



Local Government  
Workplaces Initiative



UNC

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# Creating Great Social Service Workplaces

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# Local Government Workplaces Initiative

- SOG Program since 2012 (KU prior 2004)
- Help local governments create great workplaces by listening to employees
- Surveys, interviews, focus groups, analysis of HR data
- Since 2004, 31 local government partners and 23,254 survey participants
- 1,533 social service employees in five counties



Local  
Government  
Workplaces  
Initiative



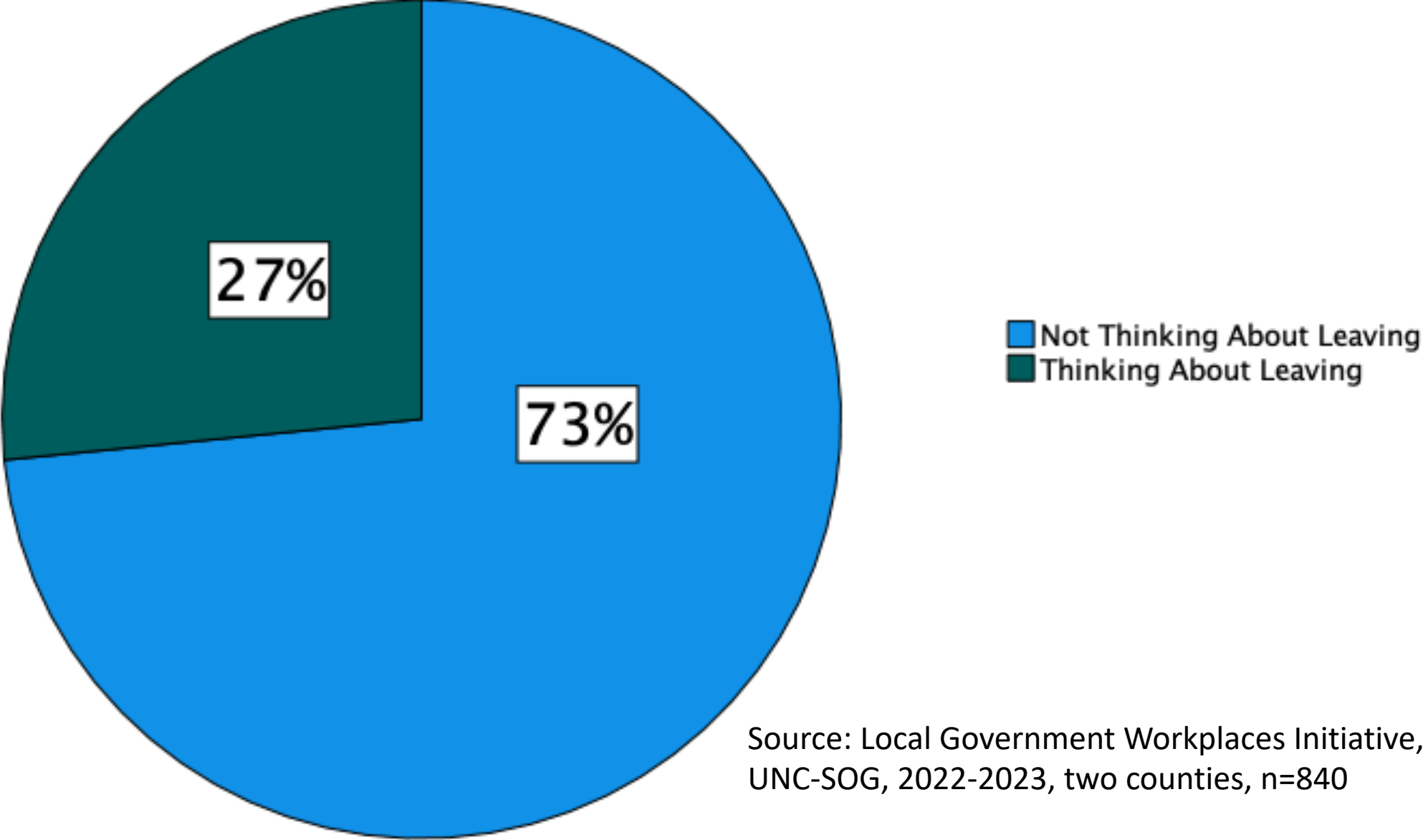
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# Some Statistics on Social Service Employees

