Costs of Turnover in Virginia's Child Welfare Workforce:

A Proposal for Reducing Turnover Related to Vicarious Trauma

Background: According to recent comments from James Williams, Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), "in 2024, the [VDSS] received nearly 95,000 reports of alleged child abuse and neglect – a 27% increase since 2020….In 2023, 38 children died as a direct result of abuse or neglect, and in 71% of those cases there was active or prior child welfare involvement." The Commissioner went on to mention that "at any given time, as many as 650 family services positions remain vacant, and two in five entry-level positions[1] turn over each year." The "complexity of the work, the scarcity of resources, and the rising numbers of families in crisis" have created an environment that is extremely taxing on state and local child welfare workers.

To address the systemic challenges (e.g., high caseload, staff turnover) of meeting the increasing demand for services, the Commonwealth is launching the ***Safe Kids, Strong Families*** initiative. One component of the initiative is to address child welfare employee turnover through better training and support for the well-being of local workers. Based on findings from employee surveys[2], focus groups[3], and a Capstone project[4], vicarious trauma (also called 'secondary trauma') is strongly associated with employee burnout, job dissatisfaction, and job exits among family services employees.

To mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma on local staff, the Office of Trauma and Resilience Policy (OTRP) at VDSS is proposing to roll out a statewide Workforce Support Program. This program would include: 1) Peer Support Line staffed by retired DSS workers 2: implementation of the evidence-based Community Resiliency Model (CRM)© in local departments to teach workers skills to regulate their nervous systems when experiencing stress and trauma, 3) on-site response to support DSS workers after critical incidents (child fatalities, threats or injuries to workers, or similar) using the CRM framework, and 4) evaluation of program utilization and effectiveness.

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[1] Human Resources analyzed annual turnover rates (2021-2024) among family services specialists by occupational code. Results show that Family Services Specialist I (OTD 21011), typically assigned to new entry-level employees, had the highest rate, on average across all four years, at 39% -- about 67% higher than Family Services Specialist II (23%). The lowest rates were 10% and 12%, respectively, for Managers and Supervisors.

[2] Mullins, Kayleigh. (May 24, 2024*). Vicarious trauma in the DSS human services workforce: Survey results report.* Retrieved from Virginia Department of Social Services: https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/otrp/intro_page/workforce_trauma/Vicarious_Trauma_in_the_Human_Services_Workforce_Survey_Report.pdf.

[3] Lamm, S., and Smith, S. (December 15, 2023). *Vicarious trauma in the DSS human services workforce: Focus group results report.* Retrieved from Virginia Department of Social Services: https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/otrp/intro_page/workforce_trauma/Vicarious_Trauma_in_the_Human_Services_Workforce_Focus_Group_Report.pdf

[4] Mullins, Kayleigh. (2024). *Vicarious trauma in the workplace: Mitigating the effects of vicarious trauma in child welfare workers in Virginia's Department of Social Services to improve turnover rates.* Unpublished report retrieved from Virginia Department of Social Services: https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/otrp/intro_page/workforce_trauma/Vicarious_Trauma_in_the_Human_Services_Workforce_Capstone_Project_Report.pdf

The objective of the Workforce Support Program is to reduce vicarious trauma and increase employee retention and reduce staff turnover especially among new family services workers. Consequently, this will lead to improved outcomes for vulnerable children and youth in the long term.

In the first year, the budget request is $600,000; a similar amount is requested for the second year and ongoing. We are requesting that a budget proposal to fund this program be considered for the FY 2027-2028 biennial budget. The budget request is justified based on the potential cost savings associated with salary and lost time and wages in training new family services workers during the first 12 months of employment who eventually leave. Although there are national estimates of the cost of turnover among family services workers, state-specific estimates are lacking. This analysis attempts to partially estimate the cost of staff turnover in terms of lost wages and training invested in new employees during the first 12 months of employment.

Proposed Analyses:

1) Calculate the annual number of separations (exits) and staff turnover rate among entry-level Family Services workers (i.e., Family Services Specialist I, or FSS I) in local agencies.
2) Calculate annual salary and hourly rate (with and without fringe benefits) for FSS I employees.
3) Estimate the average number of training hours required for a new FSS I employee during the first 12 months of employment.
4) Estimate total personnel costs (salary plus fringe) that would have been spent on FSS I personnel who exit.
5) Calculate lost time and wages associated with new worker training for FSS I employees assuming that approximately 40% will leave the agency around 12 months.
6) Finally, calculate the cost to replace "lost" computer equipment issued to new workers at the start of employment.

The data used in this analysis include local employee reimbursement, separation, and training records from the Division of Human Resources (Local HR Connect) and the COV Learning Center, respectively. The Division of Local Training and Development provided role-specific training requirements in the first 12 months for Family Services Specialists. The Division of Family Services shared estimated replacement costs for tablets issued to new employees.

Staff Separations and Staff Turnover

Calculating staff turnover across regions and over time is a crucial first step in estimating the costs associated with onboarding and training new hires. We identify the number of staff who left DSS (separations) for the calendar years (CY) 2022 to 2024.

