

Great Lakes Conservation Workforce Development

Building Capacity for Soil and Water Conservation

Dr. Ramiro Berardo, Ohio State University

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Project Overview

- Project started in the fall of 2024
- Goal: Gather data to strengthen the capacity of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs)
- Focus: Understanding challenges to recruitment and retention of skilled conservation professionals
- Why it matters: Important to protect soil and water quality in the Great Lakes region with the best “boots on the ground”

Project Team

Partners:

- **Representatives from conservation district associations from the eight Great Lakes states,**
- **International/national partners: GLLC, NACD**
- GLC: Nicole Zacharda and Connor Roessler
- OSU: Dr. Ramiro Berardo (OSU), Eli Schwartz-Yermack (OSU)
- Dr. Matthew Hamilton (University of Wyoming, formerly at OSU)

Research Approach: Mixed Design

Interviews (summer 25)-
State Assoc Reps



Online Survey (spring
26)-District Staff & Board
Members

New Project
 Open Project
 Reset Activations
 Logbook
 Teamwork
 Merge Projects
 Save Project As
 Save Anonymized Project As
 Project from Activated Documents
 External Archive
 Files
 Data

Documents

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- Pennsylvania_Recording.transcript_Clean 0
- Wisconsin_Recording.transcript_Clean 0
- SWCD Transcripts (Ramiro) 103
 - [Redacted] 57
 - [Redacted] 46

Codes

- Insufficient Leadership Turnover 9
- Time Constrained Board Members 8
- Lack of Expertise 4
- Collaboration 5
 - Intrastate Collaboration Between Districts 1
 - Interstate Collaboration Between State Associations 8
 - Interstate Collaboration Between Districts 1
- Lobbying 7
- Variance in District Resources/Capacity/Processes 13
 - Competition/Conflict with SWC Stakeholders (Excluding Districts) 7
 - Collaboration with SWC Stakeholders (Excluding Districts) 10
 - Relationship Between Districts and NRCS 10
- Staffing Challenges 9
 - Recruitment Challenges 6
 - Insufficient Training 6
 - Retention Challenges 11
- Relationships with Stakeholders 25
 - Relationship with Farm Bureau 1
 - Relationships with NGOs 3
 - Relationships with Public 4
 - Public Image of Districts 7
 - Relationships with Legislators 23
- Urban Rural Divide 13
- Funding Issues 45
 - Self Funding Efforts 19
 - County Funding 7
 - Federal Funding 6
 - Funding Shortfalls 14
 - State Funding 16
- Sets 0

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Funding Issues > Self Funding Efforts

Relation

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..State Fundin

113 not fully trained because they're new, or or whatever a lot of them have Crp
114 agreements with NRCS. At least, currently we do, or we're still like waiting on
115 hearing if we have an extension on that or not. But that does pay them really
116 well. So I think a lot of them like when I was talking about the resource
117 management system plans that they have to write. They're supposed to write 3 of
118 those, but those aren't paid plans. They're just like you go out to a farm and
119 you write like every conservation practice that could be applied is like applied
120 in this plan, and it's to teach them how to do it, and then they get signed off
121 and get their level 3. Well, they can go, and just once they, you know, have
122 their level one, they can just go and write a conservation plan for an actual
123 customer and get paid to do that. So they're, you know, a lot of them have
124 written 500,000 different conservation plans and still don't have that level 3
125 status because they haven't done that RMS plan. But they've written, you know,
126 tons and tons of plans, because it's usually Farmer comes in. They want one
127 practice, right? It's typical. It's like, Oh, this like with crp, a lot of times.
128 It's like taking it out of production and putting it into native grasses or
129 native seed and stuff. So you know they can. A lot of them, just, you know, will
130 do that. They'll do a lot of filter strips. Some of them do like a lot of
131 waterways and stuff. So they're usually like kind of like in certain counties,
132 like everyone's coming for a waterway in certain counties. Everyone's coming for
133 pollinators, you know. And so it just they really like have select practices
134 that they need to learn to do their job and get paid to do it. So they really
135 focus on that instead of kind of learning everything that they're supposed to
136 learn and then a lot of them have other grants. A lot of them have agreements
137 with their counties to do like. They're like the Wetland specialists for their
138 counties, or in, like the more urban districts, they have agreements with the
139 Army Corps of engineers and with IEPA and with local municipalities to do
140 erosion and sediment, control reviews and inspections. So those pay quite a bit
141 better, you know, so they're prioritizing that. I was in a very urban district.
142 So I was, you know, when we had to go do and get this level 3 certification, I
143 was like, I'm barely doing any agriculture work. I've got to focus on all these
144 soil erosion sediment, control plans that are coming in because that was
145 bringing in money, and I also have a deadline on these like I have to be out
146 there. I have to do monthly inspections, so I have to be out there doing that.
147 So I mean, I definitely would never have gotten my level 3 planner at my
148 district because there was no way, and I think a lot of them are in those boats
149 with like they have so many different things that they do, you know, in the more
150 rural districts a lot of them really are working on like, some of them just only
151 do CRP, because that's what brings in money. But then they're like the States
152 like, well, what are we paying you for? But it's like, Well, you are paying me.
153 But it's you know this is what's keeping the doors open so.

154 Matthew Hamilton: Yeah, thank you. That's super helpful. I have one more short
155 follow up question mentioned that formerly, I think District staff were being
156 lost to NRCS. And I think you said now that the tables have turned, is that

Codes	799
Board Issues	33
Suboptimal relationship board/staff	6
Lack of Diversity	2
Lack of Accountability	6
Insufficient Leadership Turnover	10
Time Constrained Board Members	12
Lack of Expertise	12
Collaboration	48
Intrastate Collaboration Between Districts	12
Collaboration Between State Association and SWC Stakeholders (Excluding Districts)	23
Interstate Collaboration Between State Associations	17
Lobbying	13
Variance in District Resources/Capacity/Processes	31
Competition/Conflict with SWC Stakeholders (Excluding Districts)	6
Staffing Challenges	48
Recruitment Challenges	21
Insufficient Training	15
Retention Challenges	29
Relationships with Stakeholders	97
Relationship with Farm Bureau/other ag groups	22
Relationship Between Districts and NRCS	22
Relationships with NGOs	6
Relationships with Public	18
Public Image of Districts	18
Relationships with Legislators	44
Urban Rural Divide	18
Funding Issues	96
Self Funding Efforts	13
County Funding	14
Federal Funding	11
Funding Shortfalls	36
State Funding	40

