



[00:00:00] **Paige Piper, MA:** What can we do to make our organizational culture strong enough that they feel that they can prioritize their mental wellness?

[00:00:07] **Lori Wells Brown:** We should put the same value into creating the spaces that support those services and certainly the people who are providing those services.

[00:00:16] **Christina Rouse:** Welcome to the SRCAC Exchange, a podcast series for child abuse professionals who are looking to exchange innovative ideas.

[00:00:25] **Christina Rouse:** And gain inspiration within the CAC movement. I'm your host, Christina Rouse, program manager for CAC development with SRCAC. This season, we'll be focusing on the invisible threads that sustain the dedicated professionals in children's advocacy centers. Our guests will partake in dynamic discussions around supportive workplace cultures, the importance of MDT relationships, what we are telling ourselves about our work, and so many other topics that will ignite passion.

[00:00:56] **Christina Rouse:** So whether you are a seasoned CAC professional, or [00:01:00] just starting out in your career, join us as we delve into this critical topic. Have you ever wondered why some people thrive at work while others struggle, even with strong leadership? In the demanding field of child abuse work, there's more at play than just management.

[00:01:17] **Christina Rouse:** During this episode, we will discuss the essential elements that contribute to creating a positive and healthy workplace. Two executive directors will join the conversation, sharing their thoughts on organizational culture and the importance of the physical workplace environment. To help me talk about organizational culture, I have Paige Piper joining me.

[00:01:38] **Christina Rouse:** Paige is the Executive Director of the Brave Bee Child Advocacy Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. Paige's passion for shifting

workplace culture is evident by the changes she has implemented at Brave Bee. And I'm so glad she is joining in on this conversation. All right. So let's start this conversation with [00:02:00] some statistics.

[00:02:01] **Christina Rouse:** I'm curious to hear your reaction to some of this data back in 2019, Gallup did a study of employees and through their study, they found out that eight and 10 employees are reporting that they're burned out at work. And what I found really interesting were the top reasons that. Folks gave for why they were saying they were burned out or what the cause was the burnout.

[00:02:26] **Christina Rouse:** So I want to run through the top five and Paige, I'd love to hear. Your thoughts and reaction of what those are. So they said, number one was equity, right? Not being treated fairly at work. Two was workload. So more work than time is available to do. Number three was unclear communication from directors and supervisors.

[00:02:47] **Christina Rouse:** Number four was a lack of director supervisor support. And number five was unreasonable time pressure, both as it related to. velocity and also the [00:03:00] intensity of that work. So are you surprised by any of those top five reasons?

[00:03:05] **Paige Piper, MA:** No, not at all. It's a really interesting list because I do think that this rings true.

[00:03:12] **Paige Piper, MA:** And initially I thought you were going to tell me that this data set came from after 2020. Thinking about the way that COVID shifted our work life balance and expectations and kind of the slowdown and then this massive rebound and catch up period. I'm not surprised by the list though. I think that this brings especially true in the nonprofit sector, especially because I think that most directors will tell you that the greatest struggle over and over again is having enough time and enough resources.

[00:03:45] **Paige Piper, MA:** So as we look to these points as they relate to that workload balance, the unreasonable time pressure, I think it's because in the nonprofit sector we're doing so much with so little. [00:04:00] And

when you think about child advocacy centers, I think a lot of us go into our day thinking we have our set to do list of what needs to be done.

[00:04:09] **Paige Piper, MA:** And then pretty quickly, you have an emergency that's coming in, you have a grant report that's due. It's just this constant sense of competing responsibility, and that does absolutely lead to burnout over time. And I think for supervisors, unless you have a pretty direct, clear model for supervision, You may not know what your staff need.

[00:04:32] **Paige Piper, MA:** There might not be that two way communication that's open. And as a supervisor, I know at least for us, all of our supervisors are also doing other full time jobs on top of supervising a team. So I can imagine that, yeah, this list is spot on for what's burning us out at work.

[00:04:50] **Christina Rouse:** And we know that a lot of these things in this list are directly related to the organizational structure or culture that is [00:05:00] created.

[00:05:01] **Christina Rouse:** And we know that that can directly influence how or when our staff might get burned out. But on the flip side, organizational culture can also contribute to elements of staff wellness. Why, especially in the CAC world, why is it important that our staff don't get burned out and that they do show up every day ready to be engaged while they're working?

[00:05:27] **Paige Piper, MA:** I think in the CAC world, we have a particularly unique opportunity to sit with folks in their greatest moment of crisis, both for the child and for the caregiver. And when you think about those moments in your life, whether it's been a friend or a Anyone close to you that's having a true moment of crisis and being fully present in that time is exhausting.

[00:05:52] **Paige Piper, MA:** Now, if we think about doing that over and over and over and over again for children and families, that [00:06:00] emotional wear and tear, that vicarious trauma is so devastating. significant. So I think when we talk about staff wellness and avoiding that

burnout, it's challenging because our staff are absorbing the most challenging and heavy topics day in and day out.

[00:06:19] **Paige Piper, MA:** And it takes a really special person to do that. To be able to do that and to be able to come back the next day and do it again and then do it again for years to come. So we're already kind of searching for a unicorn who can handle that content. And it becomes our job as CUC leaders to figure out how do we support their emotional wellness at work?

[00:06:41] **Paige Piper, MA:** I also think from the business side, training staff is expensive and it's very challenging again, to find that right fit who has both skillset and the cultural component to fit in with your unique. Center. So when we find a great staff member, my goal is always to [00:07:00] figure out how do we make this job something that they can do for the long term?

[00:07:04] **Paige Piper, MA:** What can we do to make our organizational culture strong enough that they feel that they can prioritize their mental wellness and utilize their special talents of being there for folks in crisis? without, in the process, completely burning themselves out or affecting their home life.

[00:07:21] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, you mentioned earlier the important role of supervision and how that plays into really understanding your staff and their needs.

[00:07:31] **Christina Rouse:** If you're a CAC leader or even a supervisor, how do you even identify what your staff needs or how they need support?

[00:07:39] **Paige Piper, MA:** I think that the very first step of that comes from trust. Your staff are not going to tell you what they need if there's not mutual trust that's established between that staff member and the supervisor.

