

Talk With Me!

**Staff Retention, Attraction and Growth in the Caring
and Non-Profit Workforce**

Staff Perspective



Workforce Planning Board
of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin

March 2026

Our Vision: We envision the continuous development of a leading-edge workforce.
Our Mission: Engage partners to find solutions to local workforce development needs.

We would like to express our sincere thank you to all those who took the time to take part in the development of this report, sharing their insight into the caring and non-profit sectors.

The material contained in this report has been prepared by the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin (WPBWWD) and draws from a variety of sources considered to be reliable. We make no representation or warranty, express or implied, as to its accuracy or completeness. In providing this material, WPBWWD does not assume any responsibility for liability.

The research staff used AI software to do the initial organization of ideas and themes from the survey's customized questions. The researcher then reviewed the organization of these comments to ensure the sector can easily use the data. AI was also used for initial text editing to improve clarity.

Canada 



Ontario 

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Using This Report

The data in this report comes directly from our Caring Workforce Survey of staff in the caring and non-profit sectors, conducted in November 2025. Quotes are straight from participants and reflect their perspectives about working in the sector.

Managers and HR professionals can use this knowledge to evaluate their own workplaces and create better environments for attracting, retaining and strengthening their staff.

Who Provided Input?

This is what we know about the 160 people who provided feedback.

Where they work

- Waterloo Region (83 people), Guelph-Wellington (68) and Dufferin County (18). Some worked in more than one geography
- Social & Community Services (68), Childcare (55) and 38 in other caring sectors.
- Almost 80% worked in non-profit companies with 20% in for-profit care.
- 52% worked in companies with fewer than 50 people. Large organizations tended to be in Childcare, Social & Community Services, and Health organizations.
- 84% reported being non-unionized.
- Most staff knew how their organization was funded. The most identified program funding came from the provincial and federal governments.

About their job

- 57% reported being a front-line worker who delivered service, support or programming.
- 43% were managerial/supervisory, human resources, support or another role.
- 86% of respondents were full-time and 79% were permanent employees.
- Contract employees were almost evenly split between having a likely renewal and planned end dates.
- 49 respondents had less than 4 years in the sector. 102 reported having 5+ years. Many of the responses come from staff with more experience. 47 people had 15+ years in the sector.

Top 10 Actions to ATTRACT Staff

“How do you think your workplace could attract quality job applicants?”

1. Pay competitively and transparently.

- "ALWAYS post the salary in a job posting. It wastes people's time when it's a "secret"."
- "It all comes down to money. We need more funding to be able to offer people better wages."
- "Ensure that salary is realistic for current reality"
- "Sharing the wage online and sharing the benefits package in the job posting."
- "Compensation package and job security (contract jobs find it hard to attract employees)."
- "Increased wages, more stable and consistent hours and time off, good paid time off system."
- "Offering competitive wages and benefits would be the biggest step to take to get more people to apply. It's a good place to start out and gain experience but there really isn't any incentives to stay long term."
- "Currently, I feel as if the low salary and frequency of contract positions opening up is problematic as most job seekers want permanent positions with competitive wages and benefit packages."

2. Offer flexibility and schedules that fit worker needs.

- "Better work from home and flexible hours/work schedule is key."
- "Offer hybrid working, improve benefits"
- "Emphasize the high work-life balance of the job"
- "4 day compressed work-week, additional PTO, increase in wage"
- "Offer full time lines with consistent days off instead of every six weeks changing schedules."
- "I applied to this position because I can do it alongside a high paying job without losing out on hours for the higher paying job because of the flexibility."

3. Improve access to benefits.

- "Offer health benefits to regular part time employees."
- "Encourage time off for self medical reasons preemptively and mental health."
- "We offer a generous vacation policy which helps with retention, we provide paid sick and personal time as well."
- "Offer benefits much earlier on (only offered after a year, in a department with contracts less than that) - that has been a reason we have lost good candidates in the past."