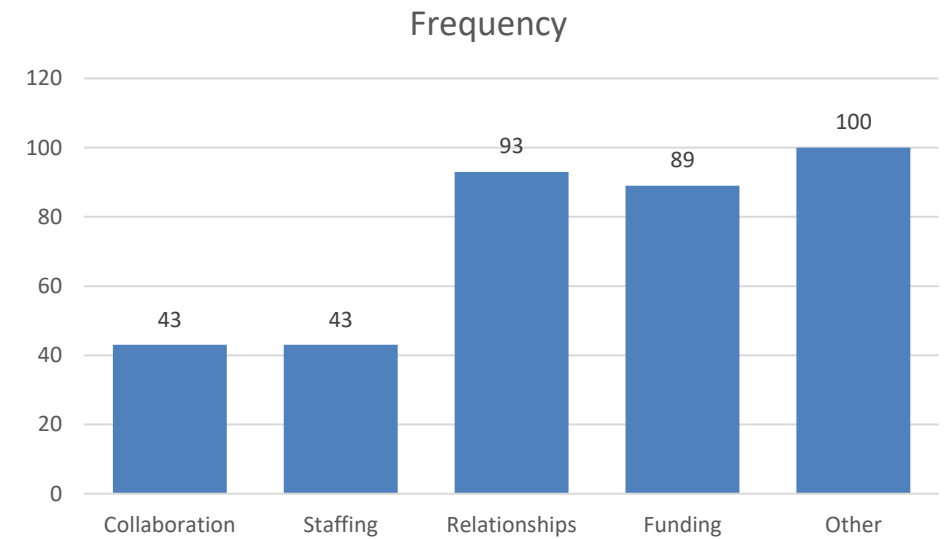


Figure 2. Frequency of statements made during interviews associated with different themes

Key Interview Findings

- Stable and predictable funding underpins every aspect of district capacity
- Recruitment, retention, compensation, and training are interconnected workforce challenges
- Conservation districts depend on trusted relationships with external partners to accomplish their mission
- Collaboration enables districts to accomplish more than they could independently

Online Survey—Spring 2026

- An approximately 20-minute survey to was released online in February 2026
- Tailored questions for Staff (Junior & Senior), and Board members

12:29


THE OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY

*Which of the following best describes your current role in your District? (Please ensure you answer accurately, as this will affect the next questions you are asked and cannot be changed after you proceed.)

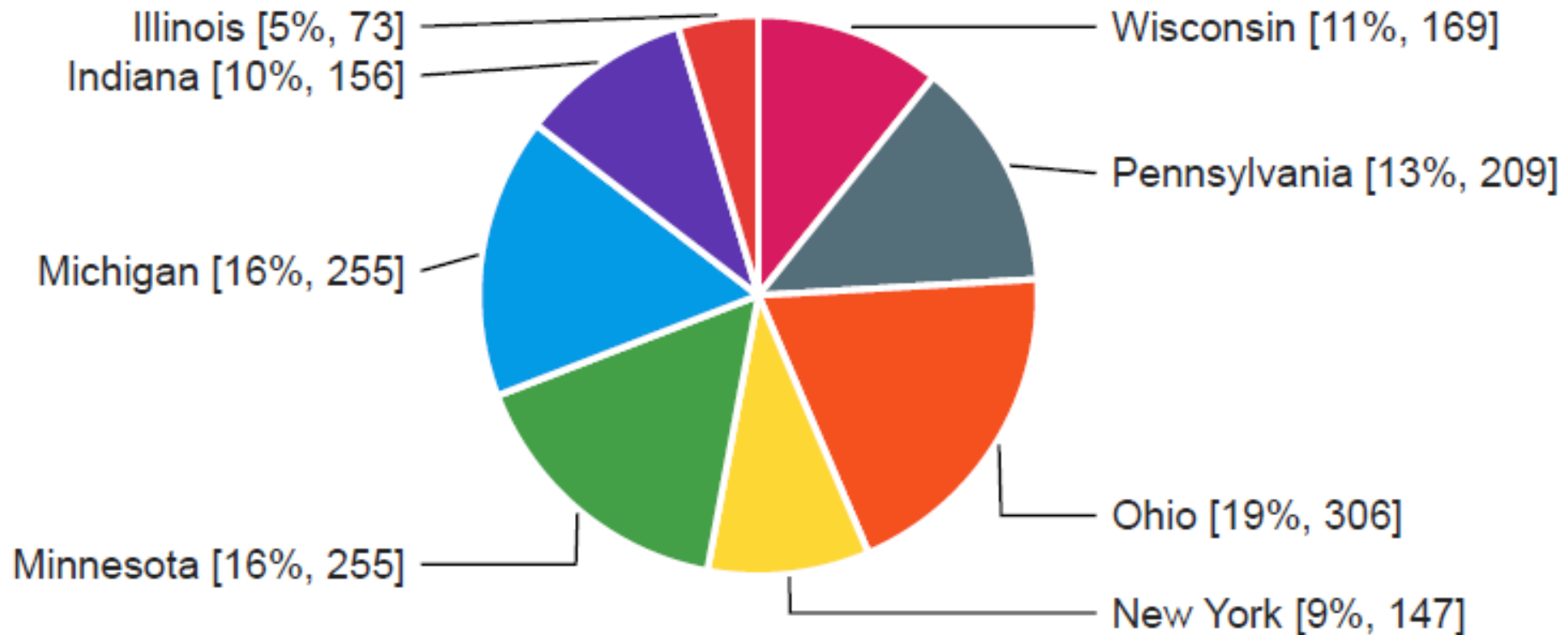
☐ Member of the Board of Directors or Board of Supervisors

☐ Staff member with more than three years of experience in the district I currently work at