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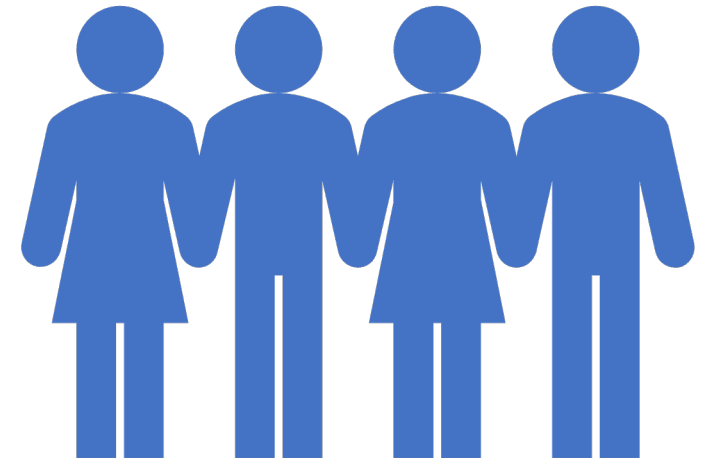
# Over 1 in 4 Social Service Employees Thinking About Leaving

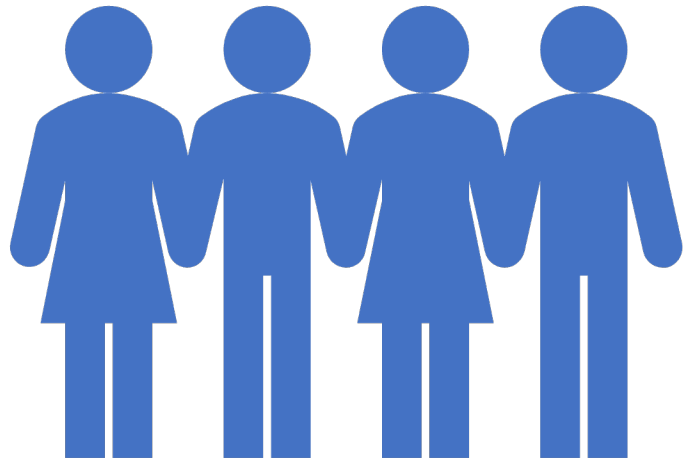


Source: Local Government Workplaces Initiative,  
UNC-SOG, 2022-2023, two counties, n=840

# Why Do Social Service Employees Want to Quit?

- Citizen Incivility
- Emotional Exhaustion
- Inclusion
- Pay
- Staffing
- Supervisors
- Workplace Incivility
- Voice





## Why Are Social Service Employees Emotionally Exhausted?

- Community Member Incivility
- Inadequate Staffing
- Supervisors
- Workplace Incivility

### **Inadequate Staffing**

The current case load has made it difficult to get cases completed, which has caused staff to work practically every weekend each month. This has caused staff to get burned out and have no support from their teammates who are experiencing being burned out as well.—Social Worker

### **Citizen Incivility**

When community members are displeased with county policy or not getting their way - the caseworker is often a verbal punching bag for that hostility.-- Eligibility Caseworker

### **Supervisors/Workplace Incivility**

(My supervisor) offers no guidance or teaching. She just tells me what to do without explaining how or why. She has no interest in helping me to learn & become a better employee and more knowledgeable. She dictates without teaching. She is miserable and rude and makes me feel very inadequate and unimportant and, at times, stupid -- Income Maintenance Caseworker





What Can Be Done?