[00:07:51] **Paige Piper, MA:** And trust is something that's earned, and the way that I hope to show that to my staff is by showing up, by giving the time and space to ask the questions about [00:08:00] how they're feeling,

how they're taking care of themselves at home. Asking questions around, hey, I can tell you're really stressed, how Let's talk about right now, what is that weight on your chest?

[00:08:11] **Paige Piper, MA:** What's causing that? Is it something that we can control or is it something we can't control? And if not, then how do I help resource you appropriately to address that? So the supervision model that we've enacted at our CAC, we take really seriously. We provide monthly supervisions and those are not to be missed.

[00:08:31] **Paige Piper, MA:** And if there have to be rescheduled for any reason, it's on that supervisor to make sure that it's happening within the next week, two weeks at the most, because we know that that time for staff is so meaningful and a huge focus of our supervision model is talking about burnout and how we combat burnout and how we address mental wellness.

[00:08:54] **Paige Piper, MA:** At work,

[00:08:56] **Christina Rouse:** so I know you mentioned you already instituted kind of a [00:09:00] new projection of. Organizational culture, and I know you've done a lot of work at your center brief fee on implementing these new. Ways of working, right? These new organizational components. So talk a little bit about how your center even arrived at deciding we need to make this shift.

[00:09:19] **Christina Rouse:** What led to that change or even acknowledgement that there needed to be a change?

[00:09:26] **Paige Piper, MA:** Well, there were a few things that happened for our center. Number one COVID. COVID happened and I think that that was a stage of life that for all of us, we were just surviving and trying to figure out how to make it through day by day.

[00:09:45] **Paige Piper, MA:** I was also brand new. In my role, I came back to Brave Bee June 1st of 2020. Oh my gosh. So, I do not recommend that timing. I was replacing our founding [00:10:00] executive director in the midst of COVID. It was a wild season, and I had previously worked at Brave

Bee, so I had the privilege of knowing a little bit about the culture, but I had been gone for two years.

[00:10:13] **Paige Piper, MA:** So, when I came back, one of the very first things that I did was I took a look at our policy and procedure, and as part of that, I started running data and looking at things like what was our average retention rate? What about sick leave? What about vacation leave? What was the supervision model? How were team meetings run?

[00:10:36] **Paige Piper, MA:** And I asked staff for some of their thoughts and feedback because I thought if we're going to make a change, especially in a global crisis, time of global crisis, what is that going to look like? And how do I keep the talented staff that I have at Bravely? So ultimately that data started to inform the shift because what I found out from our centers over the [00:11:00] course of a three year average.

[00:11:02] **Paige Piper, MA:** We had a retention rate of about 73%, which is pretty good in the CAC world. But I thought, well, that stands room for growth. Our staff were averaging around 49 hours of sick leave, about 95 hours of vacation leave. So no immediate red flags, but enough that I thought, I wonder if we start making some changes.

[00:11:26] **Paige Piper, MA:** If we'll see a shift, and the surprise to me was number one, we did, and I'll talk through some of those policies and procedures that we changed and how that impacted our overall data, but more than anything, what started to happen to our organization. Is we started to create this identity and culture of trust and transparency, and that's led to some really beautiful moments as a center for our team to feel heard and valued.

[00:11:59] **Paige Piper, MA:** And [00:12:00] I think ultimately, that's what makes people stay. Certainly not having pizza parties. It's not necessarily changing a vacation policy. It's when you establish a baseline culture. Uh, trust and transparency.

[00:12:14] **Christina Rouse:** So I imagine some of our listeners are hearing you say this. They might be thinking, yes, of course, obviously trust and transparency.

[00:12:24] **Christina Rouse:** If you're in an organization where those foundational pillars have not been set, I would assume you can't just jump into trust and transparency and that that was right process. So talk a little bit about what that process was like.

[00:12:40] **Paige Piper, MA:** Well, I'm not going to lie. The process is hard and it is not linear. I think that process is very much a winding road and we're four years into this and we're still growing.

[00:12:53] **Paige Piper, MA:** It's still something that's an ever evolving model for our center. But the way that we started is [00:13:00] very first. There's a model that exists called Entrepreneurial Operating Systems, EOS, which is a system founded by someone named Gino Wickman. This system is just a set of basic business principles. That's it.

[00:13:14] **Paige Piper, MA:** At the end of the day, there's no magic to the system. It's just business principles. And that's what I leaned on to start to create some stability across the organization was very first choosing to implement the system. And I was fortunate that in my two years I spent away from brave B, I was actually, I was with this fast growing startup where we utilize the system.

[00:13:38] **Paige Piper, MA:** And I thought whether you're a startup or you're in the nonprofit sector. It still makes sense. So the reason that I implemented that system when I first came back was that again, oftentimes in nonprofits, we're reacting and responding all day, every day. And I thought, what if we implement something that at its baseline establishes sort [00:14:00] of these predictable moments.

[00:14:03] **Paige Piper, MA:** So the system allows for things like every supervision is exactly the same. Every team meeting, whether you're a forensic interviewer, an advocate, if you're on our leadership team, the structure of those meetings is exactly the same. We all measure data the same way, and my entire organization reviews that data on a monthly basis.

[00:14:24] **Paige Piper, MA:** So, in this ultimate climate of chaos, we created predictable, stable moments. So that was kind of step one, was

implementing the EOS system, which takes time, and it required a lot of training of my leadership team, and then of course we had to cascade that all the way down to every staff member, and even now some of our recurring volunteers are familiar with some of those things.

[00:14:46] **Paige Piper, MA:** The other big change that we made pretty quickly was we really leaned into what are our employee policies and how do we adapt those [00:15:00] policies to be trauma informed? And a key component of that for us was really looking at what does it mean to have staff wellness? And so some of the policies that we turned to were, should we be calling it sick leave?

[00:15:16] **Paige Piper, MA:** Maybe that's standard language, but we decided, no, let's call it health leave. Because that sends a message that whether it's your physical or your mental health, we prioritize that. We also looked at things like accrued vacation. Does someone working in high trauma need or deserve the same amount of vacation as someone working in the business sector?

[00:15:39] **Paige Piper, MA:** Again, maybe, maybe not. And so we chose to implement something called discretionary time off. So we allow our staff in good standing to take the time that they need. To prioritize again, their health and well being and then we even change things like our maternity leave policy. So, a birthing parent receives 12 [00:16:00] fully paid weeks of leave.