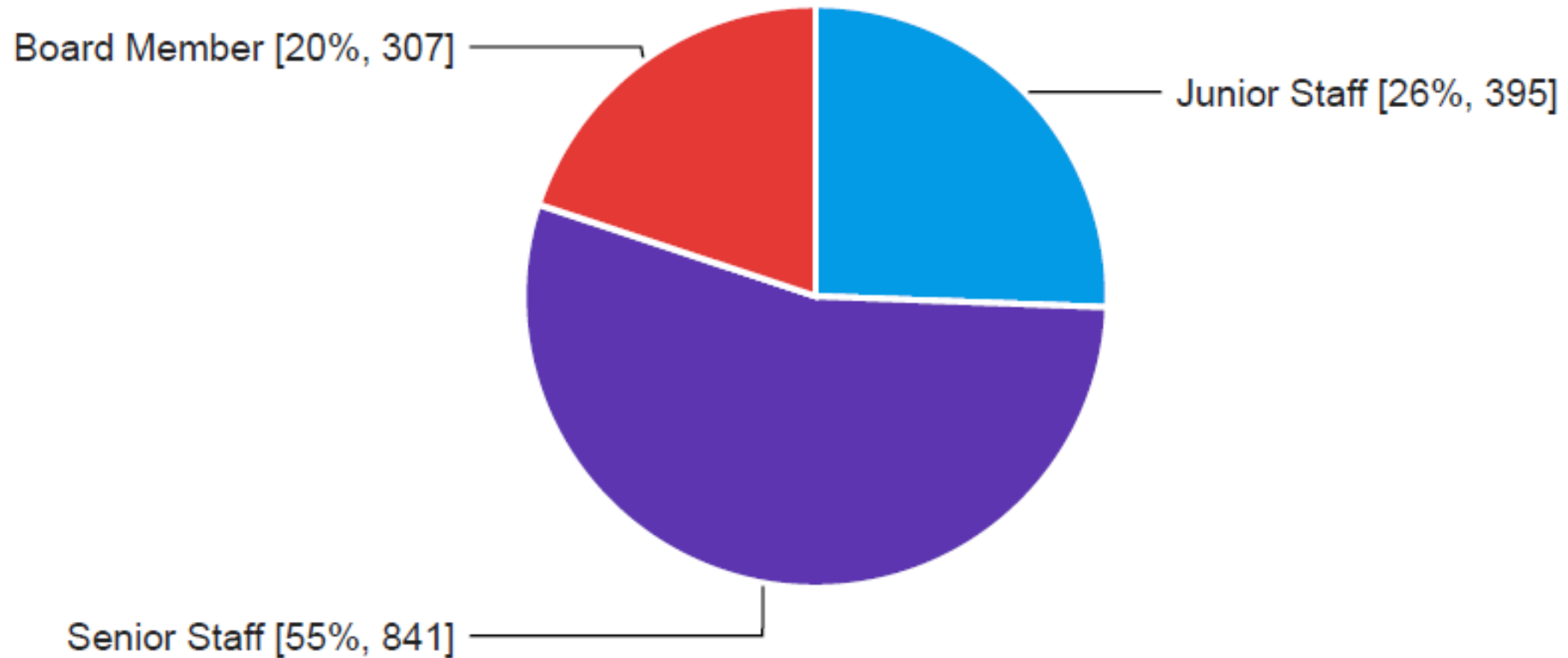
☐ Staff member with less than three years of experience in the district I currently work at

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1,570 total responses across 8 states (response rate of 26%)



By district role...



Findings!

Key Takeaway #1: Compensation is the single most important factor affecting both recruitment and retention across all respondent groups.

Panel A. Primary Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Employees



Scale 1 (factor not limiting for hiring and retention) to 5 (factor very much limiting)

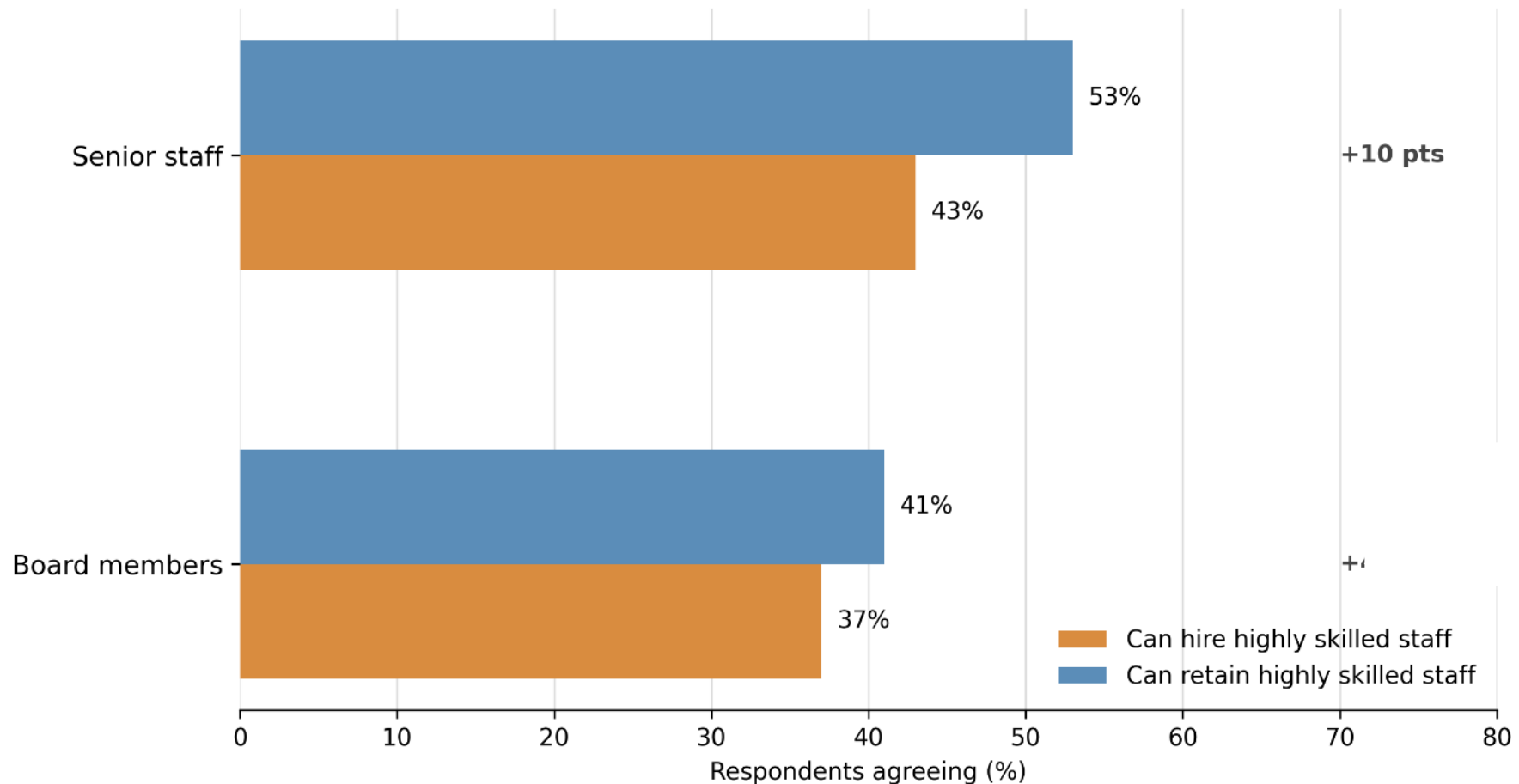
Panel B. Main Limiting Factors for Workforce Development

Respondent Group	Top Workforce Concern
Board Members	Limited Salary and Benefits
Senior Staff	Limited Salary and Benefits
Junior Staff	Insufficient Pay and Benefits

Figure 3. Barriers for Workforce Development

Findings!

Key Takeaway #2: Respondents have more confidence in retaining employees than recruiting them, although confidence in both remains modest.



The workforce pipeline: The main challenge is recruitment

Respondents believe districts are better at keeping skilled employees than attracting them.



Retention is relatively stronger than recruitment, but it varies by experience level.



72%

Senior staff
(> 3 years of service)
are likely or very likely to still be working in their district in 3 years.



Most senior staff plan to stay.



The greatest obstacle is at the **recruitment stage**.



Fewer people are entering the pipeline than districts need. Once employees are hired, retention is much stronger—especially among senior staff.



Implication:

Efforts to expand the talent pool, raise awareness, and improve the appeal of SWCD careers are critical.

