



Home Visiting Careers

How Workplace Supports Relate to Home Visitor Recruitment and Retention

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Early childhood home visiting programs support pregnant women and families with young children so they can be healthy, safe, and better prepared to reach their goals. The success of these programs is dependent upon recruiting and retaining a skilled, committed, and satisfied workforce. This brief summarizes findings from the Home Visiting Career Trajectories study—a national study of the home visiting workforce—on workplace factors in recruiting and retaining qualified staff (box 1). Specifically, with regard to the role of workplace supports on recruitment and retention, the Home Visiting Career Trajectories study found the following:

- Home visitors reported that a flexible agency culture contributes to successful recruitment and hiring practices. Key informants suggested that implementing innovative practices to identify candidates who are a good fit for the job can, in turn, promote retention.
- Home visitors identified several workplace features that boost morale and make them feel valued, including collegiality, mutual trust, autonomy, and flexibility. Home visitors indicated that rigid environments (e.g., inflexibility with regard to teleworking, schedules, etc.) contributed to job dissatisfaction.
- Home visitors repeatedly cited supervisory support—both in the forms of reflective supervision and more informal gestures, such as workplace incentives—as a key factor in home visitors' decisions to remain in their job.

BOX 1

Overview of the Home Visiting Career Trajectories Study

The Home Visiting Career Trajectories study examined the characteristics, qualifications, and career trajectories of home visitors and their supervisors in programs funded by the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. The study was conducted by the Urban Institute, under contract with the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, in collaboration with the Health Resources and Services Administration.

The following research questions guided the data collection:

- What are the characteristics of home visitors and their supervisors, including their demographics, qualifications, and employment history?
- What are the characteristics of home visiting jobs?
- What are the career pathways of home visitors and supervisors?
- What strategies do programs use to recruit and retain staff?
- What opportunities and challenges exist for professional development and training?

Study methods included a two-stage national survey of the home visiting workforce and case studies of 8 states. The first stage of the survey was completed by approximately 55 percent of state/territory MIECHV and Tribal MIECHV program managers ($N = 369$), and the second stage was completed by approximately 55 percent of identified home visitors and supervisors ($N = 926$). Across the 8 case study states (Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, New Mexico, and Tennessee), researchers visited 26 MIECHV-funded sites selected to represent diverse home visiting models, both urban and rural settings, and tribal programs. Case study teams conducted one-on-one interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with a total of 46 program directors and supervisors, and 26 two-hour focus groups with a total of 106 home visitors. Details on the methods can be found in the full report.¹ Case study analyses were compared with the results of the surveys. The case study findings on home visitors' satisfaction with and intent to stay in their jobs strengthen and add depth to related survey findings. All primary data collection occurred in 2018.

What We Learned about Workplace Supports Related to Home Visiting Recruitment and Retention

From the interviews with program managers and supervisors as well as focus groups with home visitors, several themes emerged related to workplace culture and supports that staff thought encouraged home visitor recruitment, retention and job satisfaction. Specifically, three factors arose during discussions with home visitors and program managers as integral to staff recruitment and retention:

¹ Sandstrom, Heather, Sarah Benatar, Rebecca Peters, Devon Genua, Amelia Coffey, Cary Lou, Shirley Adelstein, and Erica Greenberg. 2020. *Home Visiting Career Trajectories: Final Report*. OPRE Report #2020-11, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- Clear and accurate job descriptions play an important role in successful recruitment and hiring.
- Ensuring agreement between program staff and human resources staff on the selection criteria against which résumés are screened may help programs identify candidates well suited for the position.
- Relationships with both supervisors and peers help motivate home visitors to remain in their jobs.

Each of these themes is described in more detail below. This information could offer useful ideas for agency directors, program managers, and supervisors looking for ways to boost home visitor job satisfaction and retention.

Job Descriptions Have Consequences for Both Recruitment and Retention

Program managers and home visitors alike noted the importance of appropriately written job descriptions, which are the first step in hiring new home visitors. We learned through interviews and focus groups that job listings can often be misleading or job expectations can be unclear to applicants, resulting in dissatisfaction among those who may be unprepared or not driven by the mission of home visiting.

