

that their compensation is fair given their qualifications and responsibilities.[6] Limited opportunities for advancement and promotion also contribute to staff attrition.

- **Examine pay equity within your system and develop strategies to remedy disparities.** Organizations typically use pay equity studies to ensure salary parity across similar positions and identify areas of potential discrimination based on race, gender, age, and other factors. But these evaluations can also help you identify disparities in salaries across home visiting providers. Consider conducting a salary survey of LIAs, then sharing the de-identified findings with them. LIAs could use these data to pinpoint disparities between, as well as within, programs. Strategies for addressing these disparities include reallocating MIECHV funding, providing supplemental resources to LIAs, and imposing contract requirements to prioritize salaries for direct service staff over administration and overhead.

- **Ensure that employee classifications are aligned with salaries, roles, and responsibilities.** A common problem identified by providers is that position classifications for home visitors and supervisors fail to accurately reflect the breadth of staff responsibilities, including responsibilities related to data collection and reflective supervision. Can you work with agencies to reclassify positions or create additional position classifications to achieve pay equity and opportunities for advancement?

- **Incentivize and reward tenure.** Examine your organization's salary and benefits structure. Do you have flexibility to use bonuses and incentive pay to encourage retention? MIECHV funding provided under the American Rescue Plan permitted hazard pay for home visiting staff as a way to encourage their continued support of families during the pandemic. Can policies or strategies used to distribute these funds be incorporated into ongoing agency policies and practices?

For example:

B'More for Healthy Babies, a MIECHV-funded LIA network in Maryland, conducted a study of home visiting programs in the city. After finding that some programs were not paying staff a living wage, they set a minimum salary requirement in provider contracts. Their decision to set a floor for home visitor salaries also focused attention on disparities in salaries earned by longer-tenured, experienced staff. The study was part of a larger, equity-focused effort to improve outcomes by ensuring that home visiting staff were well-paid and well-prepared, and had clear career trajectories.

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6   Sandstrom, H. et al. *Home visiting career trajectories.*

- **Use non-salary compensation to augment salaries.**
  There are wide variations in benefit packages for home visiting staff. A recent report noted a strong relationship between the benefits provided to home visitors and the perceptions of their employer's support. Good benefits were also identified by home visiting staff as an important factor in retention. Consider adding benefits such as dental care, paid family leave, and childcare supplements; increasing retirement contributions; adding leave time; and extending benefits coverage to part-time employees. Other examples of non-salary compensation include educational scholarships (often provided in return for a specified period of continued service), attendance at conferences of the employee's choice, reimbursement of licensure and other professional fees, and flexible or part-time work schedules.

Mentoring

Mentoring, particularly peer mentoring, is an important factor contributing to workforce retention. According to a national study, assigning peer mentors to home visitors significantly impacted their intent to stay in their positions.[7] Yet only half of programs report using this approach with new staff.[8] Successful mentoring programs can help staff connect to the organization, and provide a way of sharing personal experience and advice. In fact, research shows that the impact of mentoring on retention and future advancement is greatest among women and people from groups that have been historically marginalized.

- **Develop a formal mentoring program**, and seek input from staff—especially recent hires—in its development; they can help identify specific needs based on their own experiences. Take time to think through logistics,

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7   Sandstrom, H. et al. *Home visiting career trajectories*.
8   Cary, L., Sandstrom, H., & Benatar, S. (2021). *Management practices to promote home visitor retention: What does a national study of the home visiting workforce tell us? OPRE report #2021-193*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

including type of approach (individual versus group), meeting frequency, topics, mentor availability, qualifications and training. Are there resources available to provide stipends or other compensation to mentors to support their work?

- **Match mentors and new staff based on staff preferences and needs.** Are staff interested in having mentors who reflect their gender, racial, or ethnic backgrounds? If the diversity of current staff within your program or department is limited, are there other programs or departments with staff who would be willing to help?

- **Provide opportunities for reverse mentoring.** Reverse mentoring helps to bridge generational or hierarchical divides by providing a space for more junior staff to share their expertise and experiences directly with senior management. It can take various forms, ranging from direct shadowing to informal meetings over coffee. Reverse mentoring can foster belonging by encouraging an open and honest exchange of ideas and perspectives among leaders and staff at all levels of the organization. It also demonstrates that the opinions and views of all employees are valued.

