

# **Empowering the Human Service Workforce through Organizational Development and Employee Engagement Strategies**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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City and County organizations continue to face workforce challenges driven by employee turnover. At the San Francisco Human Services Agency, including the In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) program, turnover has led to uncovered caseloads, staff burnout, and low morale. While IHSS leadership has made efforts to improve morale through monthly staff meetings and quarterly open-door listening sessions, more comprehensive strategies are needed. A strong focus on staff retention and development should be guided by a cohesive organizational development (OD) framework.

This case study explores the Organizational Development (OD) model used by the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (SCCHSD). The model is supported by tools such as an annual employee engagement survey and a structured exit interview, and it is built on four pillars: onboarding, communication, professional/leadership development, and retention.

Inspired by the Santa Cruz model, SF-IHSS piloted its first structured exit interview in April 2025, marking an early step toward a more data-informed workforce strategy. The study concludes that SF-IHSS would greatly benefit from adopting a comprehensive, long-term OD framework. Key recommendations include implementing employee engagement surveys, formalizing exit interviews, and strengthening onboarding and leadership development. These efforts should all be integrated into a unified strategy to improve staff retention, morale, and program effectiveness.

## **Introduction and Background**

Since 2021, the SF-IHSS Program has experienced an increase in staff turnover, leading to a staffing shortage and uncovered caseloads. Approximately 30% of IHSS staff, primarily Social Workers, have exited the program, in addition to staff out on protected leave. The high turnover is placing increased strain on the remaining workforce, contributing to staff burnout, declining morale, and difficulties in maintaining a program compliance rate of at least 90% that is mandated by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). While new employees are on-boarded and trained, some continue to struggle with meeting performance expectations due to workload challenges. At the same time, recruitment remains highly competitive, often resulting in net-zero or even negative staffing outcomes. These challenges have been further compounded by a recent city-wide hiring freeze, which restricts recruitment efforts and places additional pressure on existing staff.

In response to these challenges, SF-IHSS leadership has begun reflecting on several critical questions:

- What strategies can we implement to more effectively engage, support, and retain our current workforce?
- How can we inspire and empower staff to actively contribute to improving program compliance?
- In what ways can we strengthen our onboarding and training processes to promote long-term employee success?
- How effective is our current leadership communication, and where can it be improved?
- What have we learned from staff who have left the program? Would it be beneficial to implement an exit interview process?

To begin addressing these concerns, SF-IHSS leadership has launched several engagement initiatives, including:

- Developing the “askIHSS” online survey for staff to submit questions related to program policies, procedures, and/or any concerns they may have regarding the operations.
- Holding monthly all-staff meetings to provide program updates and address askIHSS submitted questions.
- Holding open-door sessions with managers and the IHSS Program Director to facilitate transparent communication.
- Responding to employee concerns about workplace and field safety by conducting a staff survey to gather input and suggestions.
- Launching a post-training survey in early 2025 to gather feedback from new staff who recently completed training. The survey aims to assess the effectiveness of the training, areas of improvement, and determine whether new employees felt adequately supported by their supervisors.

At the county level, the San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) has conducted periodic all-staff surveys—most recently in October 2024—to assess organizational strengths and identify areas for improvement.

While these efforts are valuable, they aren't yet representing a cohesive organizational development strategy framework, and they do not drive long-term improvement or culture change. Within the SF-IHSS Program, we need a more targeted and sustained approach to staff engagement. This should focus on four core areas: onboarding, communication, leadership development, and retention. A strategic focus in these areas would enhance employee well-being, reinforce a positive organizational structure, and support long-term workforce stability.