For example, one program director shared dissatisfaction with the job description her agency posts for home visitor vacancies, noting the description focuses more on health care than the actual position and does not accurately describe the job. The program director indicated that changing it could take years due to agency requirements around creating new job categories. Staff in other agencies mentioned that their human resources (HR) departments must categorize listings under an existing job title that may not actually match the position. For example, one county health agency listed a home visitor job as “social counselor.” Another was listed as “community health worker.” Across the board, program staff acknowledged the challenge of accurately depicting home visiting in a brief job description. As one key informant said, “It’s hard to put into words.”

Home visitors shared their experiences with listings, with some describing the job listing they responded to as too vague or unclear regarding specific responsibilities, required skills and knowledge, and target populations served. As one home visitor explained,

Someone could probably look at the posting and think, “I have early childhood experience, I could do that job...” I don’t think there’s any mention of social work in those postings. When working with our clients, you have to know social work basics, like confidentiality, boundaries, and you don’t learn about that if you have an early childhood background.

Some focus group participants acknowledged that when they applied, they were uncertain about the extent of their presumed job responsibilities. As one home visitor expressed,

I was just looking for daytime work. I didn’t know anything about the home visiting part. I didn’t know anything about the requirements. The ad didn’t match the job.

An innovative practice used by some agencies to ensure candidates are well suited for the job is shadowing that occurs *before* hiring, also known as “prehire shadowing,” in which a candidate joins and observes an experienced home visitor on a home visit. Another strategy that at least one agency has used includes offering an informational meeting for interested applicants to share details about job responsibilities and what is expected in the field. This gives applicants the opportunity to decide if they would be a good fit, and if not, select out early in the process.

Unclear communication and expectations at the start can have longer-term consequences, affecting job satisfaction and potentially leading to more frequent turnover. Yet changes may be challenging to make in some environments. Program directors might look for opportunities to modify job descriptions or other ways to effectively communicate job responsibilities at the outset to avoid these misunderstandings.

Screening Candidates Is a Critical Step in the Hiring Process

Following application submission, employers screen résumés. At this point, employers determine whether candidates meet minimum qualifications, and if that threshold is met, whether candidates would be a good fit for the job. Screening résumés to assess applicant fit for the job is inextricably tied to the job listing but also dependent upon who is involved in the initial screening process. As one director shared, “We try to be really careful writing the [job] requirements so people don’t get screened out.” In some cases, program staff screen applicants themselves or provide HR with a tool to guide screening. One program manager described her recent experience and the process that ultimately worked well for her:

In the summer, we went through two months of interviews. Each time, I went through maybe 30 résumés. Out of those 30, I might pull 5...but when we do the interviews, it’s not a match.... So, we [home visiting program staff] designed a set of questions for a phone interview. HR screens them before they come to me.... Once we did that, I started seeing more valuable candidates.... At first, it was just me and HR. [Now the home visitors] will do the interview with me. We’ve come up with questions we feel are important to ask.

Ensuring résumé screeners and program directors have the same priorities is essential. Some program managers expressed concern that they are disconnected from the initial step of screening applicants when that task is given to staff in HR departments. This limits program managers’ ability to identify strong candidates. Some program managers gave the example that HR departments may be motivated to identify only candidates with the highest educational attainment. Consequently, the candidate pool is often narrowed to overqualified candidates (who likely will not take the job because of salary constraints), and candidates who could be a better fit are screened out. In addition, program managers indicated that they may be able to pick up on soft skills that are less obvious to HR screeners. In cases where program directors control who they interview and hire, program directors acknowledge that they can take steps to ensure the candidate is a good fit. One program manager described how her HR department controls the search process:

They don't even let the supervisor screen the résumés. They pick the résumés. They aren't picking people with a strong social work background, and this job requires a strong social service background.

One program manager discussed working closely with an external recruiter who seeks out and encourages potential applicants and screens résumés to identify qualified candidates. She found this approach very effective because the recruiter is familiar with both the job requirements and pool of potential candidates. However, this is not a widely used approach reported by those interviewed for this study.

Other agency requirements can also make hiring a challenge. One county health department noted that their agency's methods for assembling a panel of reviewers often resulted in individuals making hiring decisions who are unfamiliar with home visiting and therefore not skilled in identifying who is best suited for the job. Respondents indicated that this happens in large agencies with multiple departments. Agencies also shared the hiring process can take a great deal of time, and they often lose good candidates as a result.