4. Make job postings clear, honest, and human.

- "Better explanation of what we do."
- "Do not post every single qualification, sometimes the job posting has a very long list and it's clear that no one person could show up to an interview with every single qualification. Only post the ones that are absolutely essential and then tell us if others are very nice to have."
- "Use clear job postings that explain job duties with the skills and related experience that you are looking for - transferrable skills."
- "Provide up front information about wage, schedule flexibility and other staff perks."

5. Promote mission, purpose, and meaningful work.

- "People often apply to our organization as they have an intrinsic calling and support our mission."
- "Focusing on making a difference in the world and how that happens. This way the work/job is meaningful. Just don't say, you'll make a difference.... It's not enough."
- "People are warm and accepting here. There is some flexibility and understanding when it comes to managing family life and work life. I love that my job has meaning, and it is gratifying. I help people find jobs and connect them with job opportunities, and I help employers find good candidates. It is a great, rewarding, and meaningful job."

6. Use multiple recruitment channels.

- "All this is not good enough if you don't plan carefully how you'd get the word out about the position. I simply don't expect much from Indeed or big job boards - you might get a few high value hits, but you get a lot of wheel spinners too. Use the organization's networks to advertise. Use LinkedIn and high value job recruitment sites. Consider hiring a specialized recruiter."
- "Look to the volunteers within the organization when looking to fill a paid position. Advertising internally, on our website, via LinkedIn."
- "Sharing job postings with other non-profits."
- "The challenge with online applications that are sent to HR to review is that we miss the opportunity to find really good candidates who either are demoralized by the lack of personal contact, or who are challenged to express their strengths in a resume/cover letter/application."
- "We use a variety of tools and practices to recruit including an HRIS that automatically posts to Indeed, as well as adding our posting to ONN Connect, Charity Village, Social media and other relevant platforms. We do have interest in our roles but find we have to put a lot of knock out questions in our applications to avoid a lot of automatically generated applications. There is potential to lose good quality candidates that way."
- "Advertising on websites like our professional resource center. This is where the invested Early Childhood Educators are going."

7. Strengthen your employment brand.

- "Have good reputation in the community. Offer good salary."
- "Better culture so word of mouth is positive."
- "Across the sector, we need to message that we recognize how important and skilled our RECEs are. If we elevate the status of these workers, more people will be excited to work in our field again."
- "We have a great work place culture that is often not displayed to job applicants. Showcasing this can attract more people to apply."
- "What I liked about my job is I interviewed for a different position and did not get it, a few months later another role opened up and they remembered me and offered me the chance to interview for the role before posting to the public. That remembrance of my prior interview made me genuinely feel like they cared about their staff."

8. Simplify the application process.

- "Keep the applications short. Avoid forcing applicants to re-enter their entire resume."
- "They should announce the post, collect the resume and cover letter and according to that documents select the candidates not according their own network. Skilled newcomers apply for a post but because they don't know anyone in the companies, don't receive any answer from companies."
- "Screen resumes and get back to clients who did not meet the qualifications so they have a closure and could improve applications."

9. Invest in strong onboarding and early training.

- "Stronger, more thorough onboarding, checking in with new employees. Explain the work culture."
- "Outline growth opportunities like trainings, internal mobility, etc."
- "Let people learn more in their schooling about the roles and provide valuable hands on training. Most of the students we see coming through are observational only and once they begin working their have no idea as to the level of expectation that will be placed on them. I feel the last placement should be as if they are working full-time in a RECE role and have the full duties attached to this."
- "We are noticing the lack of abilities from new staff are putting our long term staff in burn out and they are leaving the field or the quality of care is lacking as they focus to supporting more."

10. Ensure the work environment is appealing.

- "We have a positive workplace that is caring towards its employees and is a nice place to work in, and I think that attracts people."
- "Finding people to hire isn't the problem. Getting employees to stay is the issue. We aren't happy."
- "Be friendly - as the interviewer act like you are happy at your workplace."
- "Decrease amount of admin tasks educators are expected to do. Extra support for challenges in the classroom."
- "Update the equipment to make it more aesthetically appealing and less strenuous on educators such as larger changing tables with stairs and sturdy stools for children at sinks. Refresh paint on walls and update playground to include areas to implement programming."

