

A Five-Prong Approach to Recruitment and Retention of a Skilled and Diverse Child Welfare Workforce

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Napa County recognized that staffing shortages have a negative effect on its ability to deliver consistent, high-quality child welfare services to the members of its community, which in turn, has negative effects on the safety and well-being of its families and children. For its 2018-2024 System Improvement Plan, The Health & Human Services Agency (HHS), Child Welfare Services Division in Napa made a concerted effort to address its staffing shortages by focusing on recruitment and retention for its Agency. It developed a five-prong approach to hire and retain a skilled and diverse Child Welfare Workforce. The idea behind these strategies is based on research in workforce development, best practices, and the impact of caseload on Child Welfare's workforce. Since then, Napa County has made a significant stride by reducing its vacancy rate from 30% to around 3-4% currently. The success and quick turn-around of its ability to hire and retain Child Welfare Workers is attributed to its ability to reshape its organization's culture and staff development re-design to reflect the community and population they serve. It involved hiring additional supervisors, developing existing supervisors, and providing supervisors with the needed tools and skills to supervise, support, and develop their team members. One strategy also called for increasing the pipeline of available MSWs for hire, and creating a dedicated supervisor in charge of Staff Development to interface with the neighboring university, recruit interns, and develop curriculum for training. Another strategy was to leverage its staff, interns, and partners to spread the word about the great work that Napa County is doing and achieving. Through job redesign, Napa County also reconsidered the roles and functions for its BSWs and MSWs in order to expand its recruitment pool of applications.

Introduction

Child welfare services are mandated by both the Federal and State governments. In the State of California, 58 counties are charged to administer, manage, and provide child welfare services to families and children. Child Welfare Workers (CWWs) or Child Protective Service Workers (PSWs) are responsible for investigating child abuse/neglect reports and ensuring that children are safe, while keeping families together whenever possible. Additionally, the CWWs are responsible for coordinating care and services with schools, mental health providers, medical providers, and substance abuse treatment facilities. If children are to be removed from their home or a petition is filed with the court, the CWWs also need to write court reports, collaborate with attorneys, and resource parents and relatives. The PSWs often need to navigate a myriad of structural inequities and challenges, such as homelessness, poverty, generational trauma, and historical racism/inequities while working to support the children and families. Due to emotional demands of being exposed to secondary trauma and a high-stress work environment, CWWs often put themselves at safety risk when entering an unknown home environment, as well as potential legal liabilities. As a result, CWWs and Child Welfare Agencies often experience burnout and high turnover rates, which are of constant concern.

More than two decades ago, the federal government noted the challenges and trends faced by Child Welfare Agencies, both private and public, across the nation in recruitment and retention of CWWs and supervisors. In March 2003, the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report titled, "HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff," which highlighted the challenges of Child Welfare agencies across the country to hire and retain Child Welfare workers and supervisors to meet the mandates made by the Federal government. The study pointed out that if trends persisted, Child Welfare Agencies across the country would have a difficult time meeting and achieving some key federal measures, especially concerning safety and permanency outcomes. Specifically, the GAO's report indicated that high worker turnover and/or lack of staffing can delay the timeliness of investigations and referrals and limit the frequency of contacts made by Child Welfare Agency staff, thereby reducing the safety and well-being of children and families. The GAO's report attributed the problems of recruiting and retention of CWWs to the low-pay, high caseloads, personal safety concerns, insufficient supervision and training, and feeling overwhelmed by administrative burdens.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 ushered in what the Annie E. Casey Foundation called a period of "great resignation" in Child Welfare Agencies across the country. It declared the needs of Child Welfare Agencies to reimagine what child welfare services would look like with remote work policies, especially for CWWs who needed to assess safety in the field and/or at the client's house and make monthly compliance visits at the home or in placement with children. Since May 2023, the challenges of Child Welfare Agencies to recruit and/or retain CWWs have worsened. Across the Bay Area's region, counties such as Alameda,

Contra Costa, Napa, San Mateo, San Francisco, and Santa Clara have experienced challenges in hiring and retaining CWWs who are well-trained, highly skilled, and committed.