Staff in charge of recruiting and hiring home visitors identified the importance of agency-level policies for hiring practices, and specifically emphasized the importance of HR departments working closely with program staff. A specific example that was raised repeatedly included the importance of HR and program staff collaborating on the job listing and screening criteria. Several program managers shared that, in their experience, HR departments are often driven by different priorities than those of the home visiting program; their procedures are often rigid, and they may be underequipped to assess résumés and cover letters for the soft skills that program managers find essential.

Supervisors Play an Important Role in Home Visitor Retention

Home visiting supervisors are critical for creating and maintaining a positive work environment. Supervisors assign home visitors' caseloads and provide them with the support they need to manage the stresses of the job. They are also responsible for training staff members and identifying and tracking ongoing professional development opportunities. Findings from our survey indicate that home visitors are very satisfied with their relationships with their supervisors.² During focus group discussions, home visitors identified several ways in which supervisors provide meaningful support that encourages retention.

Home visitors shared that a consistent display of empathy by their supervisor promotes job satisfaction. Supervisors can signal empathy for their staff by being widely accessible. Several supervisors, of whom home visitors spoke of highly, instituted an "open door" policy because they grasped that home visitors need ongoing guidance and an empathetic ear. Many home visitors said this openness helped them cope

² Heather Sandstrom, Sarah Benatar, Rebecca Peters, Devon Genua, Amelia Coffey, Cary Lou, Shirley Adelstein, and Erica Greenberg, *Home Visiting Career Trajectories: Final Report*, OPRE Report #2020-11 (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2020).

with the secondhand trauma they experience during home visits, such as being witness to a violent encounter between family members. Home visitors also said they felt that discussions with their supervisors help them think through how best to support families experiencing challenging and sensitive situations (for example situations related to child custody, substance abuse, or intimate partner violence). One home visitor noted the importance of her supervisor's constant availability:

If you have a lot going on with your families, then you need to touch base with your supervisor. Luckily, she is only a text or phone call away.

In focus groups, home visitors shared their perceptions that supervisors who had been home visitors may be more empathetic, and therefore more effective, than those without such experience. Home visitors indicated that this background allowed their supervisors to fully grasp what they were regularly experiencing in homes, and that shared experiences fostered empathy and trust. Supervisors with home visiting experience generally agreed that this knowledge helped them guide their supervisees more effectively than if they did not have hands-on experience. That said, in a few instances, home visitors noted that although their supervisors lacked home visiting experience, they were still good supervisors. In these cases, home visitors shared that their supervisors were caring and empathetic people who went out of their way to listen and learn from home visitors.

Advocating for home visitors within the context of a larger agency can boost morale. Some home visitors reported feeling disconnected or undervalued by their agency, most commonly when their program was housed within a larger agency (e.g., a local public health department). In these instances, home visitors acknowledged that their supervisors would advocate for the home visiting program within the context of the larger agency. Repeatedly, we heard that agency leadership and staff outside their program did not understand the value of home visiting or the skill and resilience involved, which could lead to lower pay or lower status within the agency. In a few agencies, home visitors said their supervisor advocated for better pay, benefits, or flexibility by helping others recognize the value of the services home visitors provide. In turn, this effort contributed to staff morale.

Skilled reflective supervision is highly valued and contributes to job satisfaction. In most but not all cases, home visitors valued reflective supervision—regular, collaborative supervision—and believed it served its purpose: to protect home visitors from burnout by providing a productive space to process their experiences in the field. Many home visitors mentioned that this interaction is important because it is a place where people understand their daily experiences on the job in a way that friends and family may not. Some home visitors also acknowledged that reflective supervision helped them avoid burnout, allowing them to process their experiences while at work, rather than bringing home stress that could negatively affect their health and personal relationships. One home visitor explained how this space helped her and other home visitors in her program:

We are on the front lines; we are hearing about the violence and we are seeing the poverty and we are seeing the mental health issues and we are in their homes, which gives a different level of truth to your work that we can't hide.... And the vicarious trauma that we can witness and see and hear...we can take it back [to reflective supervision] and really look at why it was affecting us and what we can do better to help our clients, so, just, it helps.