Top 10 Actions to NURTURE Staff

“How could your workplace nurture current staff?

In other words, what would help you thrive or grow in your job?”

1. Invest in continuous, high quality training.

- "Well-paced, high-quality professional development followed by a plan that implements said learning into daily functions. Psychological breathing room to learn, make mistakes, contribute ideas, and implement innovations!"
- "Find funding for training and aligning organizational needs with their professional growth path."
- "Creating an organizational culture of ongoing training and development."
- "Opportunities to learn from other sites."
- "Professional development based on interests and not forced PD."
- "Offer paid training not on their own time."
- "Ensuring all staff have the skills to navigate the digital systems we use so no one is frustrated."
- "Mini-trainings at staff meetings to get everyone on the same page."
- "Recognition that most educators do not have training in behavioural children or special needs but they are doing the best they can."
- "Professional development funding so I can continue to learn and grow in my role."

2. Clear career & advancement paths.

- "Providing professional development opportunities. We're currently revising our PD policy and introducing more job shadowing opportunities to promote growth within the organization, along with succession planning and putting internal hires first."
- "Offer training programs to up grade certification. Create clear career paths."
- "Provide opportunities to take on new roles/training and be compensated for more responsibilities at work"
- "Opportunities for growth and to learn new skills - peer to peer mentoring, designates or lead teachers, PL supported by the employer"
- "Getting to know employees strengths and helping them utilize those skills and evolve while they are here."
- "Hiring internally first!"

3. Build team connection.

- "Making time to get to know each other socially a bit outside of work (e.g. helps build trust and connections)."
- "In-person meet-ups for teambuilding quarterly (we are fully remote)."
- "Continue checking in on staff, the bonding exercises, ensuring nobody is left out, building that close-knit work place environment."
- "Provide paid opportunities to socialize and build teams"
- "All treated as equals. Respect all."
- "Participating in professional developments together, staff bonding activities/outings, discussion on ideas for direction we are heading as an organization."
- "Relationships, people joining the work force at this time are struggling with building relationships within current positions."

4. Provide ongoing, meaningful recognition.

- "Appreciation- pop in visits just to tell staff they are doing a great job."
- "More verbal and specific appreciation."
- "Feeling appreciated and valued as a team member"
- "Inspire a feeling of value"
- "Show appreciation by giving gifts/verbal acknowledgement"
- "Encouragement from peers and superior"
- "Appreciation, both formal and informal"
- "Involve staff (esp senior staff) in conversations about maintaining and enhancing workplace culture and satisfaction."
- "Getting meaningful recognition. Having management that is understanding and compassionate."

5. Increase flexibility and autonomy.

- "More flexible schedules and not so rigid expectations."
- "More paid time off. More flexibility."
- "Autonomy from leadership."
- "Flexible hours when I need to be a caregiver."
- "Encourage work from home. Currently we are allowed to do it 2 times a month but sometimes it's not used. Maybe having some encouragement to take those days so that people don't call in sick as much for appointments for example."

6. Improve communication and check-ins.

- "Regular check-in with management. Staff meetings are often but not enough for individual feedback."
- "More frequent performance appraisals and feedback"
- "Communication is key. Feel like different parts of the teams are siloed with information. Share to all."
- "Transparency on operations and changes to daily work."
- "Building open and honest communication for team building."

7. Strengthen wellness supports.

- "Increase in benefits coverage (i.e. more toward mental health)"
- "Once again wages and benefits (especially more than 2 paid sick days) would be number one."
- "More flexible way to spend benefits."
- "Encouraged mental health days"
- "Increase in vacation time to prevent burnout"
- "Continue wellbeing check-ins, more varied and flex schedules for front line."