Background

The Health & Human Services Agency (HHS) Child Welfare Services Division in Napa is a small to medium-sized county as compared to Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara counties. In 2024, Napa County received 1,699 referrals with concerns of child abuse/neglect, which reflected 5% increase from the previous year. Of that, 511 referrals were assigned as either a 24-hour or a 10-day investigation. Of the 511 referrals that met the Structured Decision Making (SDM) criteria for assignment, 105 referrals (6.2%) were assigned as Immediate Response (IR), due to allegations of possible immediate danger to the child, and 406 referrals (23.9%) were assigned as a ten-day referral. Of the investigated referrals for either IR or ten-day, 48 referrals were substantiated for either abuse/neglect, which translated to 64 children being involved in the referrals. Furthermore, of the 64 children involved, 27 children were removed due to a failed safety plan and/or an inability to implement a safety plan with the family. The number of children in foster care during the same period was 62, which was a 5% decrease from the previous year (Child Welfare Services Fact Sheet, 2024).

In late 2010, Napa County recognized that unfilled positions and/or the high turnover rate of CWWs had significantly affected its ability to deliver quality and consistent services of keeping family and children safe. Napa County also faced potential impacts on its funding if it did not meet the state and federal mandates due to staffing shortages. Napa County further recognized that about 75% of its workforce had two or fewer years of child welfare experience, which contributed to the high turnover rates of CWWs and Supervisors. Due to the inexperience of the workforce, it had difficulty in providing services that are consistent with best practices.

For the 2018-2023 System Improvement Plan (SIP), the HHS Child Welfare Services Division in Napa identified recruitment and retention as one of its priority areas of focus. With sufficient staffing and low turnover rates, the expectation was that Napa County would improve its organizational climate and work toward building and retaining an excellent workforce to help serve families and meet federal mandates.

Findings

At the inception of Napa County's SIP for 2018-2023, the HHS Child Welfare Division in Napa experienced a 20-25% vacancy rate for its Child Welfare Workers and/or supervisors. By 2020, the vacancy rates increased to about 30% for its workforce, but in 2025, the vacancy rate for Child Welfare Workers was almost non-existent. This was a quick turnaround in just a few years, while other Bay Area counties continued to experience challenges in hiring and retaining CWWs.

Besides its high vacancy rate, Napa County also realized that about 75% of its workforce had two or fewer years of child welfare experience, which contributed to the yearly high turnover rates of CWWs and Supervisors. Currently, the vacancy rate for Napa County is 4% or less for its

CWWs and Supervisors. According to CWS Deputy Director Veronica Piper-Jefferson, in a recent hiring for two CWW positions, there were 24 applicants for two open positions, affording Napa County a significant pool of qualified applicants. Additionally, Ms. Piper-Jefferson explained that Napa County consistently commits to having between two and five master's degree-level social work interns since 2020, which allowed the Agency to build a potential pipeline of future candidates for hiring.

There are five strategies developed by HHSA's Child Welfare Division, discussed below.

Organizational Culture Improvements And Staff Development Re-Design

Napa County recognized that in order to have a dynamic, competent, and committed workforce, it needed to transform its organizational culture and rethink staff development. To this end, Napa County developed a yearly calendar and implemented continuous trainings for its staff, allowing them to plan for their training goals. The County also sends new supervisors to the Napa County Supervisory Academy, in addition to the Bay Area Academy Supervisory Core, to learn about culture and the importance of partnership with the community and others. The Agency also shifted its language and labels of terms in order to help staff and community members change their mindset of the families for staff. They started to label visits between parents/guardians as Family Time. For their monthly division meeting, Napa County intentionally invited their interns, partners, and Resource Parents (formerly known as foster parents) to meetings to participate in any planned trainings, discussions, and celebrations. The County also requested that all of their staff create "Why" statements to let others know their reasons for working in Child Welfare along with information about themselves and their photo. The "Why" statement allows staff to learn about one another, find common ground, and create a sense of community. Napa County also changed the ways it communicated with staff, supervisors, managers, and deputy directors by having open communication and information sharing on multiple platforms, including the use of technology. For example, programs provide a QR code for feedback, and employees can quickly respond.

