

RECRUITING CASE STUDIES

How Strategic Recruitment Solved Critical Staffing Challenges

CASE STUDY: YORK COUNTY, PA

Caseworker Recruitment at Scale | York, Pennsylvania

About the Client

York County, Pennsylvania is a mid-sized county of approximately 460,000 residents located in the south-central region of the state. As a county government, York County administers a broad range of public services — including children and youth services, human services, probation, and community health programs — serving families across a diverse and growing region.

York County's Children, Youth and Families (CYF) department is responsible for investigating reports of child abuse and neglect, providing family support services, managing foster care and kinship placements, and connecting families with community resources. As with most county child welfare agencies in Pennsylvania, York County CYF relies on a dedicated workforce of caseworkers — professionals who carry some of the most demanding and consequential responsibilities in public service.

The Role: County Caseworker

County caseworkers in Pennsylvania's child welfare system are responsible for investigating reports of child abuse and neglect, conducting family assessments, developing safety and service plans, coordinating placements, and providing ongoing case management for children and families involved in the system. They work across a range of program areas including child protective services, family preservation, foster care, juvenile justice, intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), mental health, and substance abuse treatment.

Caseworkers must navigate complex family situations, work closely with courts and community providers, and make high-stakes decisions — often under significant time pressure and with heavy caseloads. Pennsylvania requires caseworkers to meet specific educational qualifications, including a bachelor's degree with coursework in social welfare, psychology, criminal justice, or related social sciences.

Despite the weight of the role, caseworker positions are among the most chronically difficult to fill in Pennsylvania county government.

Why Caseworkers Are So Hard to Recruit

Chronic Underpayment	Starting salaries for county caseworkers in Pennsylvania often range from \$36,000 to \$45,000 annually — below what comparable private-sector roles pay — making it difficult to attract and retain qualified graduates, many of whom carry student loan debt from degree programs that qualify them for the role.
High Emotional Demand	Caseworkers regularly encounter trauma, family crisis, and situations involving child safety. The emotional toll contributes to burnout and turnover throughout the field, accelerating vacancies faster than traditional recruiting can fill them.
Passive Candidate Market	Qualified candidates — those with relevant degrees and human services experience — are rarely browsing job boards. Many are already employed in adjacent fields such as education, behavioral health, mental health counseling, or substance abuse treatment, unaware that their backgrounds qualify them for county caseworker roles.
Awareness Gap	A significant portion of the eligible talent pool does not consider government employment an obvious career path. Candidates with social work, criminal justice, psychology, and IDD backgrounds often default to nonprofit or clinical settings without realizing that county government offers comparable mission-driven work — often with stronger benefits and job security.
Thin Applicant Pipelines	Traditional job postings attract candidates who are actively searching — a fraction of the available pool. With vacancy rates already elevated across the state, counties cannot afford to wait for the right candidate to find them.

The Shortage: By the Numbers

The caseworker vacancy crisis in Pennsylvania is not a local anomaly — it is a statewide emergency with well-documented consequences for families and children.

- According to data from the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, nearly half of Pennsylvania counties had caseworker vacancy rates greater than 30 percent — with some counties reporting vacancy rates as high as 89 percent.
- Brian Bornman, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators Association, stated that before the pandemic, a 30% vacancy rate was considered "a pretty serious crisis" — and noted that now most counties have shortages at that level or worse.
- Pennsylvania's Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) released a workforce recruitment and retention study citing compensation, organizational culture, workload, and working conditions as leading drivers of turnover — and issued 43 recommendations to address the crisis.
- Caseworkers in some Pennsylvania counties are operating with caseloads far above recommended levels, putting both families and workers under extraordinary strain.

"Before the pandemic, if a county child welfare office had around a 30% vacancy rate, that was kind of considered a pretty serious crisis — and all hands on deck to try to get that resolved. But now most counties have those types of shortages or worse." — Brian Bornman, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators Association

The Challenge

York County recognized that filling their open caseworker positions required more than posting to job boards and waiting. Their internal applicant flow was limited, and the conventional recruiting approach — largely dependent on active job seekers — was not producing the volume or quality of candidates needed to address their vacancies.

York County came to Ascend Talent Partners looking for a true recruiting partner: one that could go beyond the visible applicant pool, identify qualified candidates who weren't actively looking, and make a compelling case for why York County was worth their attention.

Our Approach

- Conducted a detailed intake to understand York County's specific requirements — including role qualifications, program areas, candidate profile, and hiring priorities across their open caseworker positions.
- Built a targeted sourcing strategy focused on candidates with directly relevant educational backgrounds (social work, psychology, criminal justice, IDD, behavioral health) who were working in adjacent fields — education, mental health, substance abuse treatment, ABA, and more — and were not actively applying through job boards.
- Deployed multi-channel outreach across social media, email, and direct text contact to reach passive candidates where they were — not where we hoped they'd look.
- Engaged each candidate personally before submission, taking the time to speak with them by phone to help them understand the role, the opportunity, and whether York County was the right fit. This gave candidates the clarity they needed to decide with confidence — and gave York County a more informed, motivated slate.
- Managed the full outreach and engagement process from first contact through candidate presentation, coordinating two distinct sourcing phases to maintain pipeline momentum.

The Results

27

Candidates Sourced & Submitted

2

Sourcing Phases / Campaigns

12+

Fields Candidates Came From

York County was presented with a strong, diverse slate of 27 qualified candidates within just a few weeks — delivered across two separate sourcing phases. Candidates came from more than a dozen different professional backgrounds, including Education, Criminal Justice, IDD, ABA, Mental Health, Substance Abuse Treatment, and related human services fields.

Each candidate had been personally engaged by phone before submission — arriving informed, vetted, and genuinely interested in the opportunity. The result was not just a larger applicant pool, but a higher-quality one.

Twenty-seven qualified candidates submitted in a matter of weeks — sourced from over a dozen fields, personally vetted, and delivered in two focused campaigns. York County received a ready-to-interview slate that their own recruitment efforts had not been able to produce.

Sustainable, Ongoing Results

The results Ascend delivered for York County are not a one-time outcome — they reflect a repeatable model. Our sourcing infrastructure, candidate network, and outreach capability are built to operate on an ongoing basis.

For organizations with continuing caseworker needs, Ascend can reliably deliver 10 to 12 viable candidates per month, indefinitely — providing a consistent, high-quality pipeline rather than a single hiring event.

What This Means for Similar Organizations

County governments, child welfare agencies, and human services organizations across Pennsylvania face the same compounding pressures: chronic vacancies, limited applicant flow, and a talent pool that is largely invisible to traditional recruiting methods.

The candidates exist. They are working in education, behavioral health, criminal justice, mental health, and IDD settings — often unaware that their backgrounds make them strong candidates for county caseworker roles. Reaching them requires proactive outreach, personal engagement, and a sourcing model built for passive candidates.

If your county or agency is struggling to fill caseworker or human services positions, Ascend Talent Partners can deliver where traditional approaches have fallen short.

Ready to solve your most difficult staffing challenges?

Contact us to discuss your open roles.