Over this period, the number of Family Services Specialist I (FSS I) employees who exited the organization ranged from 140 to 158 per year statewide, with an average of 148.[5] Breaking the results down at the regional level, the Northern and Central regions experienced the highest numbers of separations (see Table 1).

The turnover rate is defined in this analysis as the proportion of employees who separated during the calendar year relative to the average of the total number of active employees at the start of the year

[5] Between 2022 and 2024, the number of filled FSS I positions (average of January and December) ranged from 357 to 380, for an overall average of 370.

(i.e., January 1st) and the number of active employees at the end of the year (i.e., December 31st). Following this definition, the average annual statewide turnover rate for FSS I position was 40.0%. Some regional differences exist, where the local departments in the Northern and Central regions experienced higher turnover at 51.6% and 45.0%, respectively. The average turnover rate for the remaining regions ranged from 33.2% to 37.9%.

To estimate the cost of turnover, we use these regional and statewide turnover rates and multiply them by the estimated cost associated with replacing a departing employee. This calculation is detailed in the following sections.

Table 1: Separations and Turnover Rates, CY 2022-2024

Region	Average Count of Separations	Average Turnover rate (%)
Statewide	147.7	40.0%
Central	22.7	45.0%
Eastern	33.7	37.9%
Northern	38.3	51.6%
Piedmont	27.0	33.2%
Western	26.0	34.8%

Salary and Tenure

The annual reimbursement data for CY 2022 through 2024 combined allows us to estimate the hourly rate for each FSS I employee, which serves as the basis for calculating the cost of training time per worker. We present two sets of estimates: one reflecting only the base salary and another that incorporates fringe benefits. **On average, FSS I employees earn approximately $22 per hour, or $33.89 per hour when fringe benefits are included**[6]. Both sets of initial hourly rate estimates were modified after including cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) for state fiscal years 2025 and 2026 (see Table 2). A clear trend emerges across regions: the local departments in the Piedmont and Western regions offer the lowest average pay, approximately $18 to $19 per hour ($29 to $31 including fringe benefits), while the local departments in the Central, Eastern and Northern regions provide marginally higher wages, averaging from $20 to $23 per hour ($31 to $35 including fringe benefits).

Using the data on employment begin date, we can gain a clearer understanding of retention and tenure observed for the FSS I position. Additionally, this information is instrumental in accurately estimating the training cost as a result of turnover. We report median tenure at both the statewide and regional levels.[7] At the state level, median tenure over the CY 2022-2024 period is 0.93 years. All regions exhibit tenure between 0.7 to 1.0 years, suggesting that half of FSS I workers leave their position before the 12-month mark.

[6] The FY26 fringe benefits rate is calculated as approximately 25% of the annual salary, plus a fixed yearly amount of $14,186 for health insurance.

[7] We use median, rather than average, to minimize the impact of outliers (i.e., those with exceptionally long tenure).

Table 2: Hourly Rates (2022-2024; with FY26 Projection) and Job Tenure for FSS I Employees

	Tenure (Median in years; CY 2022-2024)	Salary (Hourly, including benefits)[1]	
		CY 2022-2024 (combined)	Projected SFY2026[2]
STATEWIDE	0.93	$32.38	$33.89
Central	1.03	$31.28	$32.98
Eastern	0.93	$33.83	$35.48
Northern	0.70	$34.44	$36.17
Piedmont	0.93	$30.61	$31.95
Western	0.94	$29.97	$31.33

Source: Local HR Connect, Position Reimbursement Status Reports. Excludes vacant, part-time and invalid positions. Applies to Family Services Specialists I positions.

[1] Hourly rate ($) is computed by dividing the annual salary by 2,080 hours (assuming full-time status). This also includes fringe benefits for the fiscal year stated. Example: The Fringe Benefits for SFY24 includes retirement (14.46% of base salary), FICA-State (7.65%), Group insurance (1.34%), health insurance/hospitalization for retirees (1.12%), and long-term disability (0.61%). Health insurance is an added fixed cost of $13,464.

[2] State employees and local DSS employees received a 3% COLA (cost of living adjustment) added to the previous year's base salary, effective July 1, 2024 and again on July 1, 2025.

Required Training

New family services employees may work exclusively in one area -- Child Protective Services (CPS), In-Home Services/Prevention (INSP), Permanency (PM; spans Foster Care and/or Adoption), or Adult Protective Services (APS). Others may cross-train in two or more areas. Coursework required to be completed within 12 months varies by assigned job role. Local HR records do not have information about assigned job role. However, employees' learning records from the COV Learning Center may help us to identify the most frequently job roles assigned to new staff.

Using data on 412 employees who received family services-related training and who had active accounts between October 2023 and December 2024[8], the results show workers falling into one of 30 job roles. The five most frequently assigned roles were CPS only, Foster Care only, In-Home Services/Prevention only, CPS plus In-Home Services/Prevention, and Permanency (foster care and/or adoption), which covered 77% of recent new employees. Using the lists of required courses per area (published on FUSION)[9] and the expected number of classroom hours advertised for each course in the Learning Center, the required number of courses ranged from 20 (Foster Care only) to 35 (CPS plus In-Home Services/Prevention). Total classroom time (in hours) spent in required courses ranged from 118.5 hours (for CPS only) to 179.1 hours (CPS plus In-Home Services/Prevention). Across these five job roles, **the average classroom time spent in training during the first 12 months is approximately 143 hours, which is the standard we use to estimate the cost of turnover.**

[8] We excluded records for employees in supervisory, administrative, short-term (contractor, intern) and Benefit Program Specialist roles.

