

Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center



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Creative Compensation to Increase Runaway and Homeless Youth Staff Retention

Child and youth care workers in the runaway and homeless youth (RHY) field understand the financial constraints that tend to keep salaries low. Most do the work because it is a vocation; they find the opportunity to help young people improve their lives to be personally and professionally rewarding. On one level, vocational fulfillment is truly something that money can't buy. But on a practical level, RHY workers need to feel that they're getting as much out of the job as they put in. This tip sheet describes creative approaches to compensation—including but going beyond simple salary considerations—that Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) RHY grantees are using in order to demonstrate to staff how much they're appreciated. Included with this tip sheet are comments from RHY grantees and are indicated with quotation marks.

What the Research Says

- The average entry-level salary for a youth care worker in the U.S. is very low, starting at less than \$13 per hour.¹
- Salary is linked to retention, but not in a clear or direct way. Other factors, such as supervisory support, seem to be more important than salary in terms of retaining quality employees.²
- “Agency commitment” to employees is also key to retention, and this commitment can take several different forms.³
- There are meaningful changes that child- and youth-serving nonprofit organizations can make to improve worker satisfaction and retention.⁴

Tips for Increasing Compensation: Practices from the Field

Following are examples, gathered by survey and in FYSB RHY grantee regional meetings, of some of the approaches that RHY programs are taking in order to increase direct and indirect compensation for workers. Respondents were from rural, suburban, and urban programs throughout the United States who operate a mix of RHY programs.

No program could accomplish all of these things at once, but every RHY program should be able to identify a handful of ideas that are workable and that staff would appreciate. Better yet would be presenting to staff a list of all ideas that are a fit for your program and asking staff to help narrow the list down to the ones that they like the best.

¹Sansbury, B.S., Graves, K., & Scott, W. (2015). Managing traumatic stress responses among clinicians: Individual and organizational tools for self-care. *Trauma*, v17(2), pp. 114-122.

²Rondina, Ellen. (2018). *Self-Care Revolution: 5 Pillars to Prevent Burnout and Build Sustainable Resilience for Helping Professionals*. Upland, CA: Ellen Rondina; and Shainna, A. (Jan. 22, 2019). “Is Self-Care Just a Trend?” [blog post]. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201901/is-self-care-just-trend>

³Business.com Media, Inc. [infographic]. (2016). Stress and Productivity: What the Numbers Say. Retrieved from <https://www.business.com/articles/stress-and-productivity-what-the-numbers-say>

⁴Casey Family Programs. (Dec. 29, 2017). How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention. Retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies>

Salary, Standard Benefits, & Stipends

- Paid phone or monthly phone stipends
- Allow time spent actively working on call to be deducted from regular work hours within the same period (at an approved ratio)
- Paying time-and-a-half for certain holidays
- Discounted child care
- Paying a percentage of salary into a retirement plan
- Paying a higher hourly rate for overnight hours
- Bonuses given in paid time-off increments
- Insurance, life insurance, retirement plan
- Offer life insurance at no cost to employees
- Challenge the board to meet market value pay scales

Scheduling & Flexibility

- Flextime scheduling can be done on a case-by-case basis in order to make up for overtime work. “For example, if a staff member spends five hours working on a Saturday in response to a crisis situation, the staff member and supervisor develop a plan to take five hours off if possible during the following week. This has made the burden on staff more bearable and helped promote self-care.”
- The opportunity to work from home—for instance, completing documentation, grant proposal,s or reports as appropriate and feasible.
- Schedule staff for four-day work weeks at 40 hours versus a five-day work week. “This is generally well received.”
- Breaking shifts into four- and five-hour slots (versus full eight-hour shifts.)
- Comp a day for each employee per quarter, allowing staff to take a day off that doesn’t count toward their PTO. “I sit down with employees and a calendar to determine when their next comped day will be.”
- Offer vacation time (eight hours per month for new staff), sick time (eight hours per month for new staff), and personal time (16 hours per year for all staff), and encourage staff to take it.

**Elevating Commitment,
Advancing Careers**

In order to retain high-quality staff, allow for autonomy, encourage mastery, and foster a sense of purpose. For example, let staff test out their own ideas for programming, learn and practice new approaches that excite them, and highlight ways that day-to-day work connects to achieving greater goals that are important to them.

Career Advancement & Support

- In-house professional development opportunities, such as serving on advisory boards
- Career ladder advancement opportunities for direct care staff
- Referral for student loan forgiveness program
- Assistance meeting requirements for clinical licenses by increasing clinical supervision hours for masters-level counselors after graduation
- Regular paid training opportunities, including training for certification programs
- No-interest loans for continuing education

Gifts & Recognition

- Staff contests with prizes. “We do receive donations of tickets, meals, opportunities that are donated with the intent to be given to staff. We generally do this through raffles or employee recognition and give them the day off as well. These items have included restaurant gift cards, airline vouchers, concerts, etc.”
- Punch card system, where 10 punches for good job performance equals a gift card
- Five-year celebration gift certificates
- Barista coffee bar days, ice cream days in the summer, “spirit wear” days, etc.
- Staff raffles where employees can win a half- or full-days off outside of their personal PTO time
- Giving bonuses to “above-and-beyond workers” at years’ end

Wellness

- Therapy dog available on-site once a month
- Free fitness apps (such as Fitbit) or gym memberships
- Events to which staff can invite their families
- “Mental health days”
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) access for all staff
- EAP therapist monthly to process and debrief with staff, and also during especially difficult cases

Additional Resources

- 101 Creative Employee Benefits Ideas for All Budgets (2016). Downloadable e-book from Austin Benefits Group describing ways to recognize, reward, and attract employees using non-traditional benefits. <https://austinbenefits.com/101-creative-employee-benefits-ideas-for-all-budgets/>
- The Talent Challenge: A Toolkit for Mission Success. Attracting, Developing and Retaining Your Mission-Critical Staff (2018). Toolkit from Mission Spark that guides leaders in building and retaining “their best staff” through the strategic development of human resources and organizational culture. <https://missionspark.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Mission-Spark-Human-Resources-Toolkit-Final.pdf>
- Five Steps to a Stronger Child Welfare Workforce: Hiring and Retaining the Right People on the Frontline (2018). Paper from Annie E. Casey Foundation describing the five steps that emerged from its three-year On the Frontline initiative to reduce turnover and improve worker retention. <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-fivestepstostrongerchildwelfare-2018.pdf#page=5>
- Compensation for Nonprofit Employees [Webpage]. The National Council of Nonprofits lists resources on its website for understanding appropriate rates of compensation, legal restrictions on nonprofit compensation, and state-specific sites for more information. <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/compensation-nonprofit-employees>
- Here for Good: Sustaining Your RHY Program. (2018). This guide from the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes. www.rhyttac.net/here-for-good-sustaining-your-rhy-program-with-local-support
- RHY Staff Retention Tip Sheet Series (2019). This set of five tip sheets from the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes strategies for retaining quality staff in RHY programs by focusing on self-care, organizational culture, hiring, compensation, and career pathways. www.rhyttac.net

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