Note: This illustration is conceptual and reflects the overall pattern reported by survey respondents.

Findings!

Key Takeaway #3: Many employees see limited opportunities for long-term professional growth within SWCDs.

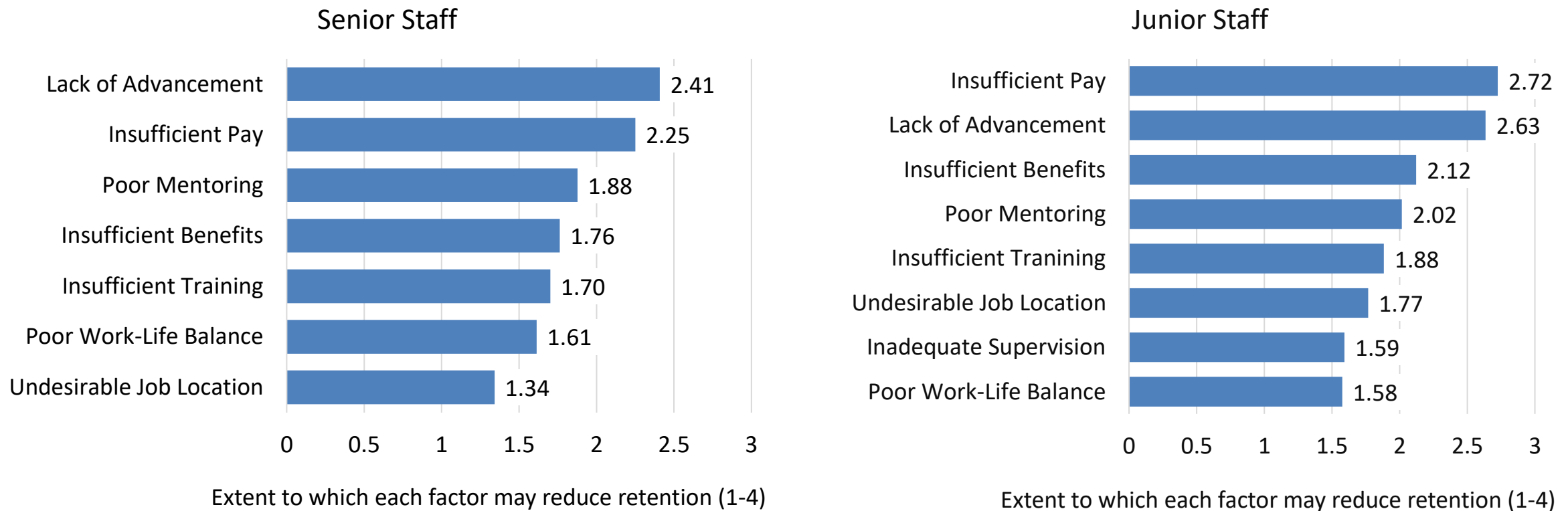


Figure 5. Hurdles for retention identified by staff members.

Typical Smaller SWCD

Fewer Advancement Opportunities



District Administrator
(Top Leadership)



No Intermediate
Management Level

Staff / Specialists



Conservation
Specialist



Outreach
Coordinator



Technical
Specialist



Administrative
Support



Limited hierarchical levels can restrict career growth and long-term advancement opportunities.

Typical Larger SWCD

More Advancement Opportunities



District Administrator
(Top Leadership)



Senior Specialist
(Senior Technical Expert)



Program Lead
(Supervisory / Program Management)



**Conservation
Specialist**
(Field / Technical
Work)



**Outreach
Coordinator**
(Education /
Engagement)



**Technical
Specialist**
(Design / Planning /
Implementation)



**Administrative
Support**
(Operations /
Administration)



Multiple levels create opportunities for advancement, specialization, and leadership development.



Implication: Larger districts are better positioned to develop internal talent and retain staff through career growth.

Findings!

Key Takeaway #4: Board members and staff generally report positive relationships with each other, but they differ in their perceptions of communication needs

Both groups report generally positive board-staff relationships.

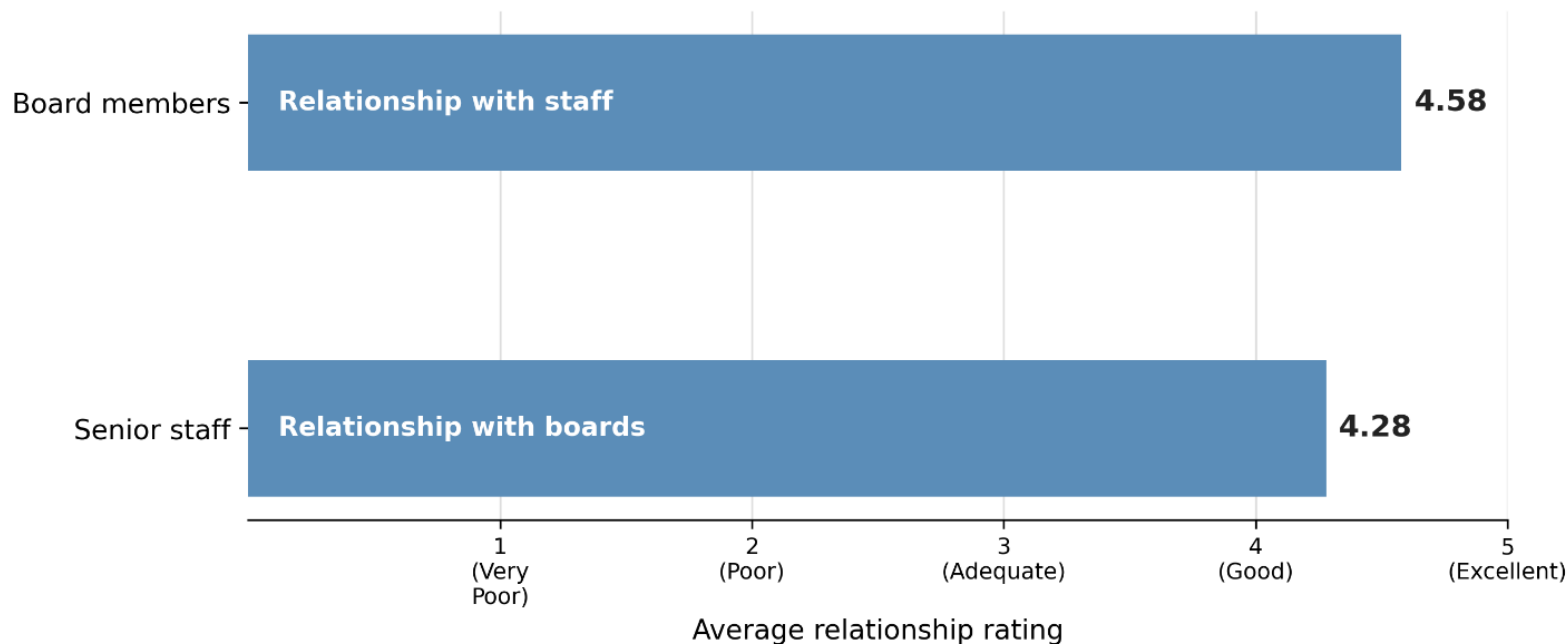


Figure 6. Quality of reported relationships between board members and staff.