[9] Required courses in each area, whether instructor-led or asynchronous, are posted in FUSION.

Salary Cost Associated with Participation in Training

Finally, we utilize the average classroom time (in hours) during the first year for FSS I positions plus the average hourly rate for FSS I workers (adjusted after including yearly 3% COLA for FY 2025 and FY 2026) to estimate the total training cost incurred by turnover (Table 3). **Statewide, upwards of $717,294 in salary and fringe benefits per year would be spent in supporting new employees through required training[10] at the current turnover rate.** Considering that turnover comes with additional cost of staff time and resources involved in the hiring process, subsequent mentoring and supervision, as well as expected learning period for new workers, the actual impact of the turnover is likely much greater than the estimated cost in training alone.

Table 3: Projected SFY 2026 Salary Compensation for Classroom Training for FSS I Employees

	Employee Separations[1]	Total Classroom Hours[2]	FY26 Salary Hourly Rate (incl. Benefits)[3]	Salary Compensation During Training
STATEWIDE	148	143	$33.89	$717,293.85
Central	23	143	$32.98	$108,480.87
Eastern	34	143	$35.48	$172,504.30
Northern	38	143	$36.17	$196,524.03
Piedmont	27	143	$31.95	$123,357.17
Western	26	143	$31.33	$116,489.09

Sources: Human Resources, Local HR Connect (Separations); Position Reimbursement Status Reports (salary data); Local Training and Development (required courses and classroom hours).

[1] Average annual count of employee separations (exits) between CY 2022 and 2024.

[2] Average total classroom time (in hours) for Family Services training. Based on courses registered in the Learning Center and required to be completed within the first 12 months.

[3] FY26 salary was computed using estimates of FY25 base salary and adding a 3% COLA. Includes fringe benefits.

Personnel Costs

Looking at wages for the entire year, not just salary paid while the employee is in training, the total amount spent in salary compensation for employees who leave in the first year would amount to $11.1 million. We arrived at this figure by multiplying the expected number of separations by the average salary projected for FY 2026 (with fringe benefits included). The costs in Year 2 would be equivalent to Year 1.

[10] Based on classroom hours spent on training required within the first 12 months for new employees.

Table 4: Personnel Costs (Salary plus Benefits) for FSS I Employees Who Exit in Years 1 and 2

	Separations in Year 1[1]	FY 26 (adj.) Annual Base Salary[2]	Personnel Cost – Salary with Benefits[3]	
			Year 1	Year 2
STATEWIDE	148	$45,791.42	$11,133,227.00	$11,133,227.00
Central	23	$44,253.48	$1,730,162.00	$1,730,162.00
Eastern	34	$48,477.38	$2,557,633.00	$2,557,633.00
Northern	38	$49,636.91	$2,858,532.00	$2,858,532.00
Piedmont	27	$42,505.52	$2,031,062.00	$2,031,062.00
Western	26	$41,459.48	$1,955,838.00	$1,955,838.00

[1] Based on average number of separations (exits) between CY 2022 and 2024. This is the expected number of new employees who leave within 12 months after start of employment.

[2] Average salary is projected for FY 26 and includes a 3% COLA increase to the previous year's base salary, effective July 1, 2025.

[3] Using the FY 26 Cost Calculator from the Division of Finance, we computed Years 1 and 2 salaries plus fringe benefits.

Equipment Replacement

In addition, the local agency issues an iPad to each new local client-facing employee to record client information in COMPASS while out in the field. Each iPad device (10th Generation, 10.9" screen, 128 GB storage, WiFi + cellular service with a hard cover) is purchased by the state at a cost of $459 per unit. Anecdotally, some tablets are not recovered when local employees leave the agency. Although Family Services does not actively track the whereabouts of each device, we will assume that one-in-four devices are not returned. **If we assume that 25% of newly issued devices will have to be replaced 12 months later (the time frame when most exits occur), the total cost for tablet replacement would be nearly $17,000 in one year.**

Summary:

In Virginia:

- Employee surveys, focus groups, and a Capstone project link vicarious trauma to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and turnover among family services staff.
- From 2022-2024, the average rate of turnover for the role of Family Services Specialist I was **40%**.
- The average length of time that a new family services worker stays at a local department before separating is **11 months**.
- Over **$717,000** is spent annually training **Family Services Specialists I alone**, excluding costs related to training all other roles in family services, benefits, etc. in local departments.
- **First-year turnover** costs local departments an estimated **$11.1 million** in total salary compensation.
- The Office of Trauma and Resilience Policy (OTRP) proposes a statewide Workforce Support Program costing a total of **$600,000**/year to address turnover related to vicarious trauma and improve retention of the local human services workforce.