[00:16:02] **Paige Piper, MA:** So, ways that we can send a message to our team that they're cared for and valued. Because we want them to stay in this work for a long period of time.

[00:16:11] **Christina Rouse:** Did you have staff involvement in that process of looking at those policies? And what was their kind of involvement with that? What did that look like?

[00:16:21] **Paige Piper, MA:** So, a lot of our policy revision was completed by our leadership team in consultation with an HR representative. We wanted to make sure that everything we were doing was legally sound and aligned

with employment practice. We did have our staff participate in an employee engagement survey, and we still do that on an annual basis.

[00:16:43] **Paige Piper, MA:** And we utilize those results to help inform. what policies we should be looking at and how we should be adapting practice because things change over time and we want to keep a competitive environment in the non profit space.

[00:16:58] **Christina Rouse:** Were any of the feedback you [00:17:00] got from the staff surprising? Were you guys like, oh, we really wanted to focus on this policy, but staff is telling us that this policy is actually more important.

[00:17:08] **Christina Rouse:** Did you get much of that?

[00:17:09] **Paige Piper, MA:** Yeah. One thing that stands out in my mind It's really hard to have good insurance benefit when you're a non profit because it's very expensive and it's very hard to fund. A lot of funders do not find paying for insurance to be a sexy ask when really it's a necessity for us as an employer.

[00:17:31] **Paige Piper, MA:** So we, for a long period of time, have fought hard to have really good employee coverage, but a missing component to that has been mental health. Because, again, I think maybe many insurance providers think that our brain, our eyes, and our teeth are not connected to our body. And that we have to carry separate plans that may or may not be funded.

[00:17:49] **Paige Piper, MA:** So, we realized that a huge benefit to our staff would be leaning into what kind of mental health insurance. We can carry and much to our surprise, [00:18:00] we actually were able to find a competitive insurance plan that covers 100 percent of mental health premium and it did not cost us any more money. It just required us to start asking questions of our insurance carrier.

[00:18:14] **Paige Piper, MA:** And that to me has been one of our biggest wins over the past year was implementing that 100 percent mental health

coverage. And that was our staff who told us that that was something we needed to do better on.

[00:18:26] **Christina Rouse:** That's fantastic because I hear that quite frequently in the CEC field of that part being missed or just like you said, really hard to obtain.

[00:18:39] **Christina Rouse:** So, did you have a secret weapon that helped you find that resource or was it just the grit of looking and looking and looking until you discovered it?

[00:18:50] **Paige Piper, MA:** Well, a couple of things. One, I shared with my board executive committee that this was an area of interest for us and I had an executive committee member who said, [00:19:00] Hey, actually my work did something similar.

[00:19:02] **Paige Piper, MA:** You should ask your provider about this particular plan. And so I did, I asked our insurance carrier and said, do you have this? And they said, well, bad news. You don't qualify, but we have something similar. Really what it took. It was the process to nail down the exact coverage that we could afford and chose to implement as an agency, but one that was well worth it.

[00:19:25] **Paige Piper, MA:** So

[00:19:27] **Christina Rouse:** now that you've been in this four year track of implementing these new policies, which policies have you found have a significant improvement on your employee morale or just their happiness at work?

[00:19:43] **Paige Piper, MA:** I think that there are a handful that stand out to me. One is certainly our discretionary time off policy, because again, I think as a staff who are working an exhausting job that's often demanding so much [00:20:00] of their time and their mental energy.

[00:20:03] **Paige Piper, MA:** Telling our staff, we trust you and we want you to take time off. In fact, we don't have a maximum time off that they can request. We have a minimum. So we tell all of our staff, you have to take at

least two full weeks off of work. Every year. And it's interesting because the data hasn't shifted that much.

[00:20:23] **Paige Piper, MA:** People are taking about the same amount of time off as they were in 2017, 18, 19. But I think it's the optics of having the choice to spend time out of the office and to feel cared for by the employer that I do think that that has been a benefit to morale. I also know that we're ultimately primarily social workers and I that means that I employ a lot of And so that our maternity and parental leave policy for a lot of our female staff who are in their years where they're growing their families [00:21:00] to have those 12 weeks fully paid at home with their new baby, I think has also been a significant win.

[00:21:08] **Paige Piper, MA:** All of our staff who have had children have returned to the office and we've had a lot of conversations around just the excitement and the gratitude for being able to be home during that massive life transition period. And similar, we have a non birthing parent policy that allows for up to six weeks of leave to be that supportive co parent.

[00:21:32] **Paige Piper, MA:** And so I've also had spouses of the, or the birthing parent has told me like, thank you so much for, letting my partner be home during that time to help make that shift for the family. So those are kind of my two that stand out the most, but I will say, I think it's much more than that. It's the holistic approach of saying that the most important component of my job is to love my staff at the end of the day, if [00:22:00] I'm doing that effectively.

[00:22:01] **Paige Piper, MA:** Then we start to see that ripple effect through our leadership team, through our supervisors, through our staff that they feel cared for at the workplace.

[00:22:11] **Christina Rouse:** So, we know Paige that CACs come in lots of different shapes and sizes and access to resources and funding. So, for some CACs that might be listening, thinking, I'm just not at a place to be able to implement these huge policy changes.

[00:22:29] **Christina Rouse:** What are some things that they could be thinking about as it relates to maybe some micro changes that they could implement for staff wellness?

[00:22:39] **Paige Piper, MA:** Well, I think a handful of things. One, when we started this, we were a midsize CAC. We had a staff of 19 when I came back. Our staff at the end of this year will be at 40.

[00:22:49] **Paige Piper, MA:** So we've doubled, you know, so much anxiety. We've doubled, we've doubled our size in four years. And I think part of that is that we created a scalable [00:23:00] organization when we started making some policy shifts. I know it's kind of, this has been said to me many times over my career, you spend the time now to save the time later.

[00:23:09] **Paige Piper, MA:** And that could not be more accurate. I've been very fortunate to help some other CACs with implementing policy shifts like this. And those CACs range from a staff of five to gosh, I worked with a CAC that had a staff of, This is not just applicable to our mid and large CACs. I do think that starting with some of those micro shifts, whether it's adding a structure to your meetings, simply adding a structure to a meeting can start to create a predictable environment.