# Great Workplaces: A Recruitment and Retention Tool

*With limited time and financial resources, DSS directors can focus on creating great workplaces as a recruitment and retention strategy*

The logo for Great Place To Work, featuring the text "Great Place To Work" in white, bold, sans-serif font, with a registered trademark symbol (®) at the end of "Work". The text is set against a red background that has a curved, rounded shape on the left side.

Great  
Place  
To  
Work.®

# Great Workplaces

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# Great Workplaces ...

- Help employees **manage emotional exhaustion**
- **Give employees a voice** in decisions that affect them
- **Empower employees to make decisions**





Help Employees Manage  
Emotional Exhaustion

# Emotional Exhaustion

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- One dimension of burnout
- Has serious physical and mental consequences
- Associated with intention to quit (Padin, et al, 2021)
- More common in emotion-intensive and trauma-informed work





# Managing Emotional Exhaustion

- Workplace climate improvements\*
  - Health-oriented leadership
  - Critical incident debriefs
  - Supervisory support\*
  - Peer-to-peer support programs\*
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- \*\*Associated with slowing turnover of early-career social workers (Chenot et al 2009)



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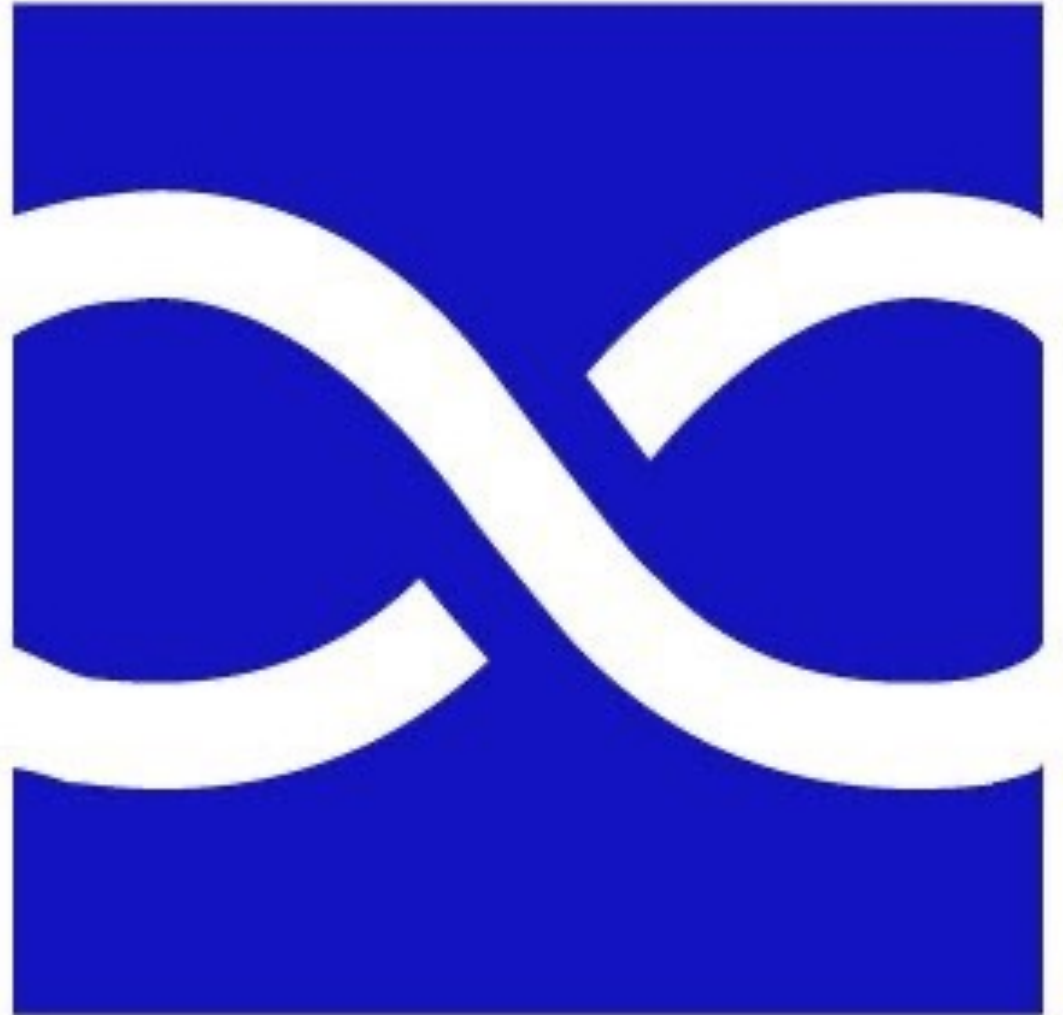




