

2020 Annual Report to the Legislature on Employee Caseload Staffing, Recruitment and Retention and Impact on Child Welfare Outcomes



OFFICE OF
CHILDREN'S
SERVICES

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Background

House Bill (HB) 151, entitled the “Children Deserve a Loving Home Act,” passed the Alaska Legislature in 2018 with strong bipartisan support. The primary aim of the Act was to improve the likelihood that children in foster care will have the same opportunities in life, and the same safety, health, and well-being outcomes, as their peers. In addition, it included numerous mandates aimed at maintaining family connections. Supporters of the legislation recognized that high caseloads contribute to caseworker turnover, which leads to poor outcomes for families. HB 151 provided a total of 52 casework positions, 31 new positions in FY 2018, and 21 new positions in FY 2019 and created new caseworker training and workload standards. The goal was to recruit and retain enough positions to achieve a statewide average caseload of 13 cases per worker. The new caseload and training standards require a prolonged period of training and a gradual acquisition of new cases which became law two years after the legislation’s effective date in June of 2020.

The Act required an annual report to the legislature to address the following topics:

- Staffing Report/Compliance with Training and Caseload Standards.
- If not in compliance:
 - Why the Department is not able to meet the standards,
 - The amount of funding that would be necessary to meet the standards.
- Employee Recruitment and Retention:
 - Including a Five-Year Plan.
- Effects on Families if Staffing and Caseload Standards are not being met.

Executive Summary

High staff turnover and high caseload at the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) continue to overburden the child welfare system’s ability to assess for safety and achieve safe and timely exits of children from foster care. Caseloads vary across the state from 11 to as high as 18, with some offices in recent months reporting temporary caseloads of 28 or higher while at the same time managing staff vacancies or absentee rates due to COVID-19. The statewide annual turnover rate of staff who carry cases or supervise case carrying staff is 47.6%. A primary barrier to not meeting the caseload standards is the inability to retain staff. The work is stressful and hazardous, and the State lacks competitive wage and incentives to retain talent. Other agencies with similar retention difficulties have utilized generous financial incentives and other benefits to entice employees to stay. The cost to implement a competitive incentive program to retain staff is estimated to cost \$800,000.00 annually. To simply manage the current turnover rate, the OCS caseload staffing measurement tool estimates the need for 23 new positions with a projected annual increased cost of \$3.5 million.

Case Worker Retention, Caseload Data, and Compliance with Training and Caseload Standards

The statewide turnover rate of case carrying employees from October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020, (timeframe following the last annual report) is 47.6%. During the 2019 calendar year, the vacancy

rate for OCS frontline case workers was also 47.6%, indicating no change. As of November 1, 2020, of the 31 new positions funded in the FY 2018 budget, 24 are filled and 7 are vacant. Of the 21 new positions appropriated in FY 2019, 14 are filled, and 7 are vacant. Since the creation of the 21 new positions in FY 2019, all the positions have been filled at least once and 22 staff have left their positions. Of the 31 positions appropriated in FY 2018, all the positions have been vacant at least once and 37 staff have left their positions.

HB 151 implemented a graduated process for the acquisition of cases for new caseworkers. During their first three months on the job, caseworkers are allowed 6 cases. During months 4-6 they are allowed 12 cases. After being on the job greater than 7 months they may be assigned up to 13 cases. The Caseload Standard Gap Analysis Report, **Attachment A**, calculates OCS current case carrying capacity using the number of frontline Protective Service Specialists available for assignment in each of the HB 151 longevity categories. It takes an average of 198 days from a case worker resignation to a new worker being recruited, hired, and trained to carry a full case load. Currently, 58% of case carrying staff have been on the job long enough to carry a full caseload. The report also illustrates the additional number of Full Time Employees (FTEs) that would have to be available for assignment to achieve HB 151 caseload standards. The report indicates that 23 new caseworkers are needed to meet caseload requirements. The Department continues to refine recruitment, hiring, and retention efforts.

Due to high staff turnover, OCS is not meeting the caseload standard requirements of HB 151.

Summary of Caseworker Staffing Levels and Caseload – See Attachment B for details.

Measurement	Caseworker Retention, Caseload Standards
OCS is allocated 233 case carrying Protective Service Specialists.	2020 annual report: Case Carrying PCNS – 233 Vacant as of 9.30.2020 – 53 Filled on 9.30.2020 – 180 Available for full caseloads: 57.5% 2019 annual report: Case Carrying PCNS – 233 Vacant as of 9.30.2019 – 36 Filled on 9.30.2019 - 197 Available for full caseloads: 57.9%
Average annual turnover rate of front-line Protective Service Specialists. Target measure is a turnover rate of less than 30%.	The average turnover rate for case carrying Protective Services Specialist is 47.6% for 10/1/2019 through 9/30/20. Case carrying turnovers since last Annual Report: 112
Average caseload of front-line Protective Service Specialists: Target Measure is 13 cases for staff on the job for 9 months or longer.	Average statewide caseload Quarter ending 9/30/20: 14.8 Prior 4 quarter Average: 15.3

Five Year Recruitment and Retention Plan Highlights

In 2019 OCS developed a Five-Year Staff Recruitment and Retention plan. The plan is reviewed and updated annually. Strategies identified in the plan are the result of reviewing staff survey results, consultation and support from a national resource center, research on success from other states and partnering with the University of Alaska Anchorage. Please see **Attachment B** to review the OCS Five Year Recruitment and Retention Plan. OCS is utilizing a multipronged approach to address case worker retention. Current efforts include:

