



**UNDERSTAFFED AND
UNDERFUNDED:**

**BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE
ANTI-POVERTY ASSISTANCE**



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Introduction

Workers at county social service agencies across New Jersey provide essential support to our families, friends, and neighbors. They help elders struggling with dementia navigate the process of applying for Medicaid, support veterans in need, and work tirelessly to ensure that hungry children are fed, clothed, and cared for. From Newark to Warren County, social service workers uphold the value of service and care that is the backbone of our shared humanity. Our communities thrive when social service agencies are adequately supported, yet chronic understaffing and underfunding hinder the stability these agencies provide. Low pay and high turnover harm not only the dedicated employees who serve our counties and state but also ripple outward, disrupting vital safety net programs and benefits on which countless individuals and families rely. State leaders often tout these programs as advantages of living in New Jersey, but poor implementation means that residents aren't getting the help they need.

A new survey conducted by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) of its members working in New Jersey county social service agencies finds that declining staffing and increasing caseloads impact their ability to assist New Jersey residents. Across the county agencies surveyed:

- Staffing levels from 2019 to 2023 decreased 3.2 percent while caseloads increased 32.4 percent;
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents in the survey reported that understaffing prevents families from receiving benefits in a timely manner;
- A majority of respondents cited low pay as a primary driver of understaffing.

These results demonstrate the importance of ensuring employees can deliver quality service so residents can access these vital state programs. By increasing pay, setting and enforcing minimum staffing requirements, and providing benefits that improve work-life balance for agency workers, county leaders can better serve their communities.

Thousands in New Jersey Rely on County Agencies for Assistance

Federal and state benefit programs go through administrative processes to reach eligible participants. County social service agencies and the workers that run them are the community connection administering these programs. These workers evaluate applications and provide eligible residents with the services of New Jersey's public assistance programs, including:

- Work First New Jersey (WFNJ) (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], General Assistance [GA], and Emergency Assistance [EA])
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]
- NJ FamilyCare (New Jersey's Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program)
- Child support services
- Other assistance programs for the elderly, residents living with disabilities, and more.¹

With nearly 31,000 people currently served by the WFNJ/TANF program, over 830,000 residents currently served by the SNAP program, and over 1.8 million participants in NJ FamilyCare, the county social service agencies are responsible for assisting hundreds of thousands of families each month.²

¹ New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development, *County Social Service Agencies*, 2024. <https://www.nj.gov/humanservices/dfd/counties/>

² Note: Throughout the report, "WFNJ/TANF" refers to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program under the umbrella of Work First New Jersey, in order to differentiate it from the numbers for General Assistance or Emergency Assistance under Work First New Jersey. Numbers from: NJPP Analysis of New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Family Development, *DFD Current Program Statistics*, September 2024. <https://nj.gov/humanservices/dfd/news/cps.html>

County Social Service Agencies Assist Hundreds of Thousands of Residents Each Year				
County	Number of Residents Living Below the Federal Poverty Level	WFNJ/TANF Participants (September 2024)	SNAP Participants (September 2024)	NJ FamilyCare Participants (September 2024)
Atlantic	34,989	1,510	33,584	70,137
Bergen	63,825	852	41,920	120,928
Burlington	29,718	987	22,422	68,018
Camden	64,050	4,065	76,645	136,407
Cape May	8,443	180	7,873	16,988
Cumberland	22,292	964	28,545	51,026
Essex	125,228	4,272	134,219	230,416
Gloucester	22,231	691	17,596	49,083
Hudson	99,546	5,504	103,521	175,454
Hunterdon	4,685	107	3,645	10,576
Mercer	41,079	2,333	38,574	81,500
Middlesex	69,626	1,699	57,159	147,653
Monmouth	40,595	606	30,979	81,681
Morris	24,800	335	17,170	47,321
Ocean	66,258	1,006	58,304	167,367
Passaic	68,995	2,465	77,347	152,399
Salem	8,271	440	8,834	15,708
Somerset	18,097	624	11,869	38,377
Sussex	7,948	78	4,052	15,000
Union	50,130	1,923	48,525	121,378
Warren	8,373	217	8,188	16,841
New Jersey	879,179	30,858	830,971	1,814,258*

Source: NJPP Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 2022 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701; New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Family Development, DFD Current Program Statistics, September 2024; New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Medical Assistance & Health Services, NJ FamilyCare Monthly Enrollment Statistics, September 2024.