# Health-Oriented Leadership

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- Leaders
  - Are attentive and sensitive to emotional/physical health of workers
  - Promote health-related activities among workers
  - Prioritize physical/emotional health in workplace
  - Considered a competency in social work leadership (Hussain and Ashcroft 2020)





International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc.  
*HELPING SAVE THE HEROES*

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## Critical Incident Debriefs (Mitchell 1997)

- Debriefs by **small groups of staff** that have been exposed to a traumatic event
- Intended to **normalize reactions** to traumatic event, facilitate **recovery**, restore **group functioning**
- Lay out facts, identify thoughts and feelings, and pinpoint symptoms that warrant follow-up
- Effectiveness depends on training and whether CID protocols are followed
- Certification available

# Supervisory Support

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- When supervisors are trained to provide professional support to employees
- Supervisory support entails
  - Training to understand emotional labor and toll
  - Goal setting to reach out to employees periodically
  - Evaluation to measure the effects of supervisory support



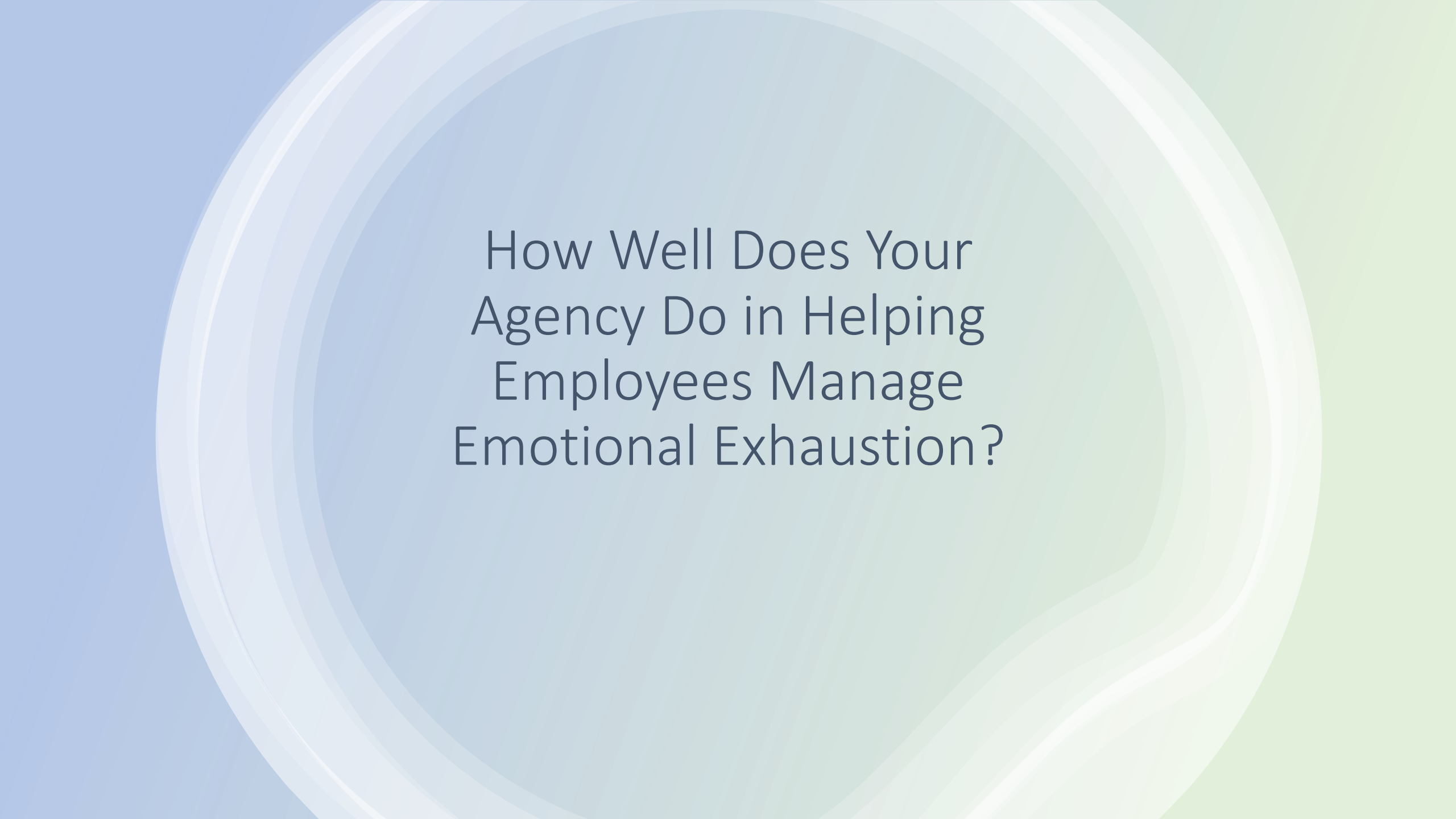
# Peer Support

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- When co-workers provide support