Board–Staff Communication Can Become Even Stronger

Strong relationships provide a foundation for continued improvement.

Board Members



“Our relationship with staff is working well.”



Relationship rating: **4.58 / 5**



34% mentioned communication improvements



Also highlighted board orientation and governance

Senior Staff



“Our relationship with the board is strong, but communication could improve.”



Relationship rating: **4.28 / 5**



43% mentioned communication improvements



Also highlighted board training and leadership development



SHARED OPPORTUNITY

Both groups report strong relationships and recognize opportunities to improve communication.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION DISTRICTS



Improve communication and information sharing



Clarify board and staff expectations



Provide ongoing board development and training



Create regular opportunities for dialogue



KEY TAKEAWAY: The survey points to an opportunity for continuous improvement—not dysfunctional board–staff relationships. Strong communication can build on the trust that already exists and further strengthen district effectiveness.

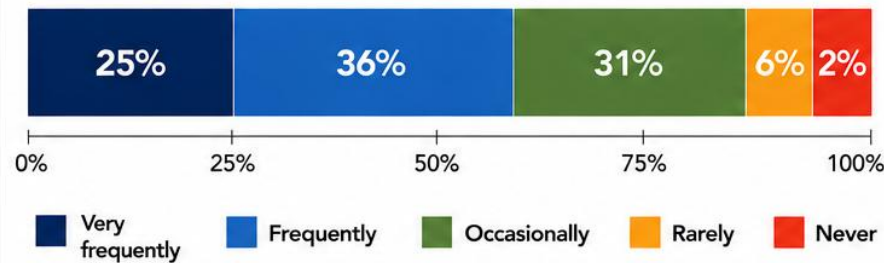
Findings!

Key Takeaway #5:
Strong collaboration
provides an
important
foundation for
addressing future
workforce
challenges.

Collaboration across districts is already common

*How often do you collaborate with personnel
from other Soil and Water Conservation Districts
(SWCDs)?*
(Senior and junior staff)

Distribution of responses



61%

of staff collaborate
frequently or very
frequently with staff
from other districts.

More common types of collaborative activity



Technical
Information
Exchange



Joint
Trainings



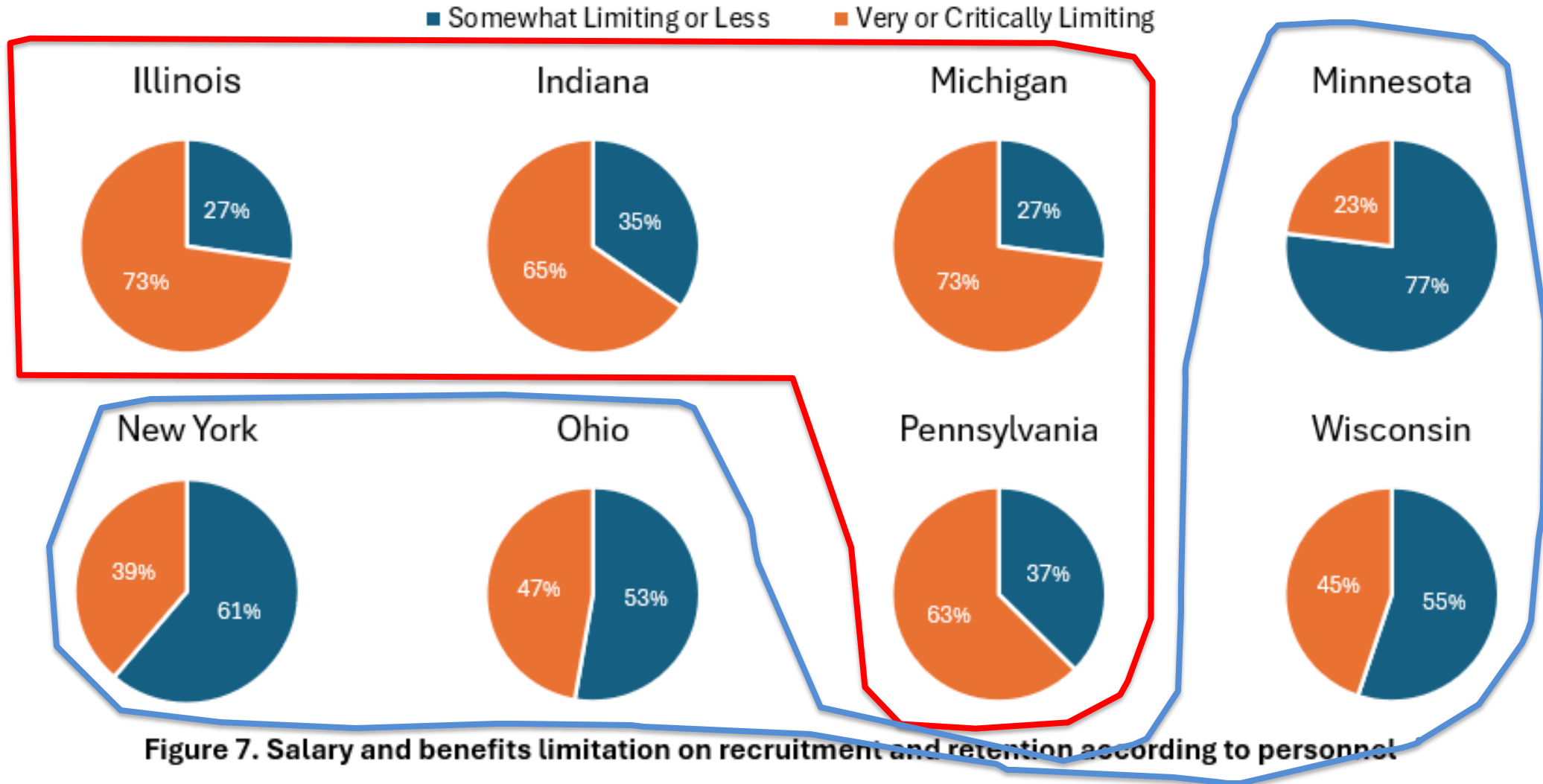
Joint
projects



Joint outreach
to the public

But there is variation across states!

Compensation Challenges Vary Substantially Across States



- **Some states rely primarily on annual state appropriations supplemented by local funds or grants, while others have more diversified funding portfolios that include county appropriations, dedicated state aid, property tax agreements, or local levies.**
- For example, [Minnesota districts receive funding from multiple state and local sources, including general service grants, Clean Water Fund resources, and county funding agreements](#), potentially providing greater financial stability than systems that rely more heavily on annual appropriations

Recruitment Challenges Are More Consistent Across States Than Retention Challenges.