[00:23:43] **Paige Piper, MA:** Which again, when our staff are working in chaos, having something that you can go to and know that it's going to be consistent each time can reduce that anxiety and that feeling of overwhelm. It can also look like implementing a [00:24:00] supervision. All of our supervisions are guided and we utilize very specific.

[00:24:06] **Paige Piper, MA:** Forms, we ask very specific questions, and we require that our staff complete those forms 24 hours before their supervision to make sure that the time of their supervision is correct. Is meaningful that we're not just sitting and staring at each other and saying, well, how are you feeling today? Because our natural instinct is going to be like, good, good.

[00:24:27] **Paige Piper, MA:** You. We want it to be thoughtful, meaningful conversation. So I think regardless of the size of your CAC, having a guided supervision, having thoughtful, intentional questions. Even things like

spending the time to do a meaningful check in, stopping by a staff member's office and just saying, Hey, I'm just thinking about you.

[00:24:48] **Paige Piper, MA:** I saw on your calendar that it looked like you had a really hard case. How are you doing? Even those little moments and kind of the space between the lines, filling that in with care and compassion, [00:25:00] I think can make a world of difference for the overall culture of our centers and the feeling of safety and support from leaders.

[00:25:10] **Christina Rouse:** And I imagine as a leader, when you survey your staff now, now that these changes have been implemented, what are things that bring you joy or fill you up, or you know that you're doing the right thing with staff feedback that you get?

[00:25:25] **Paige Piper, MA:** So very recently we participated in our city's best places to work survey, which ultimately then out of hundreds of organizations that apply, they'll award the top three and four.

[00:25:41] **Paige Piper, MA:** Medium sized business. We won a best place to work award this year and knowing what our staff do day in and day out and competing against for profit nonprofit, et cetera, to win a best place to work award was so significant [00:26:00] for us, it really filled my bucket and helps me know that. All of the policies that we've changed, the culture that we've created was 100 percent worth that time investment.

[00:26:10] **Paige Piper, MA:** And that survey comes back with, it has all kinds of staff comments, and then it'll say, what is the number one word that you would use to describe your work environment? And the number one word my staff chose was caring. So that showed up more than anything else, but they feel that our work culture is caring.

[00:26:28] **Paige Piper, MA:** That's everything. Yeah.

[00:26:30] **Christina Rouse:** And you mentioned this ripple effect. Do you foresee that that caring word also ripples down to the families that come into your center?

[00:26:38] **Paige Piper, MA:** Absolutely. And I think at the end of the day, that to me is the most important reason to invest this time is The wellness of our staff directly impacts the quality of care that we can provide to children and families when they're walking through our doors.

[00:26:53] **Paige Piper, MA:** If my staff are healthy, if my staff are not feeling burnt out, if they're finding [00:27:00] meaning and joy in their work, then ultimately that trickles down, ensures that every child and family who walked through my doors are getting the very best version of them.

[00:27:11] **Christina Rouse:** And so to kind of wrap up. Our conversation, you've mentioned that it's a process and it's ever changing and ever involving what's on the horizon.

[00:27:22] **Christina Rouse:** What new things are you all thinking about to again, stay. On top of and true to the pillars that you have created with your culture.

[00:27:31] **Paige Piper, MA:** So there are a couple of big areas that we're really leaning into right now. One is, as I mentioned, we've been a rapidly scaling center and anytime you're growing from.

[00:27:43] **Paige Piper, MA:** Whether it's one staff to five staff, or you're going from 10 staff to 20 staff, those big periods of growth have an impact on culture. It's inviting a lot of new personalities into the workplace, which is exciting. But when we really want to maintain the culture that we've created, it's also a [00:28:00] little bit scary.

[00:28:01] **Paige Piper, MA:** So one thing that we're keeping at the top of our mind is our culture is really grounded in our core values. And anytime I go and train, I ask every center who in this room believes every single staff member could name your core values. And usually I'll get one or two hands in a room of 50 or 60. I can pretty well guarantee that every single one of our staff members can name brief these core values.

[00:28:26] **Paige Piper, MA:** And the reason that we make a big deal about that is if we strip away everything else at the end of the day, as long as we as an agency are holding true to our core values, I believe that we'll

continue to be able to scale and to staff appropriately to maintain the caseload that we have and to meet the overall need of the community.

[00:28:46] **Paige Piper, MA:** And so our staff, I ask them on every monthly supervision form, that's ultimately the only thing we evaluate them on at the end of the year is how well that they met core values for their performance appraisal. We talk about it at every [00:29:00] staff meeting. We ask, how did you show core values or do you want to shout out a staff member who demonstrated a core value?

[00:29:06] **Paige Piper, MA:** Thank you. So those core values are a key focus during this period of scale. The other thing we're really leaning into right now is oftentimes in child advocacy centers, because a lot of us are either small or mid sized, there's not always a lot of tracks for vertical growth in those agencies. And so we're really exploring what would it look like to have some sort of leadership academy internally, or can we lean into some of those horizontal growth positions with specialty roles?

[00:29:39] **Paige Piper, MA:** I think a great example of this is we have a, we call it trace. Team response to anti trafficking and child exploitation. So our staff that are specifically working the sex trafficking and labor trafficking cases, we've created specialty roles for both an advocate and a coordinator. We're really leaning into what could that look like for [00:30:00] domestic violence specific services or problematic sexualized behaviors to create opportunities for our staff to continue to grow and thrive and then really exploring what could those vertical opportunities look like.

[00:30:14] **Christina Rouse:** That sounds super exciting and I imagine now that you've had One of the best places to work in the city accolades that when you are in a position of hiring new people, that all of that work and time you've spent in creating the organizational culture that you have. is beneficial when you're hiring because now your application pool is probably much bigger and

[00:30:37] **Paige Piper, MA:** it's so much bigger than it was.

[00:30:38] **Paige Piper, MA:** Yes. Yeah. I appreciate you highlighting that. We went from, I'll use the example. We hired an advocate not too terribly

long ago. Well, who knows, this also may have been COVID, but in 2020, 2021, we would post for a position like that. We would maybe see eight to 10 applicants. This last round, when we were hiring an [00:31:00] advocate, we had over 40 applications.

[00:31:01] **Paige Piper, MA:** Wow. And so it was amazing. Also, so hard. There are several of you that please keep in touch with us. It was a really beautiful result of changing some of our cultural elements, building upon all the beautiful things that existed. But once people know that it's a great place to work and they're talking about it, now we're recruiting friends of current staff.