Several home visitors added that it was especially helpful when supervisors shared what helped them to protect themselves emotionally. Some home visitors noted that their supervisor encouraged them to practice self-care—which allowed them to take the time and space needed to process the trying circumstances they frequently encounter. Ultimately, close and trusting relationships between home visitors and their supervisors were cited as important preconditions for developing a safe environment for open reflection.

Not all home visitors, however, felt that the reflective supervision they were receiving met their needs. In several cases, home visitors shared that their supervisors were not skilled at reflective supervision and mentioned that these meetings felt like a chore. In these cases, meetings that were called reflective supervision could feel more like one of many compliance-oriented meetings that home visitors found demoralizing and frustrating given competing demands. Though rare, some interviewees mentioned that these sessions focused on ensuring that staff members are meeting client visitation targets or on other administrative tasks. Home visitors who described reflective supervision in this way indicated that they did not share the same trust and rapport with their supervisors described by home visitors who found reflective supervision rewarding.

Home visitors value the autonomy and schedule flexibility offered in some agency settings. Several home visitors shared that they highly valued having the opportunity to manage their own time. This typically included scheduling their own visits with families, working remotely between home visits when that was most efficient, and squeezing in data entry tasks when time allowed. This autonomy was cited as significantly contributing to job satisfaction and retention and was frequently mentioned by nurse home visitors who were forgoing higher salaries in a hospital setting in exchange for more flexible schedules. Supervisors who provided relative autonomy to their staff—typically dependent upon agency culture and policies—were often able to provide benefits and flexibility that helped address potential burnout and improve job satisfaction. Supervisors in a few agencies, for example, described successful efforts to secure approval for extra paid time off or comp time (i.e., additional paid time off to account for overtime hours worked), as well as flexible schedules and flex time (e.g., regularly taking a day off in exchange for working longer hours on other days). This is another way that supervisors were able to demonstrate their trust and support of their staff, which in turn made home visitors feel valued.

In contrast, other home visitors spoke about the negative effects on morale when supervisors set rigid requirements around schedules, remote work, or specific tasks like data entry. In cases where supervisors required home visitors to operate on a set schedule, come to the office between home visits, or complete data entry and other administrative tasks at specific times, home visitors described feeling micromanaged or like their supervisor did not trust them. One experienced home visitor described her frustration with her supervisor's requirement that home visiting staff constantly report their whereabouts:

I've been working as a dietician for 20 years [before becoming a home visitor], so to have to explain exactly where I am at every minute of the day.... Why am I being micromanaged? I am an educated professional. It is a trust issue.

Several home visitors also noted that rigid requirements about when and where they complete tasks decreases efficiency, because it often requires more time travelling to and from the office or limits their ability to change their schedules to accommodate clients' needs.

Supervisors' flexibility to impart this kind of autonomy varied. In some cases, supervisors' personal mind-sets appeared to drive the varying levels of flexibility given to home visitors, but in other cases, these policies appeared to be out of the supervisors' control. Some supervisors acknowledged the effect these factors can have on retention but explained that agency leadership sets policies regarding benefits and scheduling, leaving them with fewer tools to support home visitors' job satisfaction.

BOX 2

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Program managers might look to identify opportunities to ensure job descriptions accurately reflect roles and responsibilities. When that is not an option, consider other means of communicating these criteria, such as during the interview process or during prehire shadowing or by offering an informational meeting for candidates.

Lesson 2: Ensuring decisionmakers understand the position and the qualities desired in a candidate may boost recruitment and retention.

Lesson 3: Supervisors can identify the tools available to them—like schedule flexibility—that promote workplace satisfaction, as well as investments that promote relationship building between home visitors and supervisors and among staff.

Conclusions

Findings from the Home Visiting Career Trajectories study provide important insight into how program managers and supervisors may better recruit and retain home visitors. Staff in home visiting agencies that have more flexibility to implement the strategies discussed in this brief can support effective recruitment through well-tailored job descriptions and thoughtful candidate screening. Further, supervisor displays of trust and appreciation coupled with skillful guidance and empathy can contribute to overall job satisfaction and staff retention. Promoting mutually trusting relationships between supervisors and home visitors may also be crucial for reducing turnover.

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