### **SCCHSD Organizational Development: Employee Engagement Strategies**

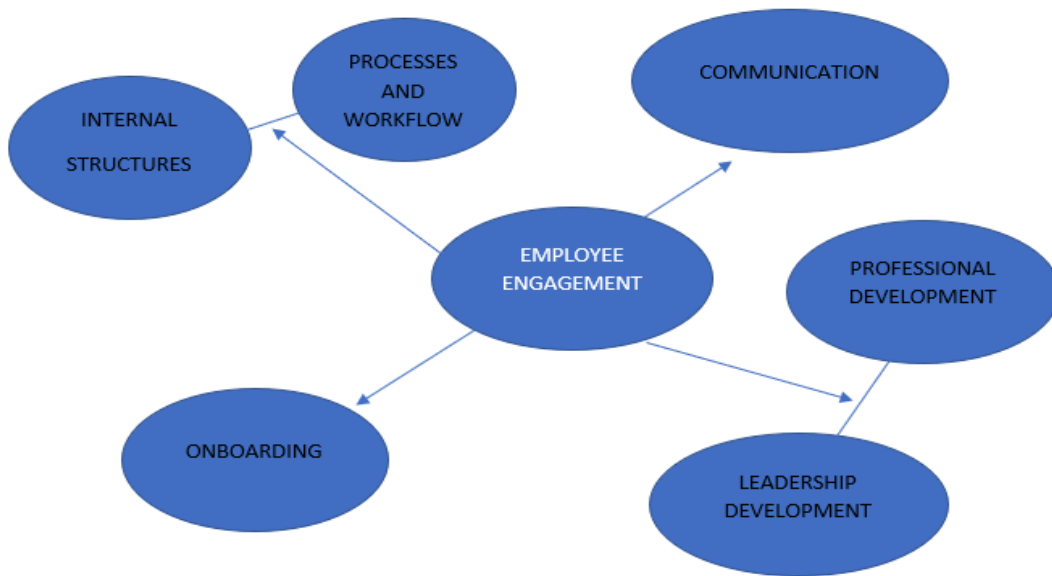
This case study explores the organizational development journey of the SCCHSD, which focuses on strategies designed to improve employee engagement. The approach emphasized the critical role that an organizational culture has in influencing how work is done, especially when it is shaped by shared values, beliefs, and behaviors. SCCHSD's OD efforts are grounded in planned, research-based activities aimed at increasing motivation, job satisfaction, and removing systemic barriers to improvement. The goal is to increase the long-term health and well-being of employees and performance of the organization.

In 2016, SCCHSD hired a new Organizational Development Manager to lead a department-wide engagement initiative. Her role is comprehensive, cross-functional, and deeply embedded in the department's strategy and operations. She initiated efforts aimed at increasing agency-wide staff engagement and job satisfaction, collaborating with various divisions across the SCCHSD to gather and analyze staff feedback from surveys and focus groups. Based on her findings, she provided recommendations and proposed the next steps, actively involving staff in the division and the management team.

The Organizational Development Manager explained that **Organizational Development (OD)** applies principles from social sciences to help organizations function more effectively. It focuses on the organization's culture, including its systems, processes, and reward structures, with the aim of fostering sustainable and positive change. By addressing "people" issues such as communication, leadership, and work environment, organizations can make positive and lasting change at relatively low-to no-cost. For OD to be effective, it must be grounded in the belief that people are the organization's most valuable asset and not just "human resources" to be used and replaced. When organizations invest in bringing out the best in their employees, they foster a culture of engagement that leads to optimal performance and long-term success.

At the heart of SCCHSD's OD initiatives, employee engagement is the key driver of retention, satisfaction, and productivity. Onboarding, communication, workflow processes, and professional development are shown impacting staff engagement in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Factors Contributing to Employee Engagement



Each of these areas both influences and reinforces staff engagement in the following ways:

### ***Onboarding***

As part of the SCCHSD onboarding process, new hires will receive a welcoming package referred to as the Employee Engagement Suite, which includes the employee training plan, professional development planner, competencies and practice behaviors, engagement suite desk guide, self-care handbook, and New Employee Desk Guide folder. This guide features a personalized welcome message from the Director and an overview of all programs within SCCHSD. In addition to the warm welcome, new employees are provided with the tools, resources, and training to succeed in their roles. This positive onboarding experience strengthens a new employee’s commitment to both their position and the organization.

### ***Communication***

The strategy aims to strengthen communication by engaging and supporting staff, partners, and the community through a comprehensive face-to-face and technology-based model. It emphasizes continuous, transparent, and inclusive communication through various mediums—from onboarding and supervision to digital tools and media—while focusing on improving information accessibility, enhancing clarity and feedback, and boosting employee morale and retention.

Effective communication is essential to organizational success, as it sets clear expectations, strengthens relationships, and fosters trust among employees, partners, and clients. It encourages idea sharing and innovation by promoting an open, inclusive environment where feedback is valued. Additionally, strong communication empowers individuals to serve as ambassadors of the organization and enhances teamwork by creating a collaborative and constructive work culture.

### ***Professional/Leadership Development***

A robust professional development program contributes greatly to both developing future leaders and satisfying current employees' desire to grow and learn. According to the SCCHSD At-A-Glance Employee engagement survey results for 2024, a common career development theme across divisions includes staff scoring their satisfaction with opportunities for professional growth in the low B range. The survey used a 4.0 grading scale to evaluate key organizational areas. Scores in the 'B' range indicate satisfactory performance, while scores in the 'C' or 'D' range highlight areas requiring focused improvement. This could be related to how employees define “professional growth,” as shown in Table 1 below.