*Note: This number does not include participants listed as "Other" for their county location. The total of residents listed under "Other" in September 2024 was 824

There must be enough staff at county social service agencies to serve all eligible residents, regardless of differences across program rules. For example, with its more generous eligibility standards, the SNAP program helps a large number of residents in comparison to the number of residents living in poverty in many counties. Serving eligible residents with timely responses and support to get them the nutrition they need requires a high level of staff capacity.

Insufficient staff capacity combined with problematic program requirements results in fewer residents in need seeking and receiving assistance. The TANF program faces this challenge regularly. With its stringent eligibility requirements that have not changed significantly since the 1990s, TANF becomes more outdated each year and helps fewer and fewer residents in poverty.³ These requirements, in combination with low benefits relative to the cost of living, can make eligible residents hesitant to apply. When there are not enough staff to process applications on a timely basis, answer questions, and support those seeking help, the already-existing problems with access to these programs become further exacerbated.

To counteract affordability challenges and more effectively help the nearly 880,000 residents living in poverty, New Jersey leaders must take a two-pronged approach: update program requirements and benefits policies and increase pay and benefits for social service workers, a key step in addressing staffing shortages.

Undervaluing Workers Delays and Denies Benefit Access

Understanding the working conditions for county social service agencies can help leaders identify how to improve assistance in the state's anti-poverty programs. A 2024 survey distributed to the 3,000 CWA members employed at county social service agencies across New Jersey examined the connection between staffing levels, workloads, and benefit distribution.⁴ This survey, in combination with data gathered from the Open Public Records Act, requests on staffing and pay levels,

³ New Jersey Policy Perspective, *Outdated and Ineffective: Why New Jersey Needs to Update Its Top Anti-Poverty Program*, 2024.
<https://www.njpp.org/publications/report/outdated-and-ineffective-why-new-jersey-needs-to-update-its-top-anti-poverty-program/>; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Policy Basics: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families*, 2022.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/policy-basics-an-introduction-to-tanf>; New Jersey Policy Perspective, *Promoting Equal Opportunities for Children Living in Poverty*, 2020.

<https://www.njpp.org/publications/report/promoting-equal-opportunities-for-children-living-in-poverty/>
⁴ For detailed research methods and information about the demographics of the survey respondents, please see Appendix A.

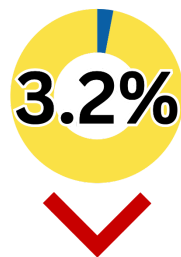
highlights the critical role of workers at county agencies in supporting the state's lowest-income families.

Turnover and Slow Hiring Leaves County Agencies with Low Staffing Levels

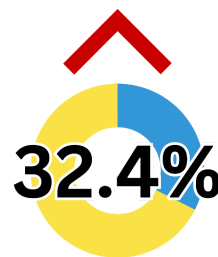
When social service agencies are short-staffed, workers are often overwhelmed by the volume of applications and the processing time needed to help all eligible residents.

Despite the increasing need for assistance amongst Garden State residents, staffing levels at county agencies in New Jersey have fallen, putting more strain on workers. Currently, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 people work for county social service agencies across the state, but these numbers are declining.⁵ Across nine agencies (Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cumberland, Hunterdon, Middlesex, Morris, Union, and Warren) that provided current and historical employment data through open records requests, the number of staff fell 3.2 percent between 2019 and 2023, from 2,268 to 2,195.⁶ At the same time, the number of WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare evaluations for which those workers were responsible increased by 32.4 percent, from 877,970 in 2019 to 1,162,209 in 2023.⁷ As caseloads per employee rise, turnover can accelerate, and hiring can become more difficult, especially when salaries and benefits do not rise to match the value of each employee's work.