[00:31:28] **Paige Piper, MA:** I did a tour not too long ago with a local university and at the end, when the students were asking questions, one of them goes, how do I get a job here, which is what you want to hear, right? Like, yeah, that's exactly what we want to hear. And ultimately I love data because it paints such a beautiful picture of.

[00:31:50] **Paige Piper, MA:** What are the tangible changes as a result of our policy investment? And so even when I look at that retention rate, we jumped from 73 percent to 86%. [00:32:00]

[00:32:00] **Christina Rouse:** Wow.

[00:32:00] **Paige Piper, MA:** Following some of these changes. And again, when we're talking about keeping staff engaged in this work, that's a pretty low attrition rate. For an agency that's working in the field that we do.

[00:32:14] **Christina Rouse:** All right. I'm going to flip it back to you, Paige. Now that you've asked your staff to name one word of what brings them to work every day or what they find value in. What's your word when you think about your job as a leader?

[00:32:26] **Paige Piper, MA:** For me, it's passion. And I know that as a leader, the greatest asset I bring to this team is.

[00:32:34] **Paige Piper, MA:** Not necessarily working the cases. I do some of that, of course. But I think that the greatest gift that I can bring to my team

is passion for the kids and families we serve, passion for the work we do for the community, and passion for building organizational culture.

[00:32:53] **Christina Rouse:** Now that we've laid the foundation with organizational culture, let's turn our attention to the physical [00:33:00] spaces where the work happens.

[00:33:01] **Christina Rouse:** Our next guest brings an incredible perspective on the power of space in healing. Lori Brown, the director of Lotus in Paducah, Kentucky, has created a trauma informed oasis designed to foster healing and peace, not only for the families they serve, but also for their staff. Picture walking along a trail through a sensory garden, Pausing at a labyrinth for quiet reflection or resting on a porch swing.

[00:33:28] **Christina Rouse:** The center also offers an expressive arts therapy space and a holistic healing center, all designed to nurture both physical and emotional healing. Lori's vision reminds us that the spaces we create. are just as vital as the services we provide, benefiting both the children and the staff who support them.

[00:33:50] **Christina Rouse:** So, Lori, I found this quote and I want to hear your thoughts around it. It says, Healthy employees are the heartbeat of a thriving [00:34:00] workplace ecosystem. So, what do you think about that?

[00:34:04] **Lori Wells Brown:** I agree wholeheartedly with that, Christina. I think that health and well being are those long lasting goals that we're working towards to help promote for our teammates.

[00:34:17] **Lori Wells Brown:** There's things that are fleeting, like happiness. It's really about health and well being that we know leads to those longer term goals.

[00:34:24] **Christina Rouse:** And we know that staff want to feel valued and cared for and acknowledged, and they want to To know that their contribution they're making is worthwhile and it matters.

[00:34:36] **Christina Rouse:** I wonder what you think about this as well is if the workspace, right, where they show up every day. Is that one way to recognize the impactful work that professionals

[00:34:47] **Lori Wells Brown:** are doing? Absolutely, we know that the physical environments that we live and work in affect us in important ways and certainly workspaces, healthy workspaces are important [00:35:00] in any professional setting.

[00:35:01] **Lori Wells Brown:** But given the work that we do. In the trauma field, I think it's especially important that we make the effort to create healthy work spaces for our teammates and that they recognize those efforts and that they're able to utilize those spaces and resources that are available to them.

[00:35:22] **Christina Rouse:** So, earlier in the episode, we talked with Paige Piper, who talked about the importance of organizational culture and specifically policies that leaders can change that can help improve staff morale and well being.

[00:35:35] **Christina Rouse:** In your experience, how can the physical environment, the place where someone sits every day in their office, how does that impact staff?

[00:35:46] **Lori Wells Brown:** Yeah, well, I think that the physical environment that we work in has a major impact on the way that we feel emotionally, physically. The experience of the work, I think that there are [00:36:00] important things that we can do to create workspaces so that teammates can really kind of set up their day.

[00:36:07] **Lori Wells Brown:** Whatever is kind of meaningful and important to them, whether that's. Sensory things like lighting or using essential oils or music to kind of get into a good rhythm, but also just opportunities to transition and the activities throughout the day. So, whether it's setting up that space, where it's kind of closing out the space at the end of the day, or transition times throughout the day, what are things that are readily available in their workspace or in their service spaces?

[00:36:41] **Lori Wells Brown:** That they can kind of set that environment up and then also creating spaces where they can take a break. Maybe they need a break and it's a transition between what's going on, or maybe it's 1 of those moments where they're having a particularly hard time focusing or attending. And so [00:37:00] having other opportunities where they could go and.

[00:37:03] **Lori Wells Brown:** Whether it's engaging with nature, moving, maybe doing something creative, maybe even something playful that could help them to be able to maybe focus and attend and really get more meaning out of the work that they're doing.

[00:37:18] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I imagine the love that people have when they go home. I'm at home. I feel safe here.

[00:37:24] **Christina Rouse:** I'm happy here. That's the same feeling we want our staff to have when they come into the office.

[00:37:30] **Lori Wells Brown:** Absolutely, and I will say, Christina, I have been my entire life, I think, very much about creating spaces that feel comfortable, that have meaning, that people can tell their own story in that space. People talk about spaces having stories.

[00:37:44] **Lori Wells Brown:** I think it's about kind of creating an environment where people can feel like their story can kind of come alive. And certainly that's something that I was fortunate to grow up in. But then even when I came here to Lotus, that was something that I did as far as creating my own personal [00:38:00] workspace or the spaces where I worked with clients.

[00:38:03] **Lori Wells Brown:** But I worked with several therapists at that time where we really started working together to kind of create all of the therapeutic areas, the spaces, both indoor and outdoors, where we would kind of open those spaces up so that it would feel good not only to the clients that we served, but also to us.

[00:38:20] **Lori Wells Brown:** So that we felt more connected to ourselves therefore could be more connected and attuned to the people that we

were working with. And I think that grew even what we did alongside each other. So, whether it was kind of starting off coming in early to do yoga outside on the porch, and then it was us continuing to grow on ways that we could kind of promote our own health and well, being in the beautiful environment that we have here, and then wanting to share more and more of that with our other teammates.