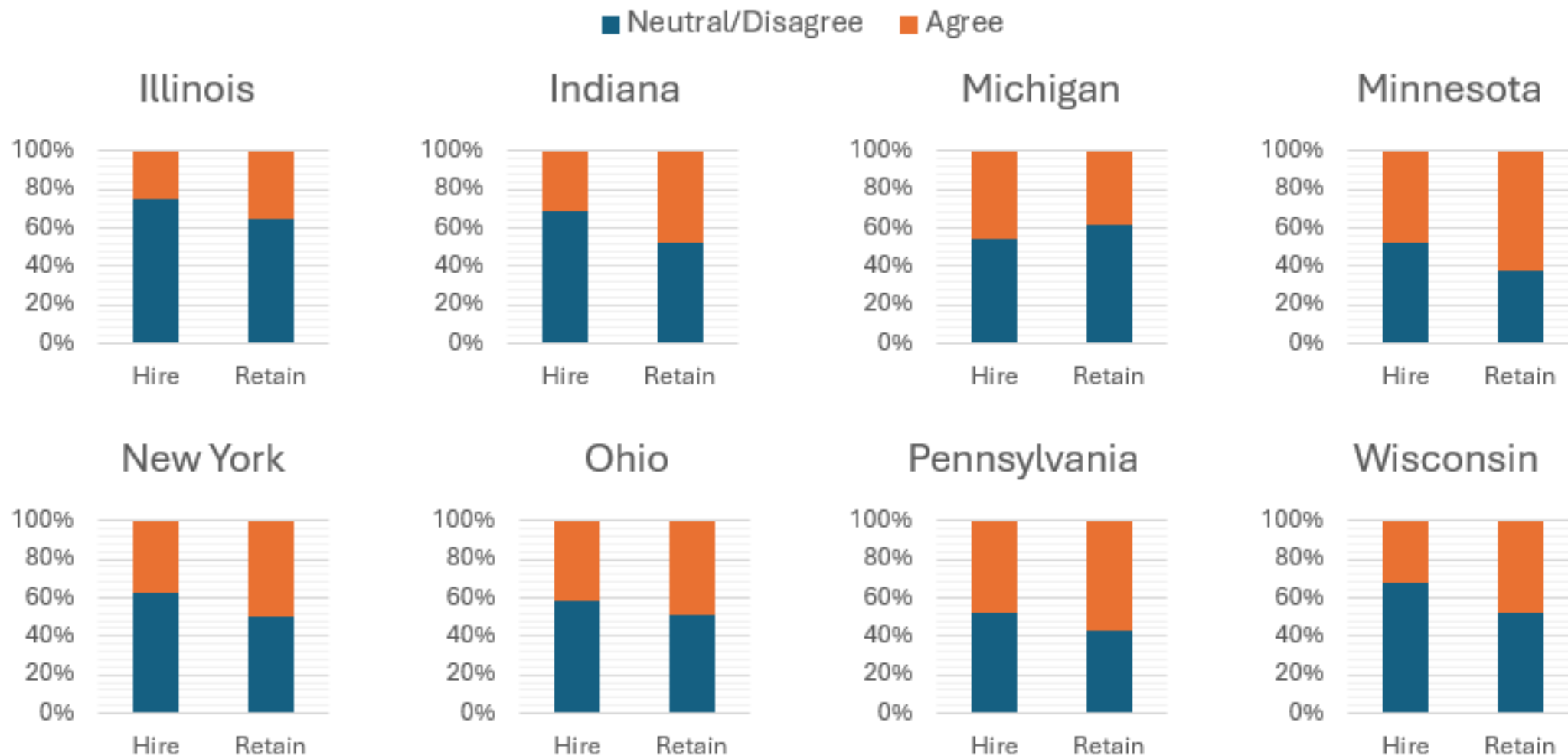


Figure 8. Reported ability of districts to hire and retain highly skilled staff

Likelihood of remaining with the district three years from now...

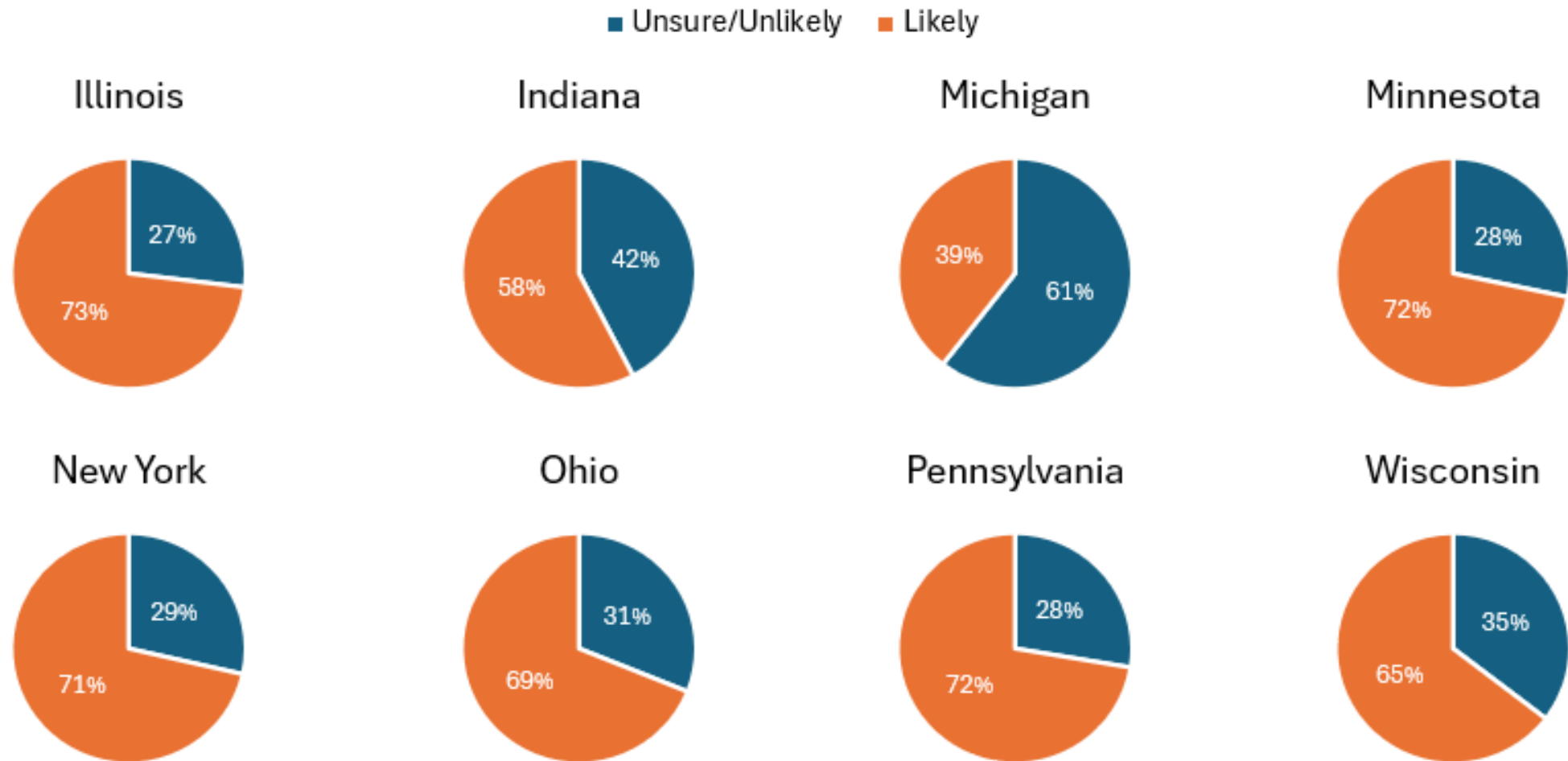


Figure 9. Staff likelihood of remaining at their district for at least 3 more years.

