

Excellence

Skilled and Specialized Professionals

Child protection work requires specialized skills and training, including investigative expertise, risk assessment, and engagement with families.

In a field where the implications of practice are so significant and the consequences of error are tragic, a highly-trained, well-supported workforce is essential. Excellence in child protection requires the right people, empowered with accurate information and equipped with the right tools.

Federal law acknowledges the importance of a variety of disciplines and knowledge bases to shape child protection work. Additionally, significant federal dollars are available to support states' child welfare workforce development and training programs. Beyond these requirements and funding, states have considerable flexibility in assembling and supporting a workforce as they see fit.



Spotlight on specialization and expertise:

Foundational social work and related education help equip the child welfare workforce with baseline skills, but child protection requires more. The work is not just one task. Instead, it's a web of inter-related tasks that move a child from investigation to permanency. Rather than expecting every professional to be equally expert in every aspect of this work, agencies can organize teams so that staff develop and apply specialized expertise while drawing on the complementary skills of their colleagues. When paired with strong supervision and team-based practice, specialization can help build a more stable, sustainable workforce which, in turn, supports greater safety and stability for children.

Child welfare is also increasingly drawing from the fields of aviation, healthcare, and other safety-critical industries. In these fields, complex, high-risk situations are typically managed through specialized roles, structured teamwork, and clearly defined responsibilities.



Michigan

In March 2025, Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) announced a teaming model for child welfare staffing called the Children's Services Administration (CSA). This approach ensures that the expectations associated with the work are shared while allowing staff to

serve different roles and bring diverse skills as part of a core team, known as a pod. In this model, staff can develop deeper expertise while sharing responsibility for investigations, case management, supervision, and supporting families. The model is intended to better position teams to respond to the unique needs of each family while keeping families together whenever safely possible. Early indications suggest that the approach is valued by both staff and families.



Florida

Florida has long embraced the value of a multidisciplinary, specialized approach to investigating serious cases. Its Critical Incident Rapid Response Teams, established in 2014, bring together professionals with expertise in child protection, child welfare, organizational management, and other relevant fields. In 2021, Florida strengthened this model by requiring that teams investigating allegations of sexual abuse include a representative with “specialized training in sexual abuse.” This requirement reflects the complex nature of such cases and the specialized expertise they require. By intentionally structuring teams around specialized expertise and defined processes, Florida has sought to ensure that serious allegations receive an appropriate and rigorous response.



Louisiana

In 2023, Louisiana’s Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) appointed its first Director of Medical Services within the Child Welfare Division. The position provides an in-house source of medical expertise for complex cases while strengthening connections between child welfare and the medical community. The position builds on Louisiana’s longstanding use of multidisciplinary teams and formal protocols that bring medical professionals into child protection investigations. ***Together, these approaches help ensure that child welfare professionals can draw on medical expertise when assessing allegations of maltreatment and addressing children’s health needs.***

CAUTION:

Specialization should not mean creating a multitude of distinct roles. This can lead to unnecessary transitions and fragmentation of services for families. Instead, teaming and other approaches can ensure that the necessary skills and expertise are available without forcing families to navigate a series of professionals.

Opportunity

Several jurisdictions are exploring ways to redesign frontline work so caseworkers can devote more of their time to the human and relational aspects of casework, while administrative and logistical functions are handled elsewhere within the team. Technology can support this shift by automating routine tasks, organizing information, and facilitating coordination across team members. Together, these approaches can allow professionals to focus on the work that requires their expertise and judgment while ensuring that the full range of child protection functions is carried out effectively.