Teambuilding

Making sure all staff—regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, identity, or background—are welcomed, supported, and appreciated by peers is important to developing a sense of belonging. This is especially critical in a hybrid work environment where face-to-face contact is limited (see box: "Fostering Belonging in a Hybrid Environment"). Group activities that enable home visitors (who spend much of their time working independently) to work with their peers can build personal and professional relationships, as well as strengthen communications, innovation, and problem-solving. Participating in communities of practice, HV CoIINs, and

For example:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ohio MIECHV awardee staff sent one another appreciation cards and letters of encouragement. The effort helped to build morale and maintain connections during this stressful period when most staff were working from home.

practicums offer work-related opportunities for teambuilding, learning, and peer support. It is important to allocate time for employees to take advantage of these activities.

- **Recognize the teambuilding benefits of CQI!** MIECHV-required continuous quality improvement (CQI) activities are more than just tools for improving program performance and participant outcomes; they also can be part of a powerful teambuilding strategy. Effective CQI processes engage staff in prioritizing and selecting topics, setting aims, identifying changes to test, and selecting measures to track. Use CQI to encourage group brainstorming and problem-solving—and to celebrate success! If staff want to focus on managing stress and self-care, consider Joy in Work, which addresses many workplace issues related to belonging (see box: "Joy in Work: Fostering Belonging through CQI").

- **Share success stories and challenges.** Focus on successes, as well as challenges, in staff meetings and other worksite gatherings. Highlight what's going well in the program and encourage staff to do the same. Encourage staff to share information about help provided by peers and supervisors that contributed to their success. Offer an opportunity for staff to present challenges they are facing, and invite the group to brainstorm strategies for addressing it.

- **Create a space for courageous conversations.** A diverse workforce needs space and guidance to talk frankly about race, racism, and other issues that continue to divide our country. Consider using trained facilitators to lead the discussions. Although these conversations can be uncomfortable and stressful, they are important to building trust and understanding. They also provide opportunities for staff to identify ongoing discrimination, both real and perceived, so steps can be taken to address it. It is important for organizational leadership to invest in anti-racism training and

provide opportunities for staff at all levels to deepen their understanding of racism, implicit bias, discrimination, and the privilege inherent in a dominant culture.

Fostering Belonging in a Hybrid Environment

The transition to a hybrid work environment offers both opportunities and challenges for awardees and LIAs in creating a culture that advances diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and that supports workforce retention. Studies indicate that underrepresented groups—including those who are Black, women, LGBTQ+, nonbinary, and disabled—strongly prefer hybrid work. Offering this flexibility may help attract a larger and more diverse pool of applicants, and increase retention post-hire. Yet hybrid work can also contribute to isolation; and it can limit collaboration, networking, and social support—all key factors in building a diverse workforce.

Fostering belonging and inclusion in a hybrid environment requires intentional efforts to provide work-life support, promote teambuilding, and nurture mutual respect among employees. This includes giving staff who work remotely the tools and support they need to work successfully outside the office, and encouraging them to establish communication preferences and boundaries to maintain work-life balance. Teambuilding can be strengthened through informal social activities organized by staff, such as potluck lunches or hobby-related affinity groups. These activities allow staff to get to know each other personally as well as professionally, building the relationships needed for collaboration and peer support. Celebrating holidays particular to different groups, and sharing traditional foods and cultural practices, can also promote understanding and appreciation among staff from different backgrounds.

Finally, it is important to monitor the impact of hybrid work on advancement and professional development to ensure staff who prefer this option have equal access to information, training, and leadership opportunities.

Sources: Dowling, B., Goldstein, D., Park, M., & Price, H., 2022, *Hybrid work: Making it fit with your diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy*, McKinsey & Company; Samuel, A. & Robertson, T., 2021, October 13, *Don't let hybrid work set back your DEI efforts*, *Harvard Business Review*.

- **Reflect diversity in your program materials and workplace environment.** It's easier for staff from historically underrepresented groups to engage in teambuilding and other efforts to strengthen organizational connections when the worksite reflects and embraces diversity. Include on your website, in your resources and program materials, and in your office images that are diverse and inclusive (i.e., that depict individuals representing a variety of races and ethnicities, as well as genders, ages, and sexual orientations).

- **Advocate for your staff.** Program managers and supervisors can contribute to team building by advocating for staff and their needs with agency leadership. Surveys and focus groups with home visitors reveal that support and advocacy by supervisors is highly valued by staff and contributes to increased trust and commitment.[9] Supervisors and managers are in the best position to communicate how policy and budget decisions impact some staff disproportionately. For example, decisions to reduce flexible hours, cut benefits, or increase caseloads may disproportionately affect recently hired staff who lack seniority and/or who may be working in positions that are already at the lower end of the pay scale. They are also in the best position to engage staff and suggest more equitable alternatives which safeguard gains in DEI.

