

# Supporting Well-Being for Oregon's Home Visiting Workforce: Policy & Practice Recommendations

Learning Brief #5 from Oregon's Qualitative Home Visiting Workforce Study

## Background & Importance

Prenatal and early childhood home visiting is an effective strategy for promoting positive birth outcomes, improving family well-being and preventing child abuse and neglect. One key to successful services is having a strong, well-supported home visiting workforce. **In Oregon and nationally, this critical workforce is facing a significant challenge as programs struggle to hire and retain skilled home visitors, and workers face low pay, difficult working conditions and high job stress.**

In 2021, Oregon Maternal Infant & Early Childhood (MIECHV) program leaders recognized the need for information about Oregon's home visiting workforce, including and beyond MIECHV-funded programs. The evaluation team from Portland State University and Oregon MIECHV joined four other states prioritizing workforce well-being in a federally funded, multi-state study. Oregon committed to an equity-focused approach to describe and understand what was important for home visitors, especially those most impacted by racial, linguistic, and social inequities. The PSU evaluation team worked with home visitors and supervisors, primarily persons of color, to form the Workforce Equity Research Leadership group to co-create the study.

This is the fifth and final learning brief from this study. The previous four shared findings and recommendations from the 2023 statewide survey of over

700 members of Oregon's home visiting workforce. These briefs have provided a wealth of information about Oregon's home visiting workforce and how to improve and support well-being and retention, with a focus on the needs and experiences of home visitors whose backgrounds reflect the populations served throughout the state. Those four learning briefs are [available here](#).

The purpose of this learning brief is to share results from a follow-up study designed to learn about specific home visiting policies and practices being used to support home visitor well-being. Findings draw from in-depth, qualitative interviews that were conducted with home visitors, supervisors, and program managers across the state. Interviews were designed specifically to follow up on key findings from the survey, and focused on the importance of inclusive leadership, positive organizational climate, and supervisor and peer relationships.



## How We Learned

The evaluation team completed semi-structured, one-hour interviews with 30 participants. These participants included 11 home visitors, five supervisors, and 14 program managers who represented 25 different home visiting program sites. Participants work in urban, suburban, and rural areas across Oregon, and their programs are situated in various agencies, including health departments, school districts, and nonprofit organizations. Participants were offered a \$75 gift card as a thank you for being part of the interview.

All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by the evaluation team to identify themes and exemplars of policy and practice that support home visitor well-being. The evaluation team also asked participants to share (as possible) policy documents that were discussed in interviews.

## What We Learned

An overarching theme that we heard was that the emotionally demanding nature of home visiting work, including frequent exposure to vicarious trauma, make supporting the well-being of the home visiting workforce crucial for reducing burnout and turnover. Good personal- professional life balance, supportive work policies, and a positive work environment are key ways to promote positive well-being for the home visiting workforce.

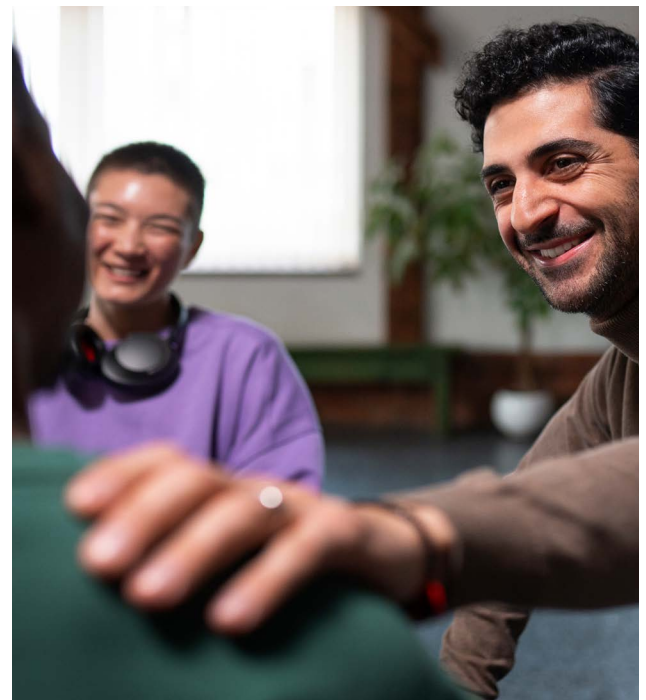
Home visiting organizations and programs can support workforce well-being by developing and implementing policies that are specific to home visitor well-being (going beyond traditional benefits). These policies are important to make sure that supportive practices are maintained even when the individuals enacting them leave.