<b>Table 1. Summary of Career Development Trends Across Departments, 2021-2024</b>				
<b>Division</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>
Admin	2.82/B-	2.63/B-	2.17/C+	2.97/B
Admin Svcs	2.42/C+	2.50/B-	2.69/B-	2.62/B-
P&E	2.82/B-	2.63/B-	2.33/C+	2.74/B-
ALTC	2.76/B-	2.92/B	2.52/B-	2.57/B-
EBSD	2.70/B-	2.61/B-	2.59/B-	2.63/B-
FCS	2.32/C+	2.44/C+	2.55/B-	2.67/B-
H4H	2.63/B-	2.60/B-	3.12/B	2.95/B

Source: At-A-Glance HSD Employee Engagement Survey Results, 2024.

SCCHSD’s Professional Development Program focuses on leadership development areas such as:

- Mentorship: a six-month process that builds mentor/mentee relationships, creates leadership skills, and supports career direction and advancement. This engages internal talent and creates a culture of shared learning and development.
- Shadowing opportunities: promote career advancement and skill exchange to enhance understanding of how positions impact each other.

- One-on-one coaching experiences include resume coaching, interview coaching, coordinated mock interviews and debriefs, as well as targeted job-shadowing experiences related to professional growth. This promotes creativity and performance, giving organizations an effective way to flow and operate within a flexible environment.

***Internal Structure and Workflow Processes***

Organizational Development involves long-term evaluation of infrastructure and processes to align structure and workflow with staff needs, aiming for greater productivity and satisfaction. Key strategies include:

- Combine supervisors and managers into one group, aligning communication and leadership development
- Cross-program design team for shared decision-making and implementation
- Annual engagement surveys and focus groups for continuous feedback
- Strategic planning at both the department and program levels annually
- Internal professional development to support promotion and career growth

**Fostering Engagement through Employee Feedback**

There are many strategies to support organizational engagement, and one that SCCHSD has prioritized is the use of employee engagement surveys. These surveys help assess how staff feel about their workplace, relationships, and professional growth, while also providing leadership with insight into areas needing improvement. Most importantly, engaged employees often report greater satisfaction both at work and in their personal lives. The Employee Engagement Survey questions were split into 6 categories: 1. Career Development 2. Work Engagement 3. Work Relationships, 4. Communication, 5. Work Environment and 6. Others (E.g. Tenure)

The Annual Employee Engagement Survey results below reflect responses from the Adult and Long-Term Care (ALTC) Division, administered in October and November of 2024. The results indicate how employees are rating their satisfaction in areas such as professional growth opportunities, work engagement, communication, and the overall work environment. Among these, work relationships are identified as the most influential factor in employee retention.

<b>Table 2. Annual Employee Engagement Survey Results for Adult and Long-Term Care Division, 2024</b>					
Division	Career Development	Work Engagement	Work Relationship	Communication	Work Environment
ALTC	2.57/B-	3.26/B+	3.48/A-	2.83/B-	3.30/B+

Source: At-A-Glance HSD Employee Engagement Survey Results, 2024.

## **SCCHSD Exit Interviews Structure**

SCCHSD's OD strategy revolves around employee feedback. The annual engagement survey gathers feedback from staff across multiple divisions, offering insights into key areas such as career development, work environment, communication, and leadership effectiveness. In parallel, the exit interview process is designed to capture the perspectives of departing employees to better understand their reasons for leaving, identify gaps in support or training, and discover recruitment/retention practices that can be enhanced or improved. The Organizational Development Manager is responsible for organizing and conducting exit interviews. Questionnaires with below-average rating responses or comments are forwarded to the Personnel Analyst and reviewed with the Director of HSD.

Information gained by exit interviews in Family and Children Services (FCS) has been used to inform their Retention Workgroup efforts and ongoing recruitment efforts since 2017. By embedding this feedback into its decision-making process, SCCHSD excels at promoting employee voices and also strengthening retention practice, improving workplace satisfaction, and guiding continuous improvement.

### ***Conducting Exit Interviews:***

When an employee submits a notice of resignation, the Division Director alerts the OD Manager who then contacts the departing employee to schedule an exit interview before their final week of work. Data from these in-person interviews and surveys is analyzed and compiled into spreadsheets. These findings are shared with Division Directors to guide improvements.

The exit interview includes a standardized set of questions, such as:

- How long have you worked in this division/department?
- What is your starting/ending position?
- Did your official job description accurately reflect your actual work?
- What did you enjoy most about working here?
- What would you change or improve about our workplace?
- On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate the availability of guidance and support?
- On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate the availability and/or quality of training?
- Do you feel you were recognized for your work?
- Were there any obstacles that prevented you from doing your job effectively? If so, what were they?