Staffing Levels Have Fallen, Despite More Residents Seeking Assistance



Employment Loss



Caseload/Evaluations Increase

Source: CWA analysis of 2023 employee census documents retrieved via Open Public Records Act requests. NJPP Analysis of New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Family Development, DFD Current Program Statistics, July 2019 and July 2023; New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Medical Assistance & Health Services, NJ FamilyCare Monthly Enrollment Statistics, July 2019 and July 2023.

⁵ The total social service employment estimate is based on CWA analysis of the following: (1) 2023 total employment data provided by 16 of the 21 social service agencies in response to OPRA requests in 2023, and (2) For the missing 5 counties: estimates were established based on average 2023 employment at agencies with similar poverty rates/benefit participation rates.

⁶ In 2023, the Communications Workers of America obtained employee census snapshots pulled on June 30th, 2019 and June 30th, 2023 via public records requests from nine New Jersey county social service agencies. Records were obtained from Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cumberland, Hunterdon, Middlesex, Morris, Union, and Warren Counties. Collectively, these nine counties supported a third of the total people receiving benefits from WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare in New Jersey in 2019 and 2023.

⁷ NJPP Analysis of New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Family Development, *DFD Current Program Statistics*, July 2019 and July 2023. <https://nj.gov/humanservices/dfd/news/cps.html>

Increases in Benefit Caseload Per Employee Outpace Staffing Needs Across the State

County	Total Employment 2019	Total Employment 2023	WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare Evaluations 2019	WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare Evaluations 2023	Average Number of WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare Evaluations per Employee 2019	Average Number of WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare Evaluations per Employee 2023	Percent change in Average # of WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare Evaluations per Employee 2019-2023
Atlantic	214	193	101,357	131,032	474	679	43
Burlington	304	359	80,202	110,257	264	307	16
Camden	482	464	206,736	258,781	429	558	30
Cumberland	138	184	71,031	92,183	515	501	-3
Hunterdon	19	25	11,991	16,770	631	671	6
Middlesex	363	307	180,248	246,290	497	802	62
Morris	164	145	54,375	76,578	332	528	59
Union	503	442	149,913	199,611	298	452	52
Warren	81	76	22,117	30,707	273	404	48
Total	2268	2195	877,970	1,162,209	387	529	37

Source: CWA analysis of 2023 employee census documents retrieved via Open Public Records Act requests. NJPP Analysis of New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Family Development, DFD Current Program Statistics, July 2019 and July 2023; New Jersey Department of Human Services - Division of Medical Assistance & Health Services, NJ FamilyCare Monthly Enrollment Statistics, July 2019 and July 2023.

This issue is not contained in a particular county or region. From Atlantic County to Morris County, agencies have failed to maintain sufficient staffing levels. The nine-county average of WFNJ/TANF, SNAP, and NJ FamilyCare evaluations completed by each employee went from 387 in 2019 to 529 in 2023, a 28 percent increase.⁸ Because of similar trends in poverty and budget issues, this pattern likely carries across most of the state.

Fewer employees, each with more cases assigned, means that each employee has less time to help each person and, in some instances, becomes significantly delayed. Complex application and documentation processes and less time available to help those in need increases the likelihood that residents are wrongly turned away or denied benefits.