In addition to focusing on home visitors and their well-being, program leaders and supervisors also need support with training and professional development to learn skills to create reflective opportunities and positive work environments.

Supervisors often discussed the value of the supervision that they receive, individually and in groups, not only for their own wellness but in order to effectively supervise home visitors.

### Recommendations

Below we provide examples from the qualitative interviews that illustrate how organization and program leaders (i.e., program managers and directors), home visiting supervisors, and home visitors can support the well-being of Oregon's home visiting workforce. Findings are organized to highlight the role that program leaders, supervisors, and home visitors play in creating a supportive work environment that can contribute to worker well-being. As feasible, we differentiate policies - expectations or rules that are explicitly documented (e.g., in a handbook or through training manuals) from practices (how policies are implemented, as well as other individual or organizational processes that are in place based on history and/or individual staff preferences, approach, and training).



# What Leaders Can Do

## Policies

Agency and program leaders can play an important role in developing and/or implementing formal policies that can support home visitor well-being. Some of the examples of helpful policies were more commonly provided benefits such as health insurance that covers mental health as well as physical health, paid time off, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Other policies related more specifically to the home visiting workforce, such as:

- Flexible schedules, including remote work options, in particular those in which home visitors have the autonomy to determine their work schedules while still meeting families' needs for visits
- Required or regular provision of professional development opportunities related to wellness (e.g., secondary traumatic stress training, mindfulness practices)
- Policies that create and support wellness activities and events, for example:
  - Staff retreats to de-stress, relax, and connect with each other
  - Paid time (in this case, 30 minutes weekly) devoted to staff-identified wellness activities (e.g., to go for a walk, meditate, etc.)
  - "Care & Connect Hour" where staff can interact with another around successes, challenges, and anything else they find helpful. Staff get professional development credit for attending
- Caseload limits (such as through a point system that accounts for complex family circumstances and lengthy driving distances)
- Careful and intentional onboarding processes to reduce overwhelm for new staff
- Having a requirement for leadership to engage in direct service and training to gain first-hand experience of home visiting

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Folks can flex their time. As long as they get to 40 hours, it doesn't matter. Especially with home visiting, it's like you have a later day, you might have a busier day and then you might have a shorter day or a less heavy day of scheduling or visit. As long as folks get their work in during that time, I don't mind how they do it and we have a hybrid policy so folks can do some things at work. They have laptops, so they can choose if they want to go to work at home or if they want to work in the office.”

— Program Manager



- “Open Door” policy and clear opportunities for home visiting staff to provide feedback about the organization/program without concern of retaliation
- Protocols for what to do if staff experience discrimination or bias within the workplace
- Incentives for hiring and retaining home visiting staff who reflect the community that they serve (e.g., bilingual pay differential)
- Diversity, cultural awareness, and anti-bias trainings that are required annually and/or part of onboarding for new staff

## Leadership Practices

Leaders have the opportunity to model behaviors that support well-being; not only do they encourage home visitors to engage in wellness practices but they lead by their own example. Additionally, leaders can, and often do, implement practices that are not specifically named by organizational policies. Some ways we heard that leaders doing this are by:

- Attending to their own self care and healthy work boundaries by taking breaks and using paid time off
- Developing an organizational culture of care and well-being by normalizing and modeling not taking work home or working outside of usual business hours
- Providing opportunities for staff to give feedback about their experiences and needs, such as through staff surveys or as part of staff meetings
- Advocating for home visitors’ needs by lobbying for additional resources, meeting with elected officials, and raising workforce well-being issues in board meetings
- Promoting inclusion and diversity among staff at all levels and fostering an environment that welcomes and celebrates all cultures

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We're not running a sprint. We're running a marathon. We have to take care of ourselves. Just how we talk to families and parents. ‘You have to take care of yourselves so that you can be present for your kiddos.’ We have to take care of ourselves so that we can be present for families.”

