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Professional Title, Organization: Executive Director, Koinonia Family Services

CHIP Title: Saving Our Caregiver Workforce with Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) Interventions

Project Description:

In 2021, direct care staff turnover in our agency was close to 35%. We are a treatment foster family agency and residential therapeutic program for youth and families impacted by the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In a field where stability and consistency of healthy relationships is vital to the success of our clients, this was a crisis.

Koinonia implemented a low-cost, evidence-based, trauma-informed, relationship-focused, transferable, and sustainable. model across all levels of the agency, using the four main components of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) of Mindfulness, Emotion Regulation, Distress Tolerance and Relationship Effectiveness.

The aim of this project was to:

- (1) reduce staff turnover rates,
- (2) reduce caregiver attrition rates
- (3) increase positive. Youth discharge outcomes.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned:

I started this project on April 1, 2022, and we are now at the scaling stage. In this case, the “build the plane while you’re flying it” strategy served to enlist and enroll key participants and influencers within the company, allowing us to collaborate and exchange critical feedback while we developed interventions that worked with our unique caregiver workforce and was subtle enough in the early beginnings so as not to create chaos or disruptive frustration.

- 1) We experienced reduced staff turnover from 35% to 17.5% (a 50% improvement),
- 2) reduced caregiver attrition by 41%, and
- 3) increased positive youth discharge outcomes by 18%.

The outcomes predominantly exceeded my expectations. If I had it to do over again from the beginning, I would have enlisted team members to select relevant DBT activities, which would have expedited the implementation process. My primary mistake was assuming that this project would be viewed by my colleagues as a burden of additional unnecessary uncompensated work.

A barrier was that during this time, I was promoted to the Executive Director role in February, had to find my replacement by April, sell my home in Southern CA in May, move to Northern CA in June, find a new home in July, and I also had an entirely new job description to navigate during one of the most financially devastating periods in child welfare history. I was knocked out with Covid twice, laid my father to rest, and fell out of the routine of caring for myself.

I was fortunate to have secured a grant to cover the costs of training, travel, accommodations and instructional material for 26 middle managers to convene at our Corporate office. This also helped to offset some of the expenses already incurred by Koinonia to prepare for this large-scale organizational change.

Next Steps:

Assess scalability, continue to reinforce the DBT culture among existing staff and supervisors, and prioritize DBT, orientation in onboarding new program staff.