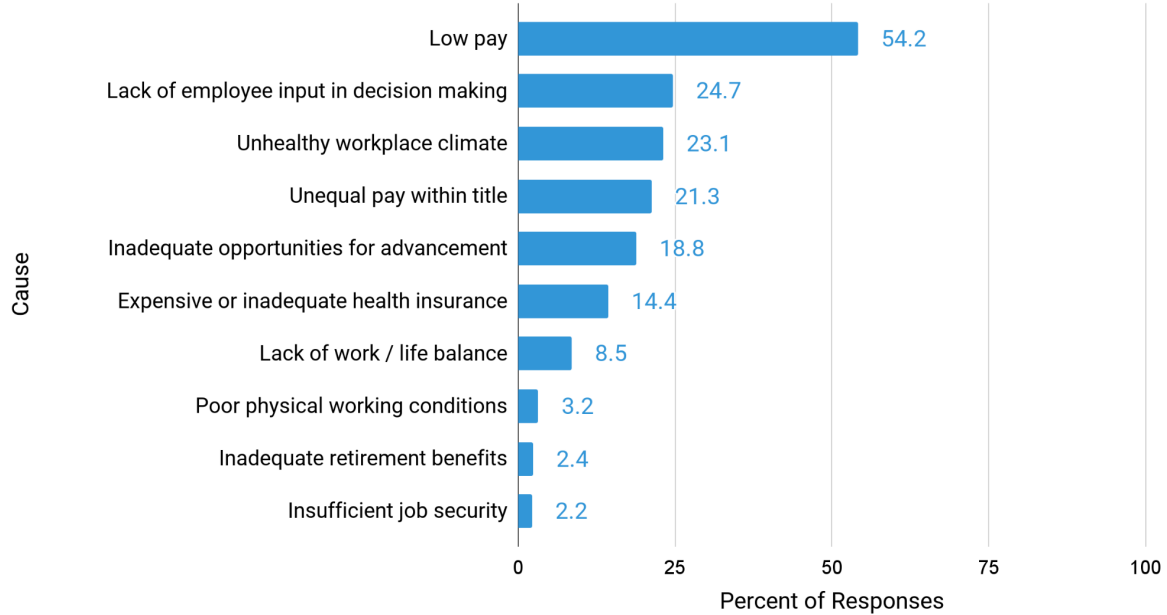
Low Pay and Poor Work Environments Lead to Understaffing

“The expense of everyday living does not equate to my paycheck. I am robbing Peter to pay Paul. Due to the lack of pay and increase in health insurance.” - Essex County social service worker

Where workers are undervalued, maintaining adequate staffing levels becomes impossible. Low wages that do not keep pace with the cost of living mean that employees struggle to pay bills and support their families. This makes recruiting larger numbers of staff more difficult. When asked to identify the top two causes of understaffing at their agencies, over half of survey responses received in New Jersey emphasized low pay.

⁸ Lists of current vacancies by agency were also obtained through OPRA in 2023. Vacancy data suggest that even in the counties where short staffing is not as severe, there are persistent challenges filling vacancies.

Workers Cite Low Pay as the Leading Cause of Understaffing



Source: NJPP Analysis of CWA survey data. Data on file with CWA and the author.

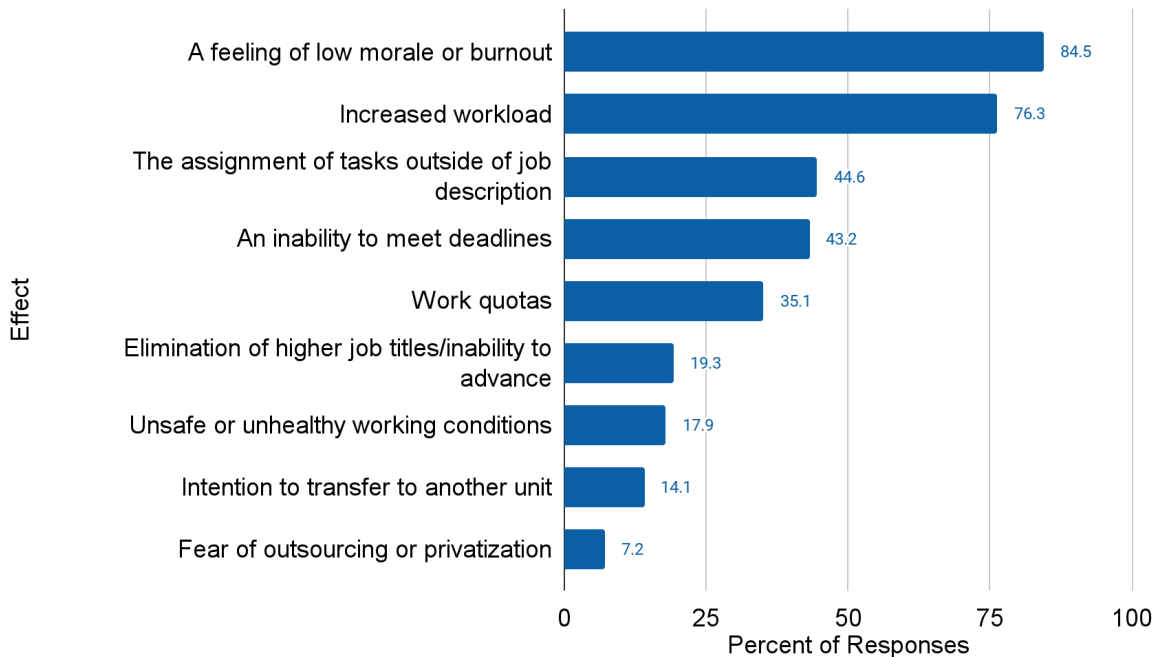
In addition to low pay, several other issues — such as a lack of empowerment to provide input in the policies and decision-making, unhealthy workplace climates, and unequal pay across workers with the same title — were all mentioned by nearly 1 in 4 respondents. Additionally, issues such as expensive or inadequate health insurance are closely tied to low pay. Follow-up survey responses emphasized that the combination of low pay and expensive health coverage go hand-in-hand.⁹