8. Improve workload balance & staffing supports.

- "Less administrative burden so more time can be spent on direct client service. More balanced workload across all staff and programs."
- "Management has two/three roles that they are a part of. We need dedicated management per sector/department. Without this, our front line staff feel abandoned and like they need to manage themselves and their peers."
- "Additional support from managers and supervisors as well as having adequate coverage for staff when necessary."
- "Time to rest. Time to learn. Less expectations, more time to be inspired."
- "Lower KPI."
- "Designated planning time where you don't feel like you're inconveniencing other staff. This would allow more time to be creative and design meaningful materials and activities. Collaborative planning time with coworkers that work in the same age groups. This would give opportunities for staff to share ideas and plan material sharing or swapping. "
- "We are doing a pretty good job of this currently, you have to find ways to make the workload manageable and the workplace supportive and fun."

9. Improve tools, systems, and workspace quality.

- "Management has two/three roles that they are a part of. We need dedicated management per sector/department. Without this, our front line staff feel abandoned and like they need to manage themselves and their peers."
- "Management training for leaders. There is a lack of understanding of the importance of this, and frontline employees can be left on their own too much, without someone setting expectations and getting to know them in a real way."
- "Reducing barriers in their work (e.g. improve workflows and tools so there is less human intervention in some tasks). We always talk about making things a science, not an art."
- "Better break rooms and spaces for staff like meeting room."
- "We need better common spaces and the possibility to connect more, maybe through some events only made for staff."

10. Encourage innovation and staff-led ideas.

- "Continue on with the ability to develop and create new initiatives and projects. Trust from manager, and the support that I have now."
- "Listen to ideas from front line workers. Don't just make decisions from the top down. Give opportunities to current employees."
- "Implement employee feedback to improve organization, service delivery and better outcomes for individuals being supported by the programs."
- "Listen to what they are saying, offer them support and choices, lots of praise for their good job and commitment."
- "Discussion on ideas for direction we are heading as an organization."
- "Offer opportunities to cross-train, get us involved in creative and innovative programs and projects, give us opportunities to partner with other agencies and become involved in advocacy work to allow us to support ourselves better."

Top 10 Actions to RETAIN Staff

“How do you think your workplace could help to retain their current staff?”

1. Pay people fairly.

- "The sector I work in has not had an increase in budget for over 15 years."
- "The salaries for the staff and what they do is low. They can go work in a factory and make more money."
- "Yes we have high turnover, for many reasons, one of the reasons, is the low pay, I would think to leave for a better salary."
- "Wage increase because cost of living has gotten very expensive. Better benefits because the cost of services like massage etc have increased but benefit allowance hasn't. Same with eye glasses."
- "Increasing pay to match inflation, transparency on pay to ensure pay equity, offering benefits that are actually useful, not charging employees fees to use parking lot."
- "Wages are not balanced across the organization in terms of understanding what a specific Job Class does versus another. For example, one Job Class is paid based in part on service navigation at a higher rate than another Job Class that also does service navigation as part of the Job function."
- "I have not had a salary increase in several years, and as someone who oversees the budget, I can't see that happening at any time soon. This concerns me greatly as I worry about how my staff will be able to afford to stay in their jobs as costs around them go up. The Ministry and our funders do not provide cost of living increases, which is problematic. Also, I worry about my position being seen as an attractive job prospect should I ever leave the organization. ... I can't imagine they'd be able to get someone with my qualifications without raising the salary offerings. I already had this scenario for another position in the office that I was trying to recruit for."

2. Prevent burnout with realistic workloads.

- "I strongly emphasize that staff work within their paid hours in order to keep morale high, to treat people fairly and to minimize organizational risk. ...By setting an example of working within my hours, I find that this is less and less of a conversation I have to have."
- "Funder set targets are unrealistic and drive people away."
- "Push for wellness in the workplace, DEI work, reducing workload to allow for rest and recovery, and other items such as flexible scheduling, working remotely, plus transparent and visible advocacy for more and better long-term funding."
- "Digital software programs or apps that make planning faster and more effective, such as Story Park."
- "We have had high turnover in the last few years due to the burn out and staff having a lot of expectations on them."
- "We've had numerous staff go on sick leave and then their workload is distributed to other staff."