Recognition

Recognition and appreciation can be important in developing a sense of belonging among staff, especially when they have a part in deciding what is recognized and how. Recognition generally acknowledges performance (for example, the highest number of completed home visits in a month), while appreciation affirms an individual's behavior or actions (for example, the most enthusiastic staff member). Both are

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9   Sandstrom, H. et al. *Home visiting career trajectories.*

excellent tools for promoting inclusion and demonstrating an employee's value to the organization. Studies cite respect, rewards, and celebration of staff achievements as key factors affecting job satisfaction and staff retention.[10] Seek staff input in determining the focus of the program and selection criteria. And remember, although awards (and rewards!) are nice, little things—like personal thank-you notes—matter, too.

- **Incorporate DEI in recognition efforts.** Elevate your efforts around DEI by recognizing staff who contribute to its success. These contributions might include organizing a discussion group, mentoring a new employee, submitting a newsletter item on diversity, and recommending a book or podcast on a thought-provoking topic.

- **Create peer recognition activities.** Work with staff to identify ways to recognize the talents, contributions, and support of their peers. Studies show that peer recognition activities build trust and collaboration.[11] They can also strengthen teambuilding and help staff representing different backgrounds to connect to the organization.

- **Provide opportunities for your staff to shine!** Encourage them to submit proposals for presentations to state and national conferences. Have they developed an innovative strategy for engaging or serving families they can share? Don't forget internal meetings—consider adding an agenda item where program staff can present success stories to agency leadership. This exposure can help managers become familiar with staff, potentially leading to future advancements.

Joy in Work: Fostering Belonging through CQI

What matters to you?

For home visiting staff at the Central Health District, a MIECHV LIA in Idaho, the answer was "bouncing back and resiliency" after a year of working with families during the pandemic. What followed was a series of teambuilding and self-care projects that measurably improved both professional and personal satisfaction about the work they do, according to Melanie Falls, a Parents as Teachers family educator at the site. "We had a strong team before, but this project helped us get to know each other better and become even more supportive."

The health district was one of seven LIAs that participated in Joy in Work, a unique CQI effort developed by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and implemented by Idaho MIECHV.

10 Sandstrom, H. et al. *Home visiting career trajectories*.
11 Vranjes, T. (2014, October 23). *Employers embrace peer-to-peer recognition*. Society for Human Resource Management.

Joy in Work: Fostering Belonging through CQI (...Continued)

"Joy in Work had a substantial impact on home visiting teams," noted Anika Levinson, CQI lead for the state awardee. "Many teams tested successful change ideas, but the greatest impact was how this project made them feel that their well-being and happiness was a priority."

Idaho MIECHV picked Joy in Work as its statewide CQI project in 2021 in response to a survey of home visiting staff that prioritized staff wellness and retention as top areas of concern. They utilized the charter, change ideas, and other material developed by Oregon MIECHV in their own Joy in Work project.

Joy in Work uses an asset-based framework that focuses on factors like joy, resilience, and relationships, rather than deficits like burnout, turnover, and conflict. It is about connecting to meaning and purpose, building a resilient workforce, and sustaining positive working relationships—all critical factors in supporting a diverse workforce. According to IHI, individuals who experience unfairness and inequity at work (or even outside of work) feel disempowered and will likely disengage, regardless of the basis for the inequity. A focus on joy is a step toward creating safe, humane places for people to find meaning and purpose in their work.

Among the successful change ideas implemented by Idaho LIAs were trauma-informed yoga practice, team breakfasts, languages of appreciation activities, and book clubs. According to Falls, her team particularly welcomed "lighthearted" coping activities.

The project came close to achieving its aim during its initial implementation, posting a 12 percent increase in home visiting staff across LIAs who experience joy in work as measured by the 13-item Joy in Work survey.

"Taking time to focus on them [the home visiting staff] rather than on benchmarks or other concrete measures has opened the door for so many conversations about how much they matter. This work is relationship-based, and having happy and healthy staff is critical for those relationships to flourish," said Levinson.

Addressing Staff Stress

Workplace stressors are well-documented in the home visiting field.[12] Factors include independent work, which can contribute to social isolation; extensive amounts of travel; and concern for personal safety. Job demands (like data collection and paperwork, large caseloads, and difficulty finding resources for families) and work environments (including neighborhood and home conditions) add to staff stress. Additionally, home visitors experience higher risks of secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout due to the nature of their work with families requiring high levels of support, as well as trauma in home visitors' own backgrounds. Staff who have experienced interpersonal and systemic racism, or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or physical abilities, may be particularly vulnerable to these stressors. Providing home visiting staff with the tools they need to protect against these stressors can help organizations retain a diverse workforce.