“Our pay is not even close to keeping up with the cost of living increases. The healthcare increases are extreme. I shouldn't be on the verge of homelessness, when trying to serve the homeless, myself.”
- Camden County Social Service Worker

Deteriorating understaffing issues mean that workloads continuously increase beyond the staff's capacity. As a result, they experience low morale and burnout much sooner, leading to high turnover rates and difficulty in hiring new staff. This further worsens the understaffing crisis, creating a snowball effect on the agencies' capabilities to carry out their work successfully. As one Camden County employee shared: **“We are being unfairly overworked/understaffed while constantly being told that we need to get things done on time. All while not having a decent raise, which puts morale at an all-time low. Some of us need to miss work due to mental stress alone, which then hurts clients. We need action soon or I don't see anything getting better.”**

⁹ NJPP Analysis of CWA survey data. Data on file with CWA and the author.

Understaffing Leads to Increased Workloads, Low Morale, and Other Negative Outcomes



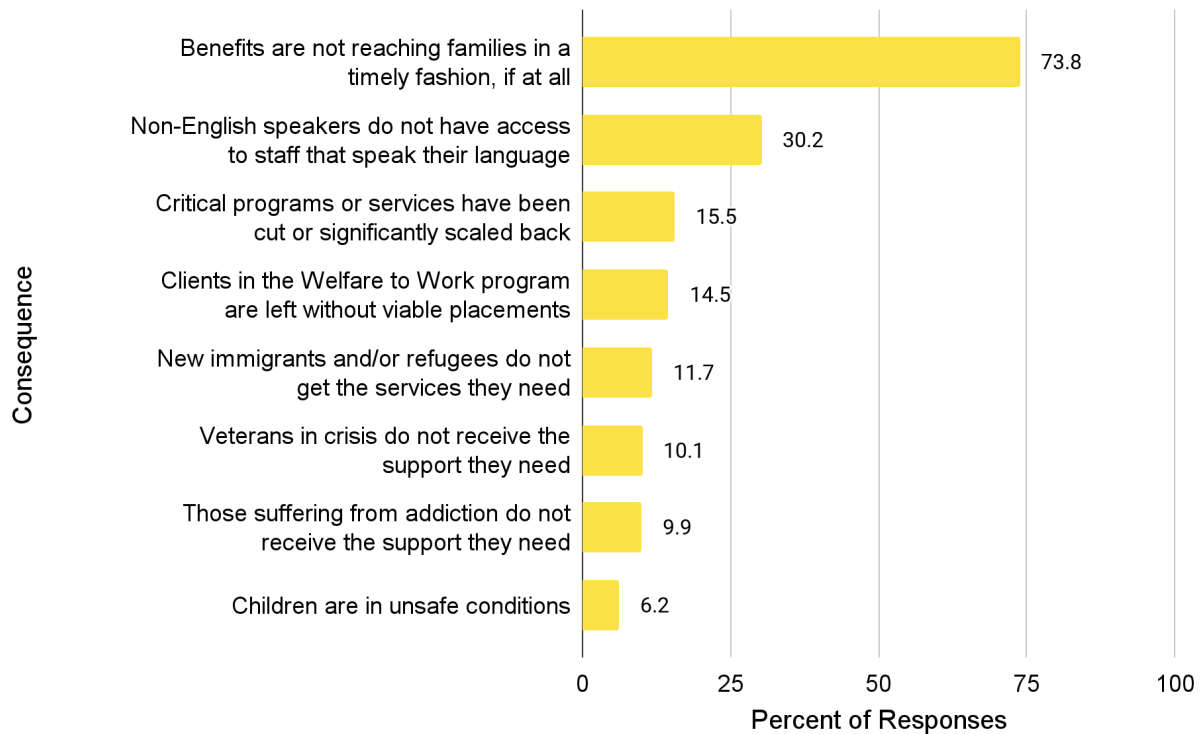
Only by increasing pay to meet the cost of living and improving work environments can county social service agencies better attract and retain employees to meet staffing needs.