— Program Manager

“

I try to create a culture of openness so that they can share with me like, "Hey, I need this." Just a culture where they can tell me how they feel without fear of repercussions or judgment because, like I said, I was a home visitor for 14 years.”

— Program Manager

## What Supervisors Can Do

Supervisors were often cited as a crucial support for home visitors' well-being. In particular, reflective supervision was frequently described as something that benefits home visitors not only in their work with families but also in their overall well-being. **Reflective supervision** practices that were described included going beyond checking on administrative tasks and creating an environment of trust where home visitors have space to express their feelings and discuss emotional and mental needs. Additional ways that participants described supervisors as supporting home visitor well-being include:

- Changing the setting of supervision by meeting outside, going for a walk, or getting coffee (paying attention to ensuring privacy of families)

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We do reflective supervision every single week, an hour and a half with all of our staff. I think that's a great time to just get to vent and hopefully address any traumatic exposure or vicarious trauma that they might have experienced, and get to have somebody who's championing or pushing for self-care and wellness. Even in those reflective supervision times, we make time to do breathing, maybe guided meditation, tapping, or some sort of actual intentional mindfulness moments.”

— Supervisor

- Maintaining an open-door policy so that staff feel welcome to check in as needed
- Reaching out proactively to home visitors to check in with them, especially before or after a challenging visit

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Going back to the open door policy with my boss, when she's in the office, she makes herself available for us if we have any questions, concerns, or if we just want to vent to her. She has that. I feel like it's a constant open door flow. There's not a month or a day that passes where it's like, 'Oh, well, I can't go in for support.' I feel like there's always support.”

— Home Visitor

- Making an effort to reduce or lighten administrative burden, such as by:
  - Ensuring that there is shared responsibility for tedious tasks (i.e., rotating among staff)
  - Finding other resources (including supervisors if possible) to do translation work for home visitors
  - Having a workplace party (with food!) while the team completes non-preferred tasks like file reviews or writing notes
- Actively seeking to minimize pressure from performance metrics as much as possible within home visiting model requirements; one supervisor shared how they emphasize the 75% visit expectation (versus expecting perfection), particularly in support of home visitors taking time off.
- Participating in supervisor training to develop their skills in reflective supervision and related approaches, such as Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN), Secrets of Supervision, and model-specific supervisor trainings

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Burnout prevention is something we talk a lot about. I just try to not put too much emphasis on the numbers. There is emphasis. We do talk about stats. We do talk about number of visits and all those things and how to increase that, but, also, I don't put that over all that. I try to keep them pretty balanced.”

— Program Manager

# What Home Visitors Can Do

Interview participants often shared how valuable the support of their peers is for well-being. While it is **important for organizations to intentionally create opportunities** for home visitors to connect with each other, the examples below elevate ways that home visitors in different programs lean on one another for improved well-being:

- Staff-led trainings (rotation of staff) to highlight areas of expertise
- “Question of the Week” to inspire team conversations
- Celebrating successes (big and small) on a “Win Wall”

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We post our small wins that we have with families because there's always something positive that comes out of it. When we have a celebration, we put it on there. It's for all of us to read. We all celebrate each other because we know the work we do is hard, and we lean on each other.”

— Home Visitor

- Getting lunch or coffee, taking breaks together
- Starting meetings with ice breakers or other ways of getting to know each other on a personal level
- Team celebrations and potlucks (opportunity for learning about each other's cultures)

“

Case management meetings. In the work that we do, it's super helpful because not only that we're able to talk about clients, but we're also able to talk about what's working in terms of the team and what's not working as the team. I find that those meetings are really helpful, plus it allows all of us, home visitors, admin staff to also check-in with each other.”

— Home Visitor

- Shadowing procedures for new home visitors
- Team discussion of cases, challenges, resources, etc. during meetings
- Leaning on coworkers to debrief visits, when questions arise, need coverage, or for problem-solving

“

It looks different in a lot of ways. A lot of us are moms. That's also another beautiful thing of what I do and where I work, is that not only do we support each, but we support each other outside of work as well, too.”

— Home Visitor

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