### **SF-IHSS: Exit Interview Pilot**

Until recently, the SF-IHSS program had not implemented formal exit interviews. Inspired by the Santa Cruz County model, the program piloted its first structured exit interview in April 2025 with a departing employee who had recently accepted a promotion offered by another program.

The in-person interview was conducted by an IHSS Section Manager who was not the employee's direct supervisor, and the interviewer used the same set of questions as SCCHSD.

This process provided valuable insight into the employees' experience and revealed areas for improvement, particularly in onboarding and training. The pilot highlighted the importance of structured exit interviews in capturing feedback and understanding staff experiences. The insights gathered are currently under review by the IHSS management team to discuss enhancing induction training and advancing broader organizational improvements.

As an example of the valuable feedback that can be provided by structured exit interviews, the following presents two highlighted exit interview questions and their corresponding responses below:

1. What did you enjoy most about working here?
  - a. Feedback: Staff appreciated the flexibility of the job, especially the opportunity to meet new clients and support them. The staff felt very supported by their supervisor and by fellow Social Workers in the unit. The staff also found that other Social Workers across the Section were helpful and willing to answer questions.
2. What would you change/improve about our workplace?
  - a. Feedback: While training is overall helpful, Staff suggested several improvements: two intake cases are not enough for training purposes, and more Reassessment training is needed. Staff also recommend exposure to a broader range of case types during training, such as hospital discharges, minor recipients, protective supervision, and paramedical cases. Staff added that training is an ideal time to make mistakes and learn from them. Guest speakers from other departments—such as Medi-Cal—would be beneficial. Even though IHSS workers don't need to know all Medi-Cal details, learning how to read Aid Codes would support their roles.

## **Recommendations for SF-IHSS**

### ***Implement a Formal Organization Development Framework***

1. Establish a dedicated OD lead team within SF-IHSS to coordinate engagement initiatives and analyze feedback.
2. Establish clear goals and metrics, such as reducing turnover, improving internal satisfaction scores, and increasing participation in training or engagement initiatives.
3. Embed OD principles into supervisory practices and performance evaluations.
4. Conduct Annual Employee Engagement surveys by designing an anonymous, easy-to-complete survey focused on morale, communication, career development, workload, and supervisor support.



5. Share high-level results in an accessible format (e.g., All-staff meetings, email summaries to include visual dashboards).
6. Develop follow-up focus groups with leadership teams to explore key issues in more detail.
7. Create action plans with timelines and assign responsibility to supervisors and teams.

### ***Standardize and Expand the Existing Exit Interview***

1. Create a standardized exit interview template with core questions about work environment, supervisor support, training, and reasons for leaving.
2. Input responses into a central database and analyze quarterly for trends.
3. Share feedback and findings with leadership teams, HR, and unions (if applicable).
4. Use the findings to adjust onboarding, supervision, or workload policies as needed.

### ***Strengthen Onboarding and Support for SF-IHSS***

This will require collaboration between leadership, the Quality Assurance Training team, and input from staff through surveys during the pilot phase. The following action steps are recommended:

1. Create a New Employee Welcome Packet that includes role expectations, agency values, key contacts, and a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs).
2. Assign peer mentors or “buddy” staff to support new employees during their first 3–6 months. These mentors can help answer informal questions and model positive workplace behaviors.
3. Continue Supervisor Check-Ins, currently practiced at SF-IHSS, on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to offer feedback, address concerns early, and provide consistent support.
4. Continuing Orientation Workshops, also part of the current SF-IHSS practice, that introduces the agency’s mission, provides department overviews, and offers a tour of available services.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges facing the SF-IHSS Program, including increased staff turnover, burnout, and struggle to maintain program compliance, highlight the pressing need for a more strategic and cohesive approach to employee engagement and organization. While existing initiatives demonstrate a clear commitment to supporting staff, they currently lack the structure and consistency needed to foster long-term workforce stability and program effectiveness.

The OD model implemented by the SCCHSD presents a valuable blueprint for transformation. By prioritizing employee engagement through structured onboarding, transparent and inclusive communication, ongoing professional development, and continuous feedback mechanisms such as engagement surveys and exit interviews, SCCHSD has cultivated a truly resilient workforce. SF-IHSS can benefit from adopting similar practices, particularly the employee engagement

surveys focused on key areas, such as career development, work engagement, and communication. These data-driven efforts can help drive measurable improvements in retention, job satisfaction, and leadership development,—laying the foundation for a stronger, more sustainable future.

By adapting the Organizational development strategies from Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, San Francisco County can enhance its foundation for employee engagement, trust, and retention, especially within high-demand work environments. Implementing even one or two of these recommendations could result in measurable improvements in staff morale, organizational stability, and overall performance.

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## **References**

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