- **Guidelines (Creamer, et al, 2012)**
  - **Clarify goals** to (a) provide an empathetic, **listening ear**; (b) provide **low level psychological intervention**; (c) identify **colleagues** who may be **at risk** to themselves or others; and (d) **facilitate** pathways to **professional help**
  - **Formal training** for peer supporters
  - **Mental health professional** involvement
  - Peer support should be **routine**
  - Peer support programs should be **evaluated**







How Well Does Your  
Agency Do in Helping  
Employees Manage  
Emotional Exhaustion?

# Give Employees A Voice in the Workplace

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# Great Workplaces Give Employees Voice

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- When employees speak up
  - With or without permission
  - To influence organizational decision-making or change
- If sincerely encouraged and well-managed, a performance strategy





# Why Care About Employee Voice?

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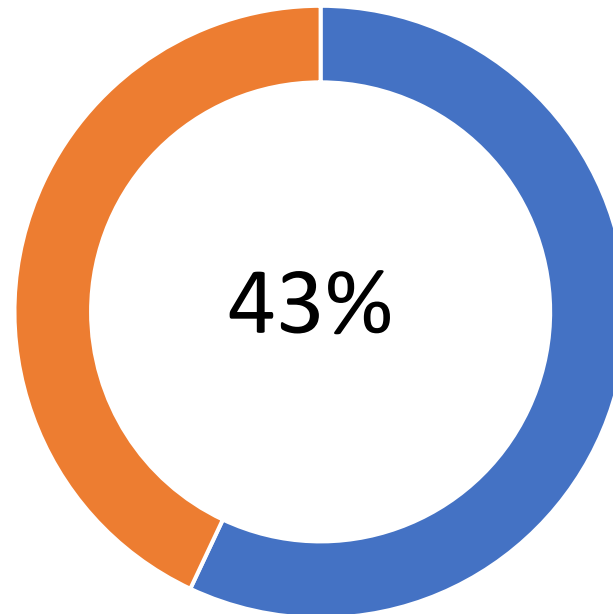
- For employees
  - Stronger sense of belonging
  - Greater employee commitment to the organization
  - Improves individual productivity
  - Emotionally and physically healthier employees
- For organizations
  - Lowers turnover
  - Can improve group problem-solving and decision quality

*Batt et al. 2002; Hirschman 1970; Freeman and Medoff 1984; Marchington and Grugulis 2000; Egan, et al, 2007*