- Collaboration with churches, schools, colleges, Tribal agencies, job centers etc. who we can notify of current job openings.
- Expansion of job postings to other mediums, such as social media.
- Implementation of competency-based assessment of supervisors.
- Implementation of a phased onboarding process during the first year of implement for all new staff.
- Consistent practices for acknowledging staff accomplishments, anniversaries.
- Provide debriefs after traumatic casework events and wellness leave following critical incidents.
- Decrease tasks for case carrying staff by centralizing procurement and payment activities on behalf of resource families and OCS clients.
- Decrease time spent waiting for travel arrangements by centralizing travel procurement with expanded hours.
- Streamline onboarding processes for newly hired staff.
- Expansion of the mentorship program to provide hands on training and support in the field.
- Statewide recruitment efforts for efficiency in hiring.
- Promote town hall forums with outlying community stakeholders to discuss opportunities for successful recruitment and retention of case carrying and support staff.
- Virtual presentation to university programs to recruit new graduates.
- Transition to competency-based hiring practices.
- Social Services Associate survey to gather information on desires to promote and education levels.

OCS implemented exit evaluations to be conducted prior to a staff member leaving employment. Many exiting employees reported that they received effective supervision, experienced good working relationships with their co-workers and participated in training that prepared them for their job. Most all surveys conducted indicated that staff leaving viewed their work assignments to be unmanageable and the pay to not be equitable to the work required. Of the nine exit surveys conducted in October 2020, 6 participants specifically spoke to the caseloads being too high.

Quotes from exit surveys include:

“I really liked the position in Family Services, it’s just that the workload was unmanageable.”

“I would not have minded assisting the initial assessment unit for a reasonable amount of time but covering both positions for six months was not sustainable and the quality of my work suffered because of it.”

“The caseload of my position was far beyond what was manageable in order to serve the people of this community fairly.”

Despite numerous efforts to retain staff, high caseload and non-competitive salaries continue to be a barrier for recruitment and retention. The additional stress of face to face contact with clients and children during the COVID-19 public health emergency is an added factor for retaining staff as well as filling vacancies.

Effects on Families if Staffing and Caseload Standards are not being met - Achievement of Outcome Measures

The long-lasting and pervasive negative impact on children and families involved in the child welfare system due to the lack of a stable and sufficient workforce cannot be overstated. High staff turnover continues to overburden the system affecting OCS ability to assess for safety and achieve safe and timely exits of children from foster care. Here are some of the possible effects:

- Delayed initiation of investigations on reports of maltreatment, resulting in repeat maltreatment and greater harm to children.
- Lack of case worker visits with parents and children, which results in poor ongoing assessment of safety, needs and case planning. This results in children languishing and staying longer in foster care.
- Decrease in support to foster parents, which results in foster parents choosing to give up on being foster parents, increasing the shortage of foster parents. Not enough foster homes cause overcrowding and unsafe conditions for foster children. In outlying areas, a shortage of foster homes may lead to an increased chance that a child must be placed away from their home community in an urban area.

The table below reflects data from OCS’s ORCA data base

Achievement of Outcome Measures:	11/1/2019-10/31/2020 Statewide	11/1/2018-10/30/2019 Statewide	11/1/2017-10/31/2018 Statewide	11/1/2016-10/31/2017 Statewide	11/1/2015-10/31/2016 Statewide
Timeliness of Investigation Response	32%	24%	25%	23%	19%
Rate of Repeat Maltreatment	14%	12%	13%	13%	14%
Number of children removed from their homes.	1313 Children	1547 Children	1397 Children	1381 Children	1355 Children
Average number of children in out of home care.	3,100	3,050	2,930	2,871	2,925
Number of children released from the custody of the Department of Health & Social Services.	1,238 Children	1,360 Children	1,279 Children	1,402 Children	1,140 Children
Rate of family reunification.	51%	50%	52%	56%	55%

Achievement of Outcome Measures:	11/1/2019-10/31/2020 Statewide	11/1/2018-10/30/2019 Statewide	11/1/2017-10/31/2018 Statewide	11/1/2016-10/31/2017 Statewide	11/1/2015-10/31/2016 Statewide
Average length of time children spent in custody of the Department.	21 months	19 months	20 months	20 months	18 months
Rate of placement with an adult family member or family friend.	58%	55%	57%	56%	54%
Number of children released from the custody of the Department of Health & Social Services.	1,238 Children	1,360 Children	1,279 Children	1,402 Children	1,140 Children
Monthly caseworker visits with out-of-home children.	69%	72%	69%	68%	74%
Current parent case plans.	66%	54%	42%	40%	*not in ORCA

Conclusion:

OCS is not meeting the caseload standard of 13 cases per Protective Service Specialist standard that went into effect in June of 2020. The 52 new positions allocated to OCS during FY18 and FY19 appear to be having little impact on improving staff retention. Statewide caseloads have decreased but still do not comply with the caseload standard imposed by the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act. OCS staffing models with the current turnover rate reflect a need for 23 more positions. Barriers to recruitment and retention include high caseload, stressful working conditions, lack of competitive wages, and meaningful incentives.