Lack of Sufficient Staffing Delays and Denies Residents Assistance

“The workload has increased tremendously and the loss of staff has gotten worse. There is no time to do all that is required, and if you are not donating your time without compensation, then you can't keep up.” - Middlesex County Social Service Worker

As workers are saddled with larger workloads, they struggle to meet the timelines necessary to get people the benefits they need. Nearly three-quarters of respondents in the survey cited the inability to provide benefits for families promptly as the main consequence of their agency's understaffing.

As a Result of Understaffing, Workers are Unable to Provide Promised Benefits to Residents Efficiently



Source: NJPP Analysis of CWA survey data. Data on file with CWA and the author.

“Applications are 6+ months old. People aren't getting timely services. Elderly and sick people can't go to the doctor because we don't hire enough people.” - Monmouth County Social Service Worker

When agencies providing critical support services are short-staffed, the quality of relationships and support for residents also suffers. This is particularly important in social services, as many clients are undergoing vulnerable and difficult experiences. A Camden County employee lamented: **“It's been quantity over quality for as long as I can remember. The "case bank" has stripped the customer of their caseworker, and for some, the caseworker was a relied-on individual in a time of need, who was familiar with their struggle(s). There is no personalization anymore.”**

In addition to the inability to provide benefits in a timely manner, nearly one-third of workers also stated that those residents who primarily speak a language other than English do not have the support they need because of the lack of capacity. **“In my building, there is only one bilingual worker. Oftentimes, the receptionist is left struggling to communicate with Spanish speaking clients and to find someone**

to serve them,” wrote a clerk in Ocean County. **“The lack of bilingual workers leaves critical communication needs unmet, especially in field duties such as home visits and client interviews,”** noted another worker from Ocean County.

With hundreds of thousands of residents across diverse communities in need of assistance, barriers to social service programs can prevent families from escaping poverty and worsen economic, health, and racial inequities. If New Jersey truly wants to be a leading state in providing generous benefits for residents and a political and economic environment where all residents can thrive, state leaders need to focus on improving the implementation of existing programs, as well as creating new programs and services. Increased benefits will not reach families in need without adequate delivery of services.

Policy Recommendations

While this report identifies challenging issues in New Jersey’s county social service agencies, recent and ongoing collective bargaining processes at the local level offer opportunities to make significant improvements. New Jersey’s public sector bargaining framework allows employees with expertise on the conditions on the ground to negotiate with their employer to improve working conditions, staffing levels, and the quality of work and service across the board. Recent examples from localities such as Ocean County — which has seen increased staffing, decreased turnover, and improved workloads after pay increases — provide a foundation for progress.¹⁰

In 2024 and 2025, the majority of social service agencies and their unions across the state are either scheduled to start bargaining or are currently engaged in ongoing negotiations.¹¹ Through these collective bargaining processes and broader policy changes, Garden State decision-makers and workers must urgently come together to implement three main recommendations from this report’s findings.

Increase Pay

¹⁰ CWA Local 1088, representing employees at the Ocean County Social Services Board, worked productively with management to negotiate a historic contract in 2024. The contract was ratified in June of 2024 and, among other improvements, it increased starting pay across all job titles by \$3 an hour. Between June and November, at least 60 new employees have been hired, turnover has decreased, and workloads are improving. The contract also includes provisions for an additional \$2/hour increase to starting pay by 2025. This progress in Ocean points to the importance of increasing pay and including the people who do the work in robust negotiations to improve New Jersey’s social service landscape. Source: Interview with Steven P. Hernandez, Ocean County Social Services Board, Chapter VP, CWA Local 1088, November 2024.