Concerns About Career Advancement Are Widespread Across States

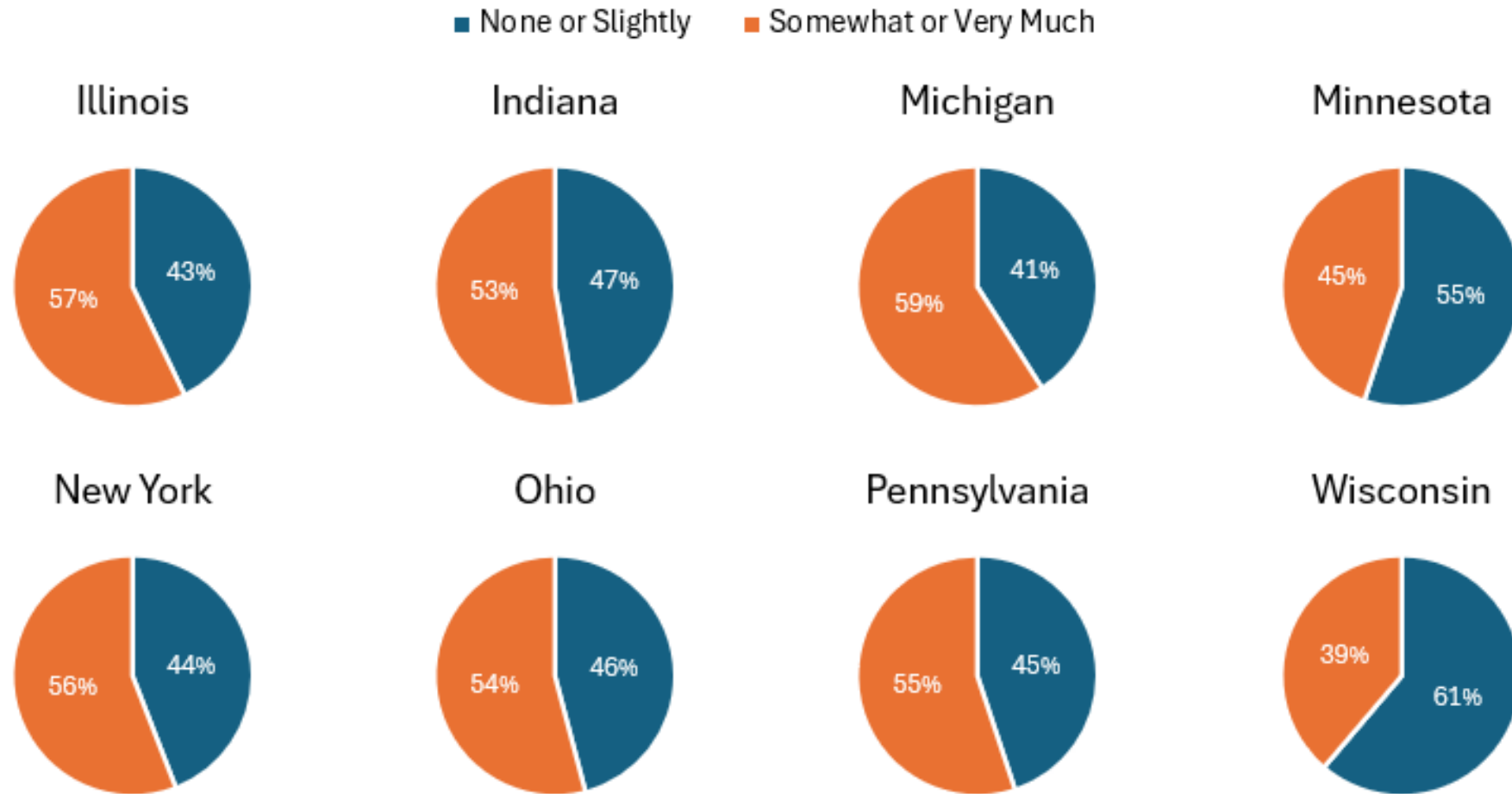


Figure 10. Lack of advancement opportunities' contribution to staff's uncertainty of staying in their district for 3 more years

Perceptions of Board–Staff Communication Differ Across States

	Illinois	Indiana	Michigan	Minnesota
Board	Improved communication	Improved communication	Improved communication	Improved communication
Staff	Increased board engagement	Increased board engagement	Increased board training and role clarity	Increased board training and role clarity
	New York	Ohio	Pennsylvania	Wisconsin
Board	Improved communication	Improved communication	Improved communication	Improved communication
Staff	Increased board engagement	Increased board engagement	Increased board engagement	Increased board engagement

Interdistrict Collaboration Is Highly Valued Across the Region, but Participation Varies