3. Build supportive, stable & trustworthy leaders.

- "More organization at the Leadership level. Manager turnover is very high so frontline team members are left to scramble and make decisions beyond their pay grade. Often left without supervision."
- "Train staff (especially managers) in emotional intelligence, inclusive leadership, and workload/organization management. If people are emotionally charged, excluded, and overwhelmed every day... they're in the Caring Sector. ;)"
- "Follow through on consequences for staff that do not comply with job requirements frequently.... Better conflict management systems."
- "Staff in positions of power who listen to their staff and hear what they need for work/life balance."
- "Strengthening management to retain great staff - people don't quit jobs, they quit managers"

4. Recognize and appreciate people regularly.

- "Recognition of the value of the workforce. It's not always about money - appreciation of the skills and dispositions the workforce brings - verbal, non-verbal, written, etc. Maybe a public campaign to elevate the status of the field in the general public."
- "My workplace could help to retain current staff by offering higher positions and responsibilities, and by consistently providing praise and support to staff to help them feel welcome and appreciated."

5. Provide flexibility that supports real life.

- "Offering flexibility in dealing with family needs and more vacation time. Basically treating people the way you want to be treated"
- "People need to feel valued, connected (staff outings, bonuses, opportunities to work flexible hours to suit family life)."
- "I think continuing to focus on work-life balance, flexibility, and supportive leadership helps a lot with staff retention."
- "I love the team and the flexibility of work life management. Days or time off aren't questioned and the supervisor is amazing! I stay because of the environment not the pay."
- "Flex with hours. ie: taking lunch break at different times + occasional work from home, using sick time to attend medical appts, social/team events"
- "Allowing more breaks in the day such as having 2 short 15-minute breaks and 1 hour while working an 8hr plus day. Fully away from the program. This allows for body to calm."
- "Staff have also quit due to zero flexibility in work schedule."

6. Improve communication and transparency.

- "This year, the management hired an HR consultant and that was one of the best things. Communication about HR processes got much better."
- "Regular check ins with staff for well being and job satisfaction."
- "Create opportunities to ask questions and learn from each other without judgement."
- "Better transparency from management, be truthful to staff regarding budget. We were told of budgets cuts, staff were let go, then a hiring spree happened 2 months later."

7. Create real career growth and internal mobility.

- "I was promoted recently and that helped to retain me. ...I have been working toward a promotion after 5 years and would have started to look for another job if I didn't receive one this year."
- "Skills development, opportunity to move roles, learn on job, opportunity to work outside the comfort zone learn and develop skills."
- "More paid PD during work time."
- "Intentional training/development opportunities to help employees advance or develop skills."

8. Fix fairness and equity issues.

- "We are all told we are equal and we all have equal responsibilities. In my eyes it isn't fair the RECE get paid almost \$5 more an hour than me whom has qualifications which just don't allow me to register and doing the exact same tasks maybe more! It creates a little resentment."
- "I think they should enforce greater structure and rules. At this time, I feel like the management is very chaotic and biased. I also think that the current management enables toxicity and favoritism. This is a huge problem. I stay because I love my job but I'd be lying if I said the work culture didn't impact my mental health."

9. A work culture of meaning and belonging.

- "Fostering a sense of community and belonging."
- "We are here for the clients and for seeing them succeed. I feel like this sector, like other sectors i.e. PSW, nursing etc, it is a calling. The workplace within the sector can do things to keep people in jobs such as team building, training to further enhance skills, support staff through offering wellness activities."

10. Provide stability.

- "Turnover has been because of funding that has ended, there tend to be gaps between projects from federal funders. Those funders are also increasingly expecting to also have funding from other sources and don't want to fully fund a project, which is challenging. Staff are on long contracts with uncertainty over and over. Investment from the company into our department would be helpful to maintain programming and staff, as they do with other departments in the organization."
- "My organization has extremely low turnover. Most employees have been here for over a decade. That said the turnover seems to be for roles that are not permanent, having some sort of comfort in job security without feeling like you have an expiration date would tremendously help."
- "Proper training and consistency so new staff don't feel overwhelmed."



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