For example:

After job-related stress was identified in a qualitative study of home visitors, the Florida MIECHV program used funding from a competitive grant to implement training in mindfulness-based stress reduction for home visitors statewide. Feedback from participating staff was very positive and supported its value as a tool to reduce the pressures of their work.

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12 Alitz, P. J., Geary, S., Birriel, P. C., Sayi, T., Ramakrishnan, R., Balogun, O., Salloum, A., & Marshall, J. T. (2018). Work-related stressors among Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) home visitors: A qualitative study. *Maternal and Child Health Journal, 22 (Suppl. 1)*: S62–69.

- **Invest in high-quality supervision tailored to meet the needs of a diverse workforce.** Reflective supervision is a hallmark of most evidence-based home visiting models. The focus, frequency, and responsiveness of this supervision affects its value for home visitors. Providing effective reflective supervision to meet the needs of a diverse workforce requires specialized training to ensure supervisors have the skills they need to navigate power differentials and respond to both explicit and implicit racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural biases.[13]

- **Prioritize self-care and workplace support.** Stress management is an essential part of workplace support. Self-care—including taking time off, providing opportunities to socialize and celebrate with fellow staff, and respecting work and nonwork hours—is critical to supporting the health and well-being of home visiting staff. Intentionally infuse mindfulness and healthy practices (like lunchtime walks) in workplace activities, or encourage staff who are working remotely to take breaks throughout the day. Home visitors even cite the value of humor as a stress management tool and point to its role in alleviating the pressures of working with families who require high levels of support. Joy in Work (see box) offers ideas on a variety of strategies to address stress and burnout.

- **Evaluate your employee assistance program.** Be sure staff have access to the mental health services they need to address stress, depression, or other personal issues that their work may be causing or exacerbating. A culture of caring demands real support for staff when they need it.

- **Take tangible action to address workload.** Examine caseloads assigned to home visitors in terms of volume and risk factors. Can resources be found to reduce the burden of data collection—for example, to hire additional

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13 Wilson, K., & Barron, C. C. (2022). *Honoring race and diversity in reflective supervision: Guiding principles to enhance relationships*. Zero to Three.

data entry staff? Can other staff, including supervisors and managers, assist with initial intake and enrollment? Invite ideas from staff on how required activities and paperwork can be streamlined, and consider testing these ideas as a CQI project.

Tracking and Monitoring Staff Retention

To determine the success of efforts to retain a diverse workforce, organizations must set goals related to these efforts and routinely collect data to assess progress. It is important for both MIECHV awardees and LIAs to accurately measure attrition and turnover, including their contributing factors. Data can help pinpoint challenges related to retention for particular positions or among specific demographic groups, as well as track the success of targeted recruitment strategies. Data can also reveal when or where budget increases or structural changes may be needed to support retention efforts. Data can help you make the case for these changes with agency leadership. Look to your human resource team for help compiling baseline data to begin this process. Below are some key data elements that both awardees and LIAs can use to track and monitor retention efforts.

- **Annual retention rate:** This is the number of employees who remain with the program for the year (calendar or budget), divided by the number of staff at the beginning of the year × 100. Calculate this rate by position and demographics (e.g., race, age, gender). Year-to-year comparisons can reveal both positive and negative trends.

- **Annual turnover rate:** This is the number of separations for the year, divided by the average number of staff during that time period × 100. (To calculate the average number of staff, add the number of staff at the beginning of the time period to the number at the end of the period, and divide by two.) Rates can be determined

for voluntary versus involuntary separations. Position- and demographic-specific rates are important for ensuring equity in layoffs, for example.

- **Employee satisfaction:** Annual surveys can help you measure staff engagement and belonging. They are a critical tool for obtaining feedback on what it's like to work for your agency or program, identifying strengths and areas for improvement in workplace culture, uncovering real or perceived biases, and highlighting systemic issues contributing to stress and attrition. Exit interviews and surveys are also important for determining workplace factors that contribute to staff turnover.

A Final Word

Efforts to attract and hire a diverse home visiting workforce are unlikely to be successful in the absence of an organizational culture that nurtures and supports its staff. Staff turnover has a direct and measurable impact on participating families and their success in achieving the goals they set for themselves and their children. DEI strategies that improve retention can be infused into all workplace activities, and are critical to cultivating a sense of belonging among staff, particularly among staff of color and others from populations that have been systematically disadvantaged in employment opportunities. Retaining home visiting staff at both the awardee and LIA levels requires both commitment to DEI principles and action to address pay equity, professional development, and employee supports.

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