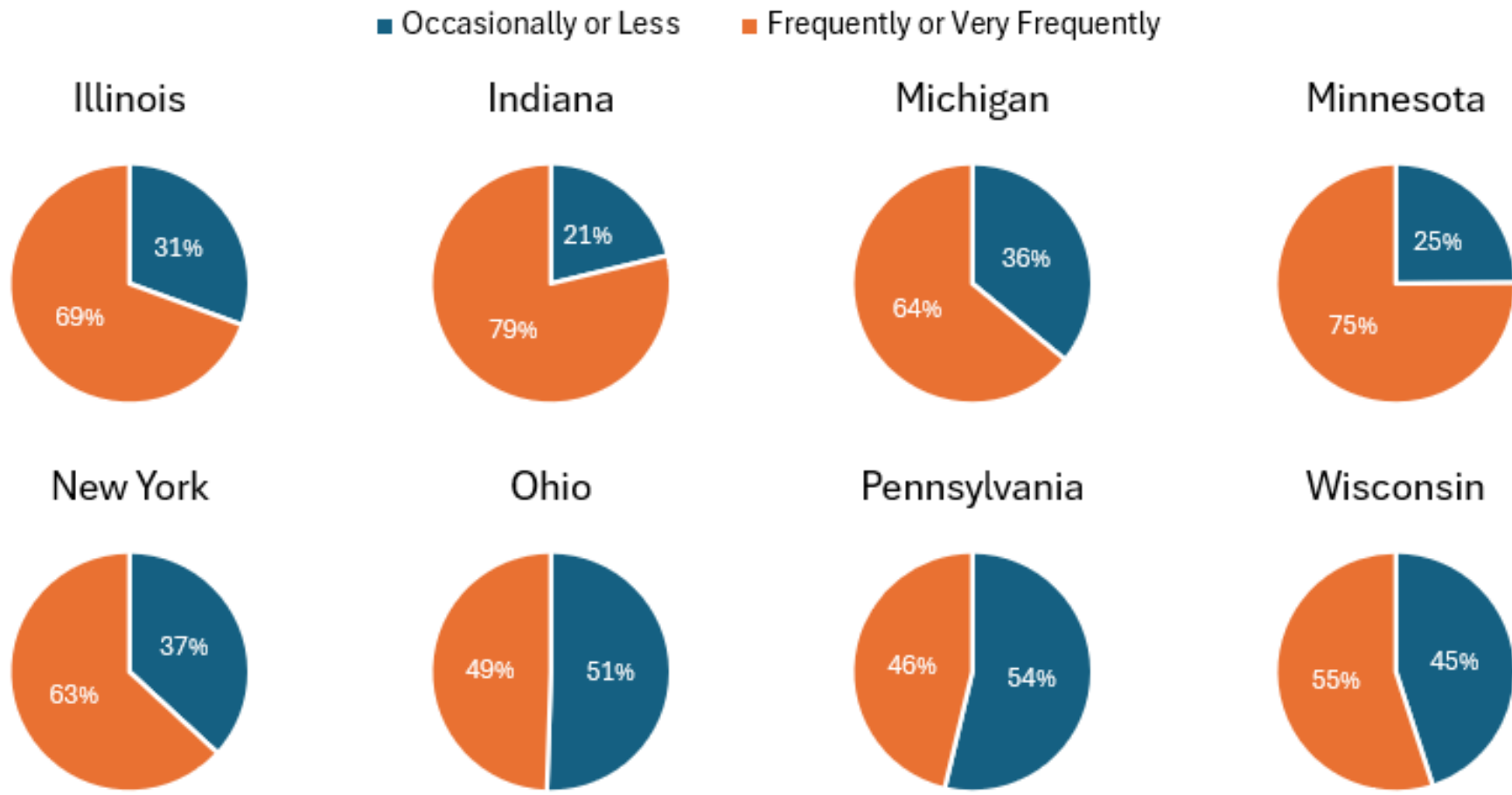


Figure 12. Frequency of collaboration with staff from other districts

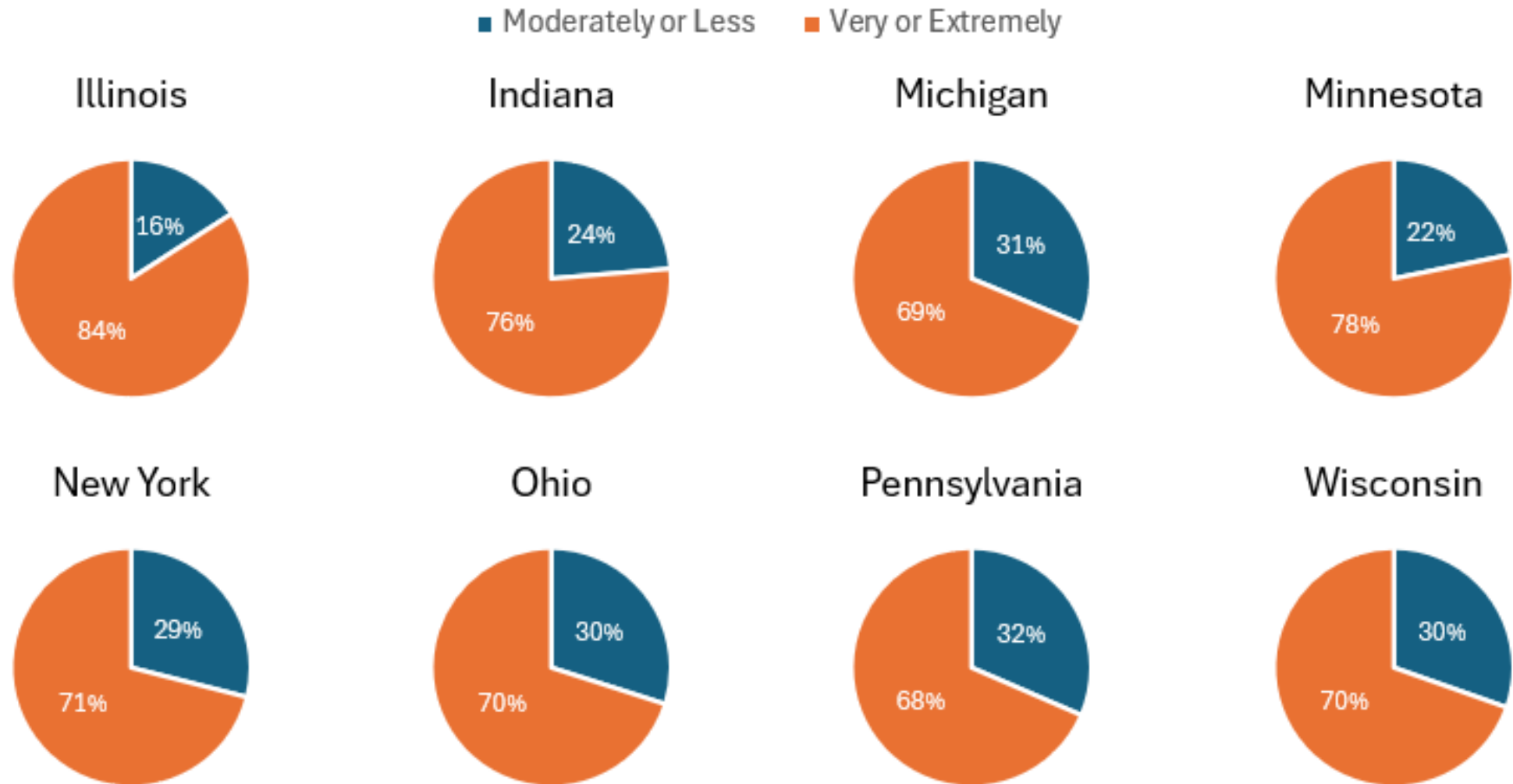


Figure 13. Reported helpfulness of interactions with staff from other districts

What's next?

- Final conversations with our state associations representatives
- October: Final Report ready!
- Appending new data to our database (e.g. county-level data from the US Census Bureau)
- Why do we see what we see?

Additional information including a list of team members, historical reports, and publications are available at www.glc.org/work/cwd



Thank you!