[00:38:49] **Lori Wells Brown:** Was I think kind of how this got started for us.

[00:38:52] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I know you've done a lot of work at the Lotus Center on implementing physical changes, but before we actually get into that [00:39:00] project. What are some of the things you noticed as a leader about the space before you renovated it that made you just start to think about needing to make changes?

[00:39:11] **Lori Wells Brown:** Lotus was a sexual assault program for many, many years. And then in 2007, we became the Children's Advocacy Center. So we became a dual center. And so overnight, We outgrew our space. So initially we were incorporating those very special Children's Advocacy Center services into the space that we had. And we did the best that we could for many years trying to make that work.

[00:39:40] **Lori Wells Brown:** But then we went through a time of tremendous growth and It was really challenging. We were literally putting up walls to divide spaces, which offices were large enough that they could be divided. And so there was really no flow for the services that were being provided. It was really challenging for those of us who had [00:40:00] to divide spaces where we didn't private workspaces, and it was becoming increasingly stressful.

[00:40:05] **Lori Wells Brown:** And so for us. We started years before the project just to do a conceptual plan with an architect on what could this look like. But as an organization, we felt like it was going to take several years to even get in the position to do this. And then an opportunity, kind of unexpected opportunity, came along.

[00:40:24] **Lori Wells Brown:** So we were able to move much more quickly than we had anticipated. And we just really saw that opportunity as. A way

to re envision our entire Paducah campus both are inside indoor facilities as well as our outside spaces 1 so that we could optimize that service delivery for the kids and families that we serve, but also so that we could really promote the health and well being of our teammates who are providing these services.

[00:40:54] **Lori Wells Brown:** I truly believe that the same value that we put into creating [00:41:00] programs for kids and families, we should put the same value into creating the spaces that support those services and certainly the people who are providing those services.

[00:41:10] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. We hear a lot about ensuring that our staff and our services are trauma informed, right?

[00:41:18] **Christina Rouse:** That we're doing trauma informed things with that lens. Also, the workspace should be trauma informed for the people providing those services, like you mentioned. And so I love that you guys thought about that as a very intentional project.

[00:41:33] **Lori Wells Brown:** And I think, too, most of my years in this work were spent as a therapist, and so I learned so much from the individuals that I worked with who shared.

[00:41:43] **Lori Wells Brown:** What they were comfortable with and what they were not comfortable with. And so we started off really kind of redesigning things with that in mind. How can we make people feel most comfortable, feel most safe? But of course, that really grew to it. That also applies to the staff as

[00:41:58] **Christina Rouse:** well. [00:42:00] So when you mentioned the pre planning before the actual work started, talk about what that undertaking was like.

[00:42:07] **Christina Rouse:** Did you fold in staff input? How did you guys arrive at the decisions you ultimately ended up making?

[00:42:14] **Lori Wells Brown:** It's a really comprehensive process where 1st, we had an architect who met with and did walk throughs with each of our

individual teams and each of our individual teammates who were involved in service delivery.

[00:42:29] **Lori Wells Brown:** So they went through every aspect. Really, from the perspective of the teammate, but also our community partners and then with those that we serve. And then we also did a lot of small group, large group listening sessions discussions. We did some creative activities. We used some mind mapping, we even did some sand tray.

[00:42:54] **Lori Wells Brown:** Vision boards, and a lot of that was focused on how to [00:43:00] promote an atmosphere that would support health and well, being for the staff, not only when they were providing services, but outside of that service delivery. What did they see as an ideal environment? Really, to be able to take care of themselves and focus on how they were feeling in the work.

[00:43:17] **Lori Wells Brown:** I think that's something we really emphasize. It's not just what we do, but it's how we do it and how we experience the work and certainly creating environments that can really help us to have that best experience. So, we wanted staff in lots of different ways for them to really think about that. And so, then we just really took all of that information and And incorporated it.

[00:43:40] **Lori Wells Brown:** Some of it was with the architect and the overall design of the facilities. And then some of it was just how we then kind of went into design all the individual spaces and then just lots of ideas about things that we could offer. And some things may be meaningful to some staff and not as much to others, but just little things.

[00:43:59] **Lori Wells Brown:** Whether [00:44:00] it's essential oils and diffusers that they could have in their office, maybe a singing bowl or a tuning fork, things like technology. So that if they want to listen to music, or they want to be able to use health apps. So just lots of ideas that we had initial things that we offered, but then that really continues to grow based on the experiences and the feedback that we get from our teammates.

[00:44:22] **Christina Rouse:** I imagine with involving the staff and involving the team that that gave them a little bit of ownership of the space that maybe they didn't have before.

[00:44:32] **Lori Wells Brown:** We see our spaces here at Lotus as just really ever evolving. There were things that we initially did during the project, but the spaces continue to change and evolve and the resources that we make available.

[00:44:46] **Lori Wells Brown:** Continues to grow really based on the experiences and the things that our teammates share that they need.

[00:44:54] **Christina Rouse:** So, you mentioned this project involving an architect and I imagine a lot of our listeners [00:45:00] when they hear architect, they feel and sense this. Issue of finance and funding talk a little bit about how you all were able to undergo such a large renovation and as a leader, what that meant as it relates to securing the funding to do that.

[00:45:18] **Lori Wells Brown:** So, I mentioned that we really needed to be able to. Expand the size of our facility. So we had done in a conceptual plan and we were really as an organization trying to get in a position to launch a major capital campaign that felt like that was going to take several years. We were trying to go about that strategically.

[00:45:38] **Lori Wells Brown:** And then we had a very unexpected opportunity, very time limited federal funding for victim services that. Was allowing more infrastructure building, which included renovation and as most of us know, in the nonprofit world, funding for renovation is very rare. And so [00:46:00] we knew that we really needed to take advantage of that opportunity and to kind of move things along much more quickly.

[00:46:06] **Lori Wells Brown:** And so trying to work strategically on how we could kind of piece together different funding. And so while this funding. Would help with renovating space. It wouldn't help with adding space, which was one of our major problems. And so the first thing we did was choose a very community minded lender who had the experience to help us navigate the process and to help us know how to best utilize some of

the opportunities that were available to us and things that we had not expected just really started to line up around that time.