Leadership and Supervisory Development

In recent years, Napa County has revamped its induction process for both new Child Welfare Workers (CWWs) and Supervisors. In addition to completing California's Core Training for CWWs, new employees also complete a pre- and post-onboarding survey for Napa County to understand employees' learning styles, baseline of knowledge, and skills in child welfare practices. Based on the new employee's knowledge and skill sets, they are then required to complete three customized SimLab trainings. New employees are also required to complete a self-reflection at the end of each SimLab module. As new employees, the CWWs receive an onboarding binder, schedules of all the trainings, a social work passport to document their progress and needs, SimLab topics, and an Employee Personnel Record. During this period, new employees are assigned to their unit and work with both the training coordinator and the unit supervisor regarding shadowing, expectations, and progress made with training. The duration of

the new employee's induction generally lasts about six weeks, on top of CWW core training required by all new CWWs.

Expansion and restructure of the MSW Title IV-E Internship Program and Recruitment

To improve the pipeline of MSWs available for hire, Napa County made a strategic commitment to have between two and five Title IV-E MSW interns yearly from the surrounding universities. Prior to 2020, Napa County had challenges having a consistent number of Title IV-E MSW interns assigned to its county. This was mostly due to Napa County not having an established relationship with universities in the Bay Area. Specifically, it did not have a formal signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the universities. Furthermore, Napa County did not have a reputation as a desirable place for an internship.

Since 2020, Napa County has made great strides to have MOUs signed with the neighboring universities to ensure that it has equal access to MSW interns as other Bay Area counties. It also created a position for a fully dedicated supervisor focusing on staff development, building and maintaining relationships with UC Berkeley, SFSU, and California State Universities in San Francisco, East Bay, San Jose, and Sacramento, recruiting interns, and developing onboarding materials.

The Title IV-E internship program mirrors the new CWWs' induction training program, but is completed in half the time. Upon arrival, interns are not assigned to a specific unit, function, or a specific CWW. They are assigned to the Staff Development Unit, which consists of a Staff Development Supervisor and a Staff Development Child Welfare Worker. Additionally, the interns are rotated through each unit throughout the Division for them to experience, learn, and become familiar with various Child Welfare functions. By doing this, Napa County provides interns with a broad exposure and continuum of child welfare services, rather than a silo view of one specific function. Equally important, the rotation assignment allowed Napa County to expose interns to the organization's culture and foster a sense of collaboration across units and functions. In 2023, two of the four interns applied to stay with Napa County. In 2024 and 2025, all five of the interns applied to stay. Due to successes and lessons learned, Napa County decided to pare down its internship program to four interns per year to provide the supervision and attention needed by interns.

"Grow Our Own"

This idea originated from the thinking that a county's reputation and relationship with other persons and institutions, such as universities, community partners, and its own employees and interns, have a positive effect on Napa County's ability to recruit new employees and retain current staff. It leverages staff, interns, and partners as the county's spokespeople and advertisers. For example, when the interns had a great experience with their internship, they would be more likely to tell others about their positive experiences. Additionally, if the CWWs have positive and supportive experiences with the county, they are also more likely to share the information and help recruit other new employees to work there. Besides word of mouth from

trusted allies, the County also holds a brown bag lunch at least once a year to encourage bachelor-level social workers to explore the MSW program as a way to be promoted. It intentionally builds and maintains a relationship with universities in the region by staying connected and inviting staff as guest speakers at their functions. It also sends CWWs and Supervisors to regional Title IV-E meetings and “Parade of Counties” to share their experiences in working for Napa County. Lastly, Napa County maintains an internal pipeline for promoting from within by encouraging staff to pursue higher education. Recently, at least 20% of the social work staff who started with the Agency as a Social Worker I are pursuing higher education. Internal data from Napa County indicated that these employees maintain longevity with the Agency, with little to no turnover.

Job Redesign

While some of the counties in the Bay Area’s region start to explore Bachelor’s Degree Social Workers (BSWs) to fill their vacancies, Napa County has strategically positioned itself to only hire Master Degree Social Workers (MSWs or MAs) for its critical functions such as Emergency Response (ER), Court Dependency (CDU), Family Reunification (FR), Family Maintenance (FM), and Permanency Unit/Adoptions/ Extended Foster Care (AB12). BA/BSWs are deployed to the Hotline screening function, as they believe that once the BSW staff receives appropriate training and oversight, they will be able to field calls from the community just like 911 dispatchers. The BSWs are also assigned to the Resource Family Approval Unit and support MA/MSWs with casework, e.g., meeting with the parents, connecting families with case plan services, and helping to complete compliance visits.