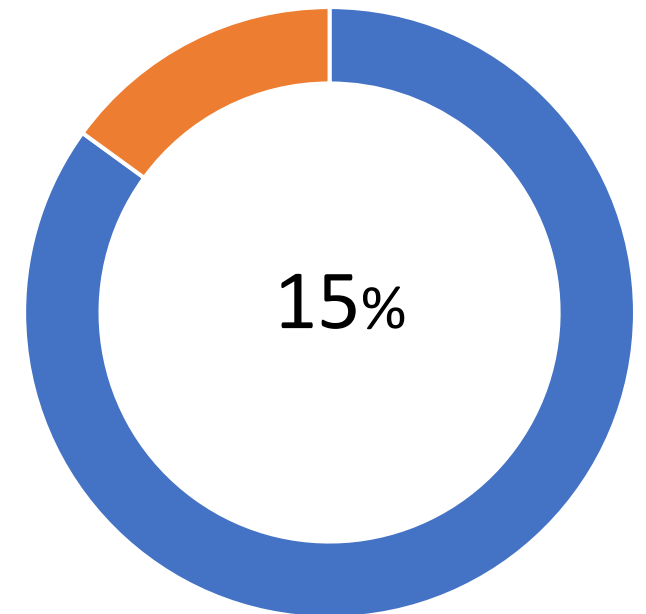
# Voice and Turnover Intentions

*Oftentimes, decisions are made by upper management without input of frontline staff who it will affect, and then we find out weeks/months later about the decision. -- Lead Social Worker*

Low Voice Workplaces



High Voice Workplaces



Percentage of Social Service Employees Thinking About Quitting

# What Causes Employees To Speak Up or Not?

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- Absence of formal mechanisms
  - Fear of retaliation
  - Sense of hope/futility
  - Supervisor confidence level
  - Supervisory demeanor
  - Individual risk aversion
  - Bystander effect
  - Rigid hierarchies
  - Others?



# Building a Culture for Employee Voice



- Recognize and reward supervisors for effectively encouraging/managing voice
- Hold managers and supervisors accountable
  - Employee surveys that ask questions about managerial practice
- Incorporate voice into professional development (360° feedback)
- Train supervisors on giving and receiving of employee feedback