[00:46:44] **Lori Wells Brown:** We had also been cultivating relationships with major donors, individuals, families, foundations and other organizations who really supported our mission and being able to share this opportunity. We were so fortunate to have a [00:47:00] tremendous amount of support from the community and then we were. Actually preparing to take our capital campaign public in March of 2020 and the weekend actually that COVID hit.

[00:47:16] **Lori Wells Brown:** We never took the campaign public, but we were successful in being able to complete and pay off that loan very quickly because we were strategic and we're able to kind of quilt together different funding sources. So I think it's really about being open and looking for opportunities. That you might not be aware of that exist, and then it does, I think, take that piecing together of those various kinds of funding to be able to do a project like this.

[00:47:44] **Lori Wells Brown:** It was at least probably 3 years sooner than what we were expecting. A project that

[00:47:48] **Christina Rouse:** takes time, right? And it sounds like you did a lot of forethought and ensuring that what you were going to change actually mattered. So how have you seen the new [00:48:00] physical environment of the Lotus Center? Impact employee mental health.

[00:48:04] **Christina Rouse:** Well, what kind of feedback have you seen and heard?

[00:48:07] **Lori Wells Brown:** So, I think there are ways that we see our teammates really using the resources that are available to them, whether it's, you individually, or sometimes together in small groups or in their teams, they are out engaging in nature walking. We've got a walking trail out front.

[00:48:27] **Lori Wells Brown:** A walking labyrinth is 1 of, I think, the favorite resources that's available. We see staff really utilizing the. Opportunities

that we created to connect and collaborate. We've got a lot of different kinds of meeting spaces, both indoor and outdoors, and so whether they're gathering around the fire pit outside or out under the pergola swinging in the swings together while they're having a meeting, or they're cooking together in the kitchen, and we've got things like cookbooks and an herb garden, things where they can kind of get in there [00:49:00] and learn and kind of share it with each other, really utilizing so many of the spaces and the resources during those, I think, important transition times.

[00:49:09] **Lori Wells Brown:** Whether they're arriving or taking a break, some of the key opportunities that we really want to be able to provide. For our staff, our nature engagement, and so we utilize biophilic design to do simple things like. Making sure that they had good views out of the windows or bringing plants into the indoors or that there were spaces where they could get out and enjoy nature, the walking trail, or we've got a wooded area and got some sensory gardens back there in that area.

[00:49:43] **Lori Wells Brown:** We really felt like movement was important. And so there's, I think, lots of opportunities, both indoor and outdoors for staff to engage in movement and. That might just be moving around in their workspaces, or it may be actually going outside and moving and walking the trail or [00:50:00] using our holistic healing center where there's things for yoga and there's some simple exercise equipment and bands and things along those lines.

[00:50:10] **Lori Wells Brown:** We wanted to offer opportunities for play and expressive creating and we have an expressive arts therapy center and everything that's available out there for the kids and families. We work for is available for our teammates and we really encourage everyone to get out and use those. So it's really great to see when they do, whether it's.

[00:50:31] **Lori Wells Brown:** A therapist who after a session goes out and does an individual sand tray to kind of help process their own experience of working with that client. Or it's a team going out to get into the movement room and get out some of the play equipment and just enjoy that time together. I think that connection and collaboration, just lots of opportunities for staff to be able to work together both formally and informally in a variety of settings is really important.

[00:50:59] **Lori Wells Brown:** [00:51:00] And so we do see them. Utilizing the various spaces to do that.

[00:51:05] **Christina Rouse:** Have you noticed a shift in how that allows them to be more productive or efficient in the services that they're offering? Are you seeing kind of this trickle down effect to the children and families?

[00:51:21] **Lori Wells Brown:** Yeah, so actually we are number one priority in our current strategic plan.

[00:51:27] **Lori Wells Brown:** It's the health and well, being of our employees and so we're actually doing a lot tracking of outcome measures and even just in the last 6 months, being able to look at the increase that staff are reporting in their own sense of well, being. In their outlook for the future, and the productivity levels have gone up significantly.

[00:51:51] **Lori Wells Brown:** The physical environment is 1 aspect, but again, that cultural piece and the focus on really fostering [00:52:00] the health and well, being of our employees is a priority. So, it's the environment that supports the work that they're doing, but it's also the bigger picture of what are the other ways that we can offer.

[00:52:11] **Lori Wells Brown:** Resources that are going to make a meaningful difference in their lives.

[00:52:15] **Christina Rouse:** With the project at the Lotus Center, what's next on the horizon? You might need more space at Lotus if you all are still growing, but do you have other projects on the horizon?

[00:52:30] **Lori Wells Brown:** Yeah, so since we did our big renovation of our Paducah campus, we have actually completed a couple of other projects since then.

[00:52:40] **Lori Wells Brown:** We designed a custom Children's Advocacy Center mobile unit. We took a 33 foot Winnebago and we designed every inch of that, that mobile unit to support services, but also so that it would be comfortable for those teammates who are providing those mobile services. [00:53:00] And then we had a another very unexpected

opportunity to purchase a new office in Mayfield, which is right in the center of our region.

[00:53:08] **Lori Wells Brown:** So, we've actually just finished up renovating that facility and we're working on finishing up the outdoor project. Actually, this week, they're on site, and so the projects that we're working on implementing next are nature play projects, which are. really creating outdoor spaces for engaging with nature and play.

[00:53:31] **Lori Wells Brown:** And so while these projects were really designed with Children in mind, Children and families. Just like everything else here, we certainly say that we will have teammates utilizing spaces as well. So it's been kind of cool, too, because the nature play that's new learning about natural outdoor playground equipment and how to design spaces and bring in those natural sensory elements along with that equipment.

[00:53:57] **Lori Wells Brown:** So, we've done the same thing where we've gotten a lot of [00:54:00] feedback from the therapist who will be really working in a therapeutic way with those kids and families. About what they envisioned this to look like.

[00:54:09] **Christina Rouse:** So I'm curious when I was at our center, we had multiple satellite offices and one of the things we attempted to ensure was that kind of the branding across all of our satellites were similar so that regardless of what space our clients came into or even our teams for that matter, they knew that each of those spaces were connected to the main Program is that similar to your mobile center and your new office space?

[00:54:39] **Lori Wells Brown:** Yes. So I would say 1 of the most important. Things that we wanted to do when we started the 1st renovation was we wanted all of our spaces to be a reflection of our Lotus brand. And of our collective values, and so that can be things as simple as our color is teal, and there is [00:55:00] teal, lots and lots of teal throughout that has been incorporated into the design.