¹¹ NJPP review of social service agency collective bargaining agreements and expiration dates available publicly or by request. Note: public sector bargaining agreements in NJ are collected by and made publicly available by Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC): <https://www.nj.gov/perc/conciliation/contracts/>

Over 86 percent of survey respondents who said they were considering leaving the job stated that a pay increase of at least 10 percent would help to convince them to stay at their job.¹² Several respondents reported that more than 10 percent would be needed, particularly with concerns about the increased cost of living and health insurance.¹³ By increasing pay to meet the cost of living, county social service agencies can improve working conditions for employees and attract more residents to agency jobs.

Improve and Enforce Staffing Ratios

Nearly half (48 percent) of survey respondents reported that a fully staffed department would help convince them to stay at their job.¹⁴ Requiring stronger staff-to-program beneficiary ratios and enforcing those ratios would help ensure that the county social service agencies can adequately perform their jobs.

Improve Work-Life Balance for Workers

While the staffing ratios and higher pay will help, improving or providing other benefits — such as child care support, greater flexibility for attending doctor appointments during work hours, and increasing the number of vacation and sick days — will further improve work-life balance to retain workers and attract more to the agencies.

Appendix A: Survey Research Methods

Over 3,000 employees at 14 county social service agencies are represented by the Communications Workers of America (CWA), working under collective bargaining agreements. Social service agency employees represented by CWA coordinate statewide through the CWA New Jersey Welfare Council (Welfare Council). In the spring of 2023, the Welfare Council designed and distributed a survey to measure worker concerns about staffing levels, pay, benefits, and service provision across the state. Between May and August 2024, the survey was sent to all CWA members at 11 of the 21 social service agencies, and 592 employees completed the survey.

Survey outreach was designed to capture a diverse sample of social service agency workers, including employees with a range of job titles and demographic backgrounds, and who work at a mix of large, medium, and small agencies in urban and rural contexts. In addition to surveys, semi-structured interviews with three workers from each agency were conducted to understand quantitative and qualitative survey data better.

¹² NJPP Analysis of CWA survey data. Data on file with CWA and the author.

¹³ NJPP Analysis of CWA survey data. Data on file with CWA and the author.

¹⁴ NJPP Analysis of CWA survey data. Data on file with CWA and the author.

Survey participants are racially and ethnically diverse. Of the 492 who answered questions about race and ethnicity (83 percent of the total), 48 percent are White, 33 percent are Black or African American, 9 percent are Multiracial, and 5 percent are Hispanic. Five hundred (84 percent) respondents answered the question about gender: 82 percent are women, and 18 percent are men, reflecting the gender demographics in the social service sector as a whole. For a more detailed chart of survey responses by agency, job title, race/ethnicity, and gender, please contact CWA.

Survey Questions:

1. Which County Welfare Agency do you work for?
2. Which programs do you work on (select all that apply)?
3. Title
4. If you selected "other" for title above, please share your job title.
5. Years of Service
6. Are you a full-time or a part-time employee?
7. What issues are you the most concerned about in your workplace? Please select the top 3.
8. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statement: "My department is currently understaffed."
9. How long ago did understaffing start?
10. What do you believe are the two (2) primary drivers of understaffing in your department? Please select only the top 2.
11. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statement: "My workload interferes with my work/life balance."
12. How long ago did your workload get so high that it began to interfere with your work/life balance?
13. Have you experienced any of the following outcomes as a result of understaffing (select all that apply)?
14. Has understaffing impacted your department's ability to provide quality services?
15. Has understaffing affected the quality of services in your department in any of the following ways?
16. Please provide specific examples as to how understaffing has impacted the quality of services you are able to provide to the clients.
17. In the past year, have you considered leaving your job for reasons other than retirement?
18. What are the top 2 concerns affecting your consideration to leave?
19. If you are still considering leaving your position, would any of the following convince you to stay?
20. What is your race?
21. What is your ethnicity?
22. What is your gender?



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