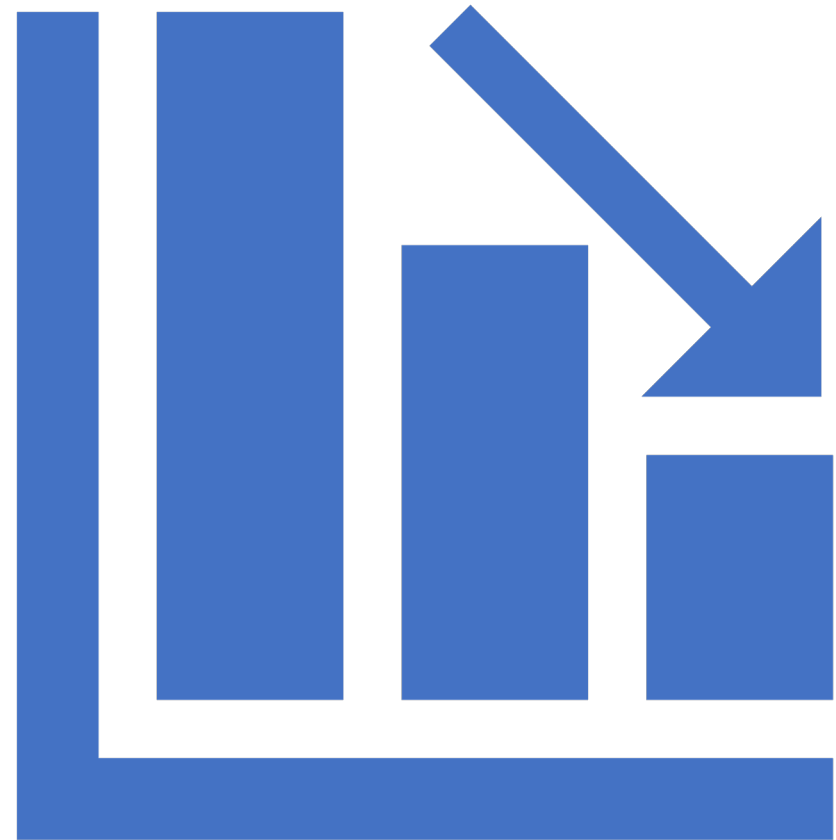





# Mechanisms for Employee Voice

- Process: solicit input, acknowledge, thank, follow up
- Where
  - Meetings
  - Idea Systems
  - Employee Advisory Initiatives (Forums, Task Forces, Committees, Problem-Solving Groups)
  - Employee Surveys
  - Open-Door Policy
- Are there others missing?

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- How well does your agency do at giving employees voice?



# Empower Your Employees

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# Great Workplaces Empower Employees



Push decision power down

Benefits

Increases  
efficiency

Boosts morale

Yields creativity  
and innovation

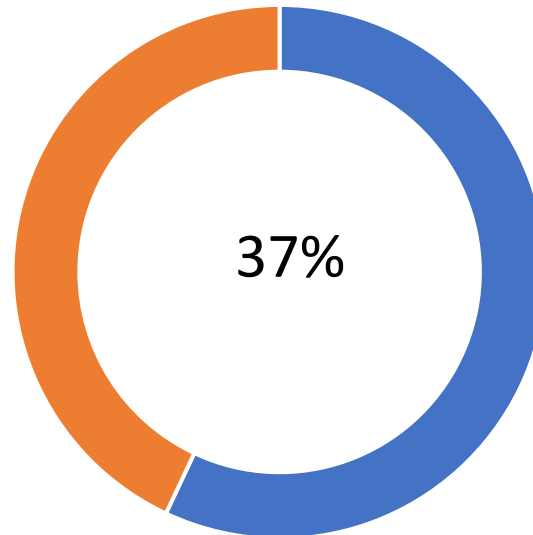
Effects

Reduces Emotional Exhaustion

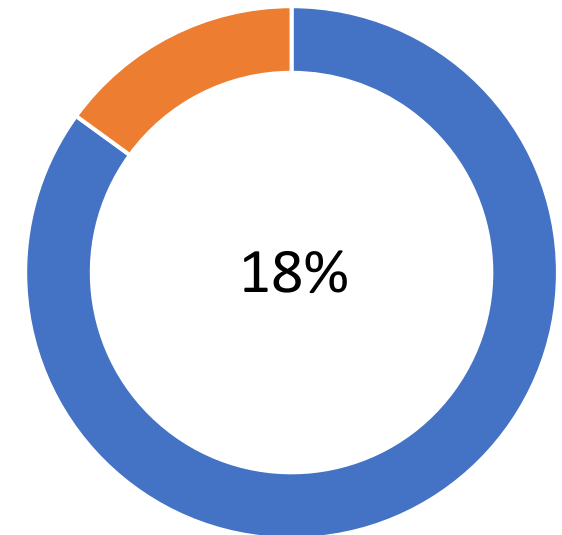
# Empowerment and Turnover Intentions

*The constant over-management and feeling like I have no autonomy is usually what wears me down. – Child Support Supervisor*