A major aspect of Job Redesign was to advocate for the Agency to hire three limited-term positions to fill any unexpected resignations of CWWs or to backfill current staff that go on leave. These positions require annual renewal, but when there is a vacancy, the staff in the limited-term position can move into a permanent position. The limited-term positions, therefore, allow Napa County to insulate itself from any unexpected staff shortages while affording itself time to pivot and make adjustments to its program. The Agency also works with Napa’s Human Resources Department to give it the flexibility to extend offers of employment to the graduating MA/MSWs before receiving their diplomas. With support from Human Resources, Napa also instituted an ongoing and continuous recruitment process.

Additionally, when staffing permits, Napa County has been able to maintain the caseload recommendations by Child Welfare Leagues of America to retain and avoid burnout from the current staff. The Academy for Professional Excellence (2019) has emphasized the impacts that high caseloads have on CWWs, including unintended consequences on families and the County’s ability to administer services. Specifically, high caseloads for CWWs caused more errors and difficulty in maintaining service standards, and negatively affected their well-being with burnout and retention problems. For the family, the study indicated that high caseloads increased parents’ time to reunify with their children and delayed completion of their case plan due to services not being provided in a timely manner. For the County, the errors made by the CWWs

might result in lawsuits, due to the inability to meet the state and federal mandates, and poor morale for its workforce. Accordingly, Napa County's average caseload for ER workers is 5-9 referrals per month, 5 or fewer cases for CDU, 10 or fewer cases for FR and/or FM cases for continuing case carrying CWWs, 15 cases for non-court FM, and 15 for adoption/permanent placement cases. Based on the feedback provided by the new CWWs regarding having a caseload assigned to them while still in training, Napa County decided not to assign any cases to new CWWs until they have completed new employee induction. Caseloads then increase incrementally, until the worker acquires a full caseload according to their unit of assignment.

Analysis/Discussion

Napa County's success in hiring and retaining new staff during the past few years was not accidental. They were intentional about their goals and strategies. The County's success has undoubtedly been attributed to the development of a five-prong targeted approach to address its recruitment and retention challenges of CWWs and Supervisors. The ideas behind the strategies emanated from research on Child Welfare's best practices, Annie E. Casey Foundation's research on workforce development, trauma-informed research, reflective and trauma-informed supervision, and research on caseload/workload impact on staff recruitment and retention.

While other neighboring counties have implemented similar strategies, they have not reaped similar rewards in retaining existing staff and hiring new CWWs. Some of the Bay Area counties are currently exploring adding BSWs to their workforce due to difficulty hiring and retaining MSWs. For example, Alameda County previously had Child Welfare Worker I or BSWs in the early 2000s when it experienced a staffing shortage, but decided to stop using the classification once it was able to hire sufficient MSWs to perform the CWW job. About a decade after stopping the hiring of CWW I, it is now hiring BSWs to fill vacancies and meet federal and state government mandates. Similarly, San Francisco County is hiring BSWs as it experiences similar challenges in filling the vacant MSW positions.

Though Napa County employs BSWs, it does not intend to replace MSWs. Through its Job Redesign, Napa County deployed a spectrum of Social Worker classifications, ranging from Social Worker I, II, III, and Child Protective Services Worker I and II to meet its various workforce needs. The Job Redesign also allowed Napa County to hire people with various education levels from associate to master's degrees, and work experience to meet its staffing needs. For example, to help with supervised visits for parents and children or to staff the Family Time facility, Napa County utilizes a Social Worker I classification. It also uses BA/BSWs, instead of MSWs to assist with hotline screening, Resource Family Approval, and the Adoption Assistance Program to free up MSWs to carry cases and/or investigate referrals.

One of the unique attributes of Job Redesign is that Napa County was able to partner with Human Resources to advocate and allow the HHSA Child Welfare Services Division to hire three limited-term positions to fill any unplanned vacancies due to attrition or medical leave. The

ingenuity behind the idea is that the three limited-term positions prevent any potential disruptions of services due to unexpected vacancies and/or leaves. Since Napa County employs about 70 Full-Time Employees, 35 of whom are Social Workers and CWWs, any vacant position or unavailable CWW position has the potential to cause major disruption for the program and families. Equally important, it allows the Agency to try out the staff before offering them a permanent position to ensure “goodness of fit.”