[00:55:06] **Lori Wells Brown:** And we think it's important to have that continuity of the brand across all of the environments. I think that balance

of creating a safe and predictable environment, it is that continuity. And no matter what space you're in, it. Feels like Lotus, and that's something that we hear when we've taken people to tour the mobile unit, or when we've had clients who have gone to both of the offices, they'll say this feels like, because I do think it's a feeling a brand is more than the color of the elements.

[00:55:37] **Lori Wells Brown:** It's that feeling that we really want people to be able to connect with. And so, certainly, we did continue the brand and different elements that we have here in Paducah in those other projects as well. So they do feel like just an extension of Lotus.

[00:55:54] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I love that. Yeah. So, you've mentioned amazing, fantastic [00:56:00] things you've implemented, and I imagine some folks might be thinking, Lori, I don't have the funds to make these extreme renovations or these big projects that take years.

[00:56:12] **Christina Rouse:** What are some ways directors and leaders can make maybe small or micro improvements to the space of their offices?

[00:56:19] **Lori Wells Brown:** Yeah, and before we were able to do these renovations, we were making the most of the spaces that we had. And even then, even though there were changes we knew that we wanted to make, we still got lots of really positive feedback, not only from the people that we serve, but also from the staff, because I think it was, we were doing a lot of the same things without the funds to do that.

[00:56:41] **Lori Wells Brown:** So, Christina, I think there are just some fundamental things, right, that we can all offer that don't cost. Anything or very little that can really make meaningful differences for our teammates. There's basic requirements, such as accessibility, parking, equipment, work and meeting spaces that can help [00:57:00] support our staff and their work.

[00:57:02] **Lori Wells Brown:** And then just basic factors, like, really being attentive to and looking at just things like lighting and noise control, temperature, air quality, maybe things that we don't always think about,

but that are really proven to have an impact on our health. And then using biophilic design doesn't have to be anything that's overly complicated.

[00:57:20] **Lori Wells Brown:** It can be as easy as right offering plants that staff can have in their private or shared workspaces being able to have views out the window to look at nature. That's a way of engaging in nature, natural light. That's proven to have health benefits. I think movement and flexibility is really important to and being able to just offer again, simple things, whether it's.

[00:57:47] **Lori Wells Brown:** Being able to adjust a desk so that they can stand or maybe be able to move around in their workspace or have alternate spaces where staff can kind of come and go if they just need a change of [00:58:00] scenery. If you're fortunate enough to have outdoor spaces, I think that's probably 1 of the most important benefits that we can offer.

[00:58:07] **Lori Wells Brown:** Being able to get outside is something that I think our staff really appreciate. That's always something that people are talking about. Little things that we've done that don't really cost much are offering things like diffusers and essential oils or having things that are along the lines of energy work, and that can be something small, like a tuning fork.

[00:58:32] **Lori Wells Brown:** We have the small sand trays if someone wants to keep that in their private workspace so that they can utilize that kind of in between providing services. If you have a space large enough just to offer things like some basic equipment for things like yoga or movement or bands, we even have some little neck rollers that staff can use or keep in their spaces.

[00:58:56] **Lori Wells Brown:** There's lots of those kinds of just basic fundamentals and I think these [00:59:00] more like sensory, emotional things that can really help where they have some choice. And the things that are important to them make a big difference, too.

[00:59:09] **Christina Rouse:** It's important we think about the little things that are easily changeable and don't necessarily need to be large projects, because everyone can start somewhere with changing the space.

[00:59:22] **Lori Wells Brown:** We were talking earlier about the importance of our focus on our space is really reflecting our Lotus brand, but I think more importantly, our collective values. And so really being able to offer more of those. Sensory emotional aspects where people can really connect to those values on a deeper level.

[00:59:48] **Lori Wells Brown:** I think that's something that helps keep us grounded in the work. Teammates talk about being able to feel in the spaces and the way that we work in these spaces connection to those values and [01:00:00] then special things like art. All of the art that we have, it's custom art or it's things that are very unique that we've selected and that staff have helped select because it feels like a reflection of those values.

[01:00:13] **Lori Wells Brown:** And so just things throughout the environment, I think, just really being curious and thinking about what are things and what are ways that we can create an experience. To keep connected to those values and to our purpose. That's a good foundation for folks.

[01:00:31] **Christina Rouse:** So, in closing, Lori, I'm curious to know what your favorite space is at the Lotus Center.

[01:00:39] **Lori Wells Brown:** It would be hard for me to choose one of my favorite places. But I guess if I had to I would choose our holistic healing center. I had a vision for that space the first time that I saw it. And it took a long time to kind of bring that to fruition, but it's just such a calm, grounding space to be [01:01:00] very mindful.

[01:01:02] **Lori Wells Brown:** I would say it's probably not only my favorite space. I hear from a lot of the staff that it is as well. It's just a great space, whether you start your day in there, or if you just want to take a few minutes to kind of go out and do a short meditation or a yoga stretch where you can really feel kind of grounded and connected.

[01:01:22] **Lori Wells Brown:** Being more mindful, being able to feel more present, being able to feel connected to our larger purpose here and to each other.

[01:01:33] **Christina Rouse:** As the saying goes, a healthy workplace isn't just about having the right people, but also the right environment and culture. Remember, investing in both can truly transform your team's wellbeing.

[01:01:48] **Christina Rouse:** Thank you for joining us for a thought provoking conversation. Much appreciation for our guests. on this episode. Remember, in the moments between episodes, look for the invisible threads that [01:02:00] connect you to your purpose. If what you heard sparked your curiosity to learn more, hit the subscribe button and follow us on Facebook and LinkedIn at Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center for more learning content.

[01:02:13] **Christina Rouse:** All resources mentioned in this podcast are linked in the show notes below. Below the S-R-C-A-C Exchange Podcast is made possible through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, US Department of Justice under award number one five PJ DP 22 GK 0 3 0 5 9 JJ vo. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this podcast are those of the guests and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice.

[01:02:47] **Christina Rouse:** The SRCEC Exchange Podcast Season 3 is hosted by me, Christina Rouse, and produced by Peachtree Sound. Music provided by Midnight [01:03:00] Dream.