Low Empowerment  
Workplaces



High Empowerment  
Workplaces

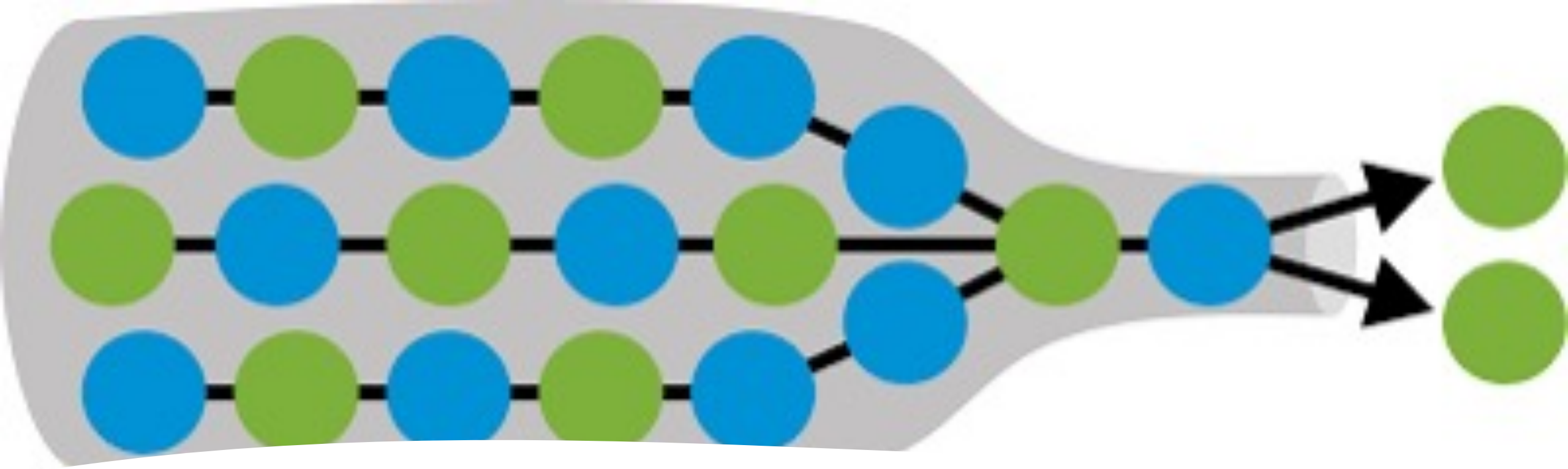


Percentage of Social Service Employees Thinking About Quitting

# How to empower employees

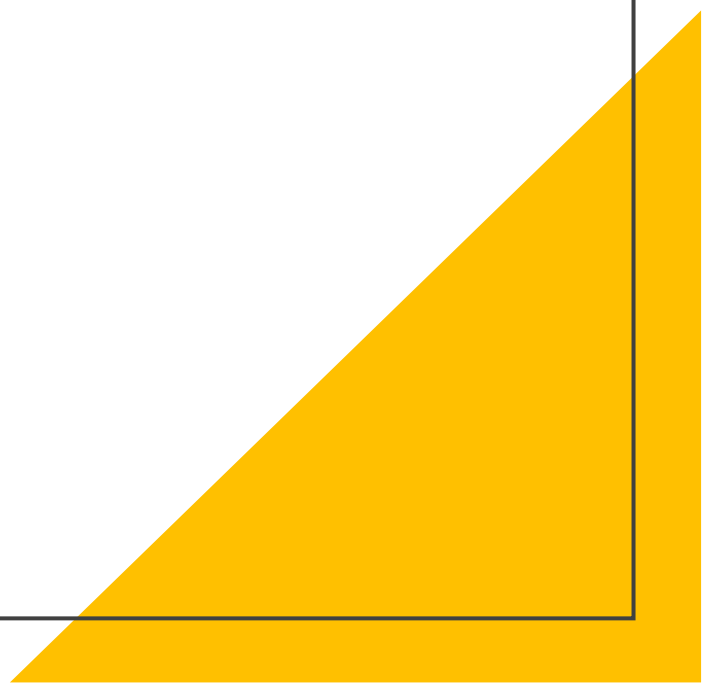


- Ask employees
  - Gather small groups of employees to identify inefficiencies
  - Create employee empowerment committee that evaluates ideas
  - Implement low-hanging fruit, think on some, reject others (saying why)
  - Re-survey in 18 to 24 months
- Where needed, train employees to make decisions



How empowering are your agency's workplaces?

Putting It All Together





# Summary

- High percentages of social service employees are thinking about leaving
- Slow turnover by creating great workplaces
  - Helping employees manage emotional exhaustion
  - Giving employees voice
  - Empowering employees

Questions?