Another unique attribute of Job Redesign that contributed to the success of hiring new staff is by working with HR, Napa County was able to offer employment to their interns before graduation, with the condition that they provided supporting documentation to verify that their degree was conferred prior to starting their employment. In doing so, Napa County was able to hire the interns ahead of other counties, putting them at an advantage in competing for the same employees.

Though not one of the five prongs, Napa County also attributed social worker recruitment and retention to competitive salaries. Specifically, the Board of Supervisors approved a 9% salary equity adjustment in 2022, followed by 4% and 3.5% Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs), for two subsequent years. Casey Family Programs indicated that the ability of Child Welfare Agencies to provide a living family wage is one of the essential strategies in recruiting Child Welfare Workers (Casey Family Programs, 08/2023).

Recommendations for Staff Retention in San Francisco

San Francisco’s Family & Children Services Agency (FCS) continues to make efforts in filling its vacancy for CWWs (2940 classification) and Social Workers (2918 classification) due to continual staffing shortages. Below, Table 1 explains the number of employees in classifications 2918 and 2940 who were hired and vacated in 2022 to 2024 in FCS.

Table 1: Comparison of Numbers of Positions Filled and Vacated in SF's Social Worker and Child Welfare Worker Positions, 2022-2024			
Position Hired/Vacated	2022	2023	2024
2918 Classifications Hired	20*	2	10
2918 Classifications Vacated	6	11	11 (29% vacancy rate)
2944 Classifications Hired	20*	31	16
2944 Classifications Vacated	28	32	32 (30% vacancy rate)
Total Vacancy Rate	18%	25%	30%

*2022 hiring data combined both 2918 and 2944’s classifications.

Note. Data from Presentation on Workforce Health at FCS Division Meeting (2025).

The data above indicates that FCS continues to lose more staff than the Agency can hire. Consequently, FCS has taken steps since 2022 to mitigate these trends by implementing various strategies to address staff retention directly, including adding infrastructure to support these efforts. Some of the efforts made by FCS are similar to those of Napa County. To improve morale and staff appreciation, FCS has a social work appreciation event with food deliveries to the staff and highlights new CWWs in its newsletter. Within the different programs in FCS, any milestones and accomplishments are celebrated. To reduce burnout and vicarious trauma, FCS created a CWWs & Supervisors support group, a monthly intern healing circle, and 1-1 or group sessions with an LCSW so the staff can have a safe space to discuss concerns and any secondary trauma. FCS also encourages and supports its 2918s to obtain an MSW degree as a promotional opportunity. It also supports the CWWs to become Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW) by providing a free weekly group supervision.

Encourage Use of “Why” Statements Among Staff

It is recommended that FCS adopt the use of a “Why” statement like Napa County, to encourage conversations among the staff, allow staff to learn about each other, foster a sense of community and commonality among staff, and serve as a reminder of why the individuals are in the child welfare profession. The statement could be posted in the employees’ common area and at the employee’s cubicle.

Caseload Caps

Due to the current staffing shortage, FCS may not be able to adopt and implement this strategy. However, it is recommended that FCS strive for this goal as it may have a positive correlation in retaining existing and new staff. Napa County does not provide additional pay to staff when they occasionally receive additional referrals and/or cases above their caseload cap due to unforeseen circumstances.

Review Child Welfare Worker and Social Worker’s Classifications for Pay Parity

Given that other counties may be providing longevity bonuses and overtime pay for casework or hiring bonuses, it is recommended that SF consider pay parity for its employees to help attract and retain new & existing staff. In its efforts to improve recruitment and retention, Napa County learned that compensation for staff significantly incentivizes retention of CWWs and Supervisors. As a result, Napa County worked with HR to examine pay parity for social workers in nearby counties, and convinced the Board of Supervisors to provide a one-time salary adjustment of 9% for its social workers. As a result, Napa County currently offers competitive salaries for CWWs. Additionally, Napa County provides longevity bonuses to staff at 10, 15, and 20 years of employment with the county. Casey Family Programs (2023) posited that providing a living and competitive wage is one of the hallmarks of successfully retaining and recruiting staff. While SF County has always provided competitive wages to its employees, due to the high cost of living in San Francisco, it is recommended that FCS work with HR to update 2918 and 2940 classifications to determine whether its salary is still competitive.

Recommendations for Staff Recruitment in San Francisco County Family & Children Services

Recruiting & Hiring Interns Prior to Graduation

San Francisco County is on the right track in its commitment to develop and provide an MSW Title IV-E internship program as a pipeline for potential candidates for hire. It has always valued the importance of training MSW Title IV-E interns over the years. In 2023, San Francisco County had six interns. In 2024, it had eight interns. When Napa County restructured its internship program, a priority was expanding the pipeline of hiring its recent MSW interns. Since 2023, Napa County's interns have consistently wanted to apply for a position after their internship concluded. Napa County, however, has a major advantage over some of its peers in the Bay Area when hiring its interns. Specifically, in working with HR, Napa County can make a tentative offer for employment to its interns three months before graduation if the intern is able to provide a letter of good academic standing. Once hired, the interns then provide verification that they have graduated prior to their start date for employment. If San Francisco County adopts this practice, it would surely increase its pipeline of applicants for hire. This will allow FCS to avoid competing with other neighboring counties by removing the interns from the applicant pool, as the interns have already received a tentative employment offer from SF County.

Recruiting & Hiring from former CWW Retirees, BSWs and Part-time MSWs

Though not similar to Napa's limited-term CWW positions, FCS is also working with its HR to create a new BA-level CWW position and is currently hiring BSWs as a strategy to lower its vacancy rate. At the same time, FCS also implements rehiring of former CWW retirees to address staffing shortages. The former SF retirees can work up to 960 hours per fiscal year, and their employment can be extended more than one fiscal year, if needed. Additionally, FCS has started to hire part-time CWWs. FCS also has explored a hybrid and/or flexible work schedule to entice applicants to consider San Francisco County for a CWW career path. Finally, like Napa County, SF FCS has worked with HR to institute continuous hiring. It is recommended that FCS continue with its efforts in recruitment, as these strategies will help fill the vacant positions in the upcoming months.

Job ReDesign for Non-Case Carrying MSWs

Through its Job Redesign, Napa County has reimaged the roles for its BA/BSWs and MA/MSWs. For Napa, it is committed to having MA/MSWs carry cases only, while BSWs help with functions that do not involve court work or carrying any ongoing referrals and/or cases. Specifically, it has assigned hotline screening, resource family approval, and the adoption assistance program to BA/BSWs. By doing so, Napa County freed up 10% of its MSW workforce to devote to case-carrying work. Since SF FCS is exploring hiring BSWs, it is recommended that SF reimagine the roles for MSWs and BSWs in order to free up some MSWs to perform case-carrying related work. This is because the number of available MSWs entering the Child Welfare profession has decreased over the past few years. Recent research found that while the number of students enrolled in MSW programs is increasing, enrollment in the Title IV-E

program and the Child Welfare discipline is decreasing (Downey et al, 2025). Specifically, MSWs are gravitating toward medical and mental health, school, and adult/aging social work. If these trends persist as predicted, the availability of MSWs for hire will be diminished, heightening competition among the counties to hire qualified MSWs for the Child Welfare profession.

Conclusion

Recruitment and retention of CWWs has become an urgent matter due to the ongoing staff shortages across the country. In recent years, Child Welfare Agencies in the Bay Area have experienced staffing shortages which impacts the ability to provide quality services and keep families and children safe. The HHS Child Welfare Services Division in Napa recognized the effects of staffing shortages early on and addressed the challenges head-on with its SIP for 2018-2023. It developed five strategies to address the issues of recruitment and retention for the agency, and the outcomes were remarkable after five years of implementation. While these strategies have served Napa County well, it is unclear whether adopting the same tactics will yield similar outcomes since the size of the county, available resources, locality, and organizational structure play important roles. In the past few years, FCS has adopted some similar strategies on its own to address recruitment and retention for its organization. This paper also provided some recommendations for FCS to consider for adoption. Given time, it is hoped that FCS will also be successful in its efforts to recruit and retain a robust workforce to serve families and children in San Francisco.

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