

**HB**

**436**

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

## **HB 436: Social Worker Caseloads Sponsor Statement**

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), a national children's organization recommends certain caseloads for social workers working in child protective services roles. House Bill 436 would bring Alaska's social workers into compliance with these standards.

Social workers are our front line resource in investigating child abuse and neglect cases, and assisting children in foster care. They provide an important service for some of the most vulnerable citizens of this state. When they are overburdened, cases go too long without being investigated, and in person visits become less frequent. Alaska has also experienced a high rate of turnover in the social worker profession, likely at least partially attributable to the high caseloads.

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) established caseload standards for each of their offices based on the CWLA standards and adjusted for the geographic area covered by each office. According to a 2005 research report, the majority of OCS social workers in Alaska had caseloads in excess of those standards. In Dillingham, the sole social worker handled 52 cases, when the caseload standard was 13. In Valdez, the sole social worker handles 30 cases, compared to the standard of 12.

HB 436 is a crucial first step toward protecting foster and neglected children in Alaska and I urge your support.

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

## HB 436: Social Worker Caseloads Sectional Analysis

### Section 1.

Amends the duties of the Department of Health and Social Services to include new social worker caseload standards.

### Section 2.

Creates social worker caseload standards in line with national Child Welfare League of America standards.

For Anchorage, Mat Su, Fairbanks and Juneau the caseload standards are:

- 12 new active initial cases assessments
- 17 ongoing cases, and no more than 1 new case assigned per 6 ongoing cases.
- 10 ongoing active cases and 4 new active cases for initial assessment
- 15 children in foster care

For areas outside of Anchorage, Mat Su, Fairbanks and Juneau the caseload standards are the same, or what is necessary to comply with the Department's 2005 workload study.

These standards do not apply to the extent the department is unable, after diligent recruiting efforts, to hire a sufficient number of social workers to meet the requirements.

### Section 3.

The Department may adopt regulations for transition.

### Section 4.

The Department may employ additional personnel as necessary to comply with this Act.

### Sections 5 & 6.

Effective dates.



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## Recommended Caseload Standards

The following recommended caseload standards are excerpted from the CWLA Standards of Excellence for Child Welfare Services. The standards can be ordered by going to [www.cwla.org/pubs](http://www.cwla.org/pubs) or calling 800-407-6273.

The recommended caseload standards for child protective services are as follows (CWLA Standards of Excellence for Services to Abused or Neglected Children and their Families, Revised 1999):

| Service/Caseload Type                                | CWLA Recommended Caseload/ Workload  |
|--|--|
| Initial Assessment/ Investigation                    | 12 active cases per month, per 1 social worker   |
| Ongoing Cases  | 17 active families per 1 social worker and no more than 1 new case assigned for every six open cases |
| Combined Assessment/ Investigation and Ongoing Cases | 10 active on-going cases and 4 active investigations per 1 social worker                             |
| Supervision  | 1 supervisor per 5 social workers  |

It should be noted that the caseload is based on new and active cases per month. In other words, new cases should not be added in a new month unless a comparable # of cases have been closed, assuming that the worker has a full caseload.

The recommended caseload standards for family foster care services are as follows (CWLA Standards of Excellence for Family Foster Care Services, Revised 1995):

| Service/Caseload Type | CWLA Recommended Caseload/ Workload |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Foster Family Care    | 12-15 children per 1 social worker  |
| Supervision           | 1 supervisor per 5 social workers   |

The number of supervisees assigned to a given supervisor should be determined by the training and experience of both the supervisor and supervisees.

### Background

Alaska State Legislature  
House of Representatives

Session address:  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182  
1-888-465-2647 (toll free)  
1-907-465-3518 (fax)



Interim address:  
716 West 4th Avenue  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2133  
1-907-269-0106  
1-907-269-0109 (fax)

Representative Les Gara

February 6, 2006

Tammy Sandoval  
Deputy Commissioner  
Office of Children's Services  
P.O. Box 110630  
Juneau, AK 99811  
*Via Fax to: (907) 465-3397*

Dear Tammy:

I understand you are currently in the process of completing a workload study for social workers statewide. We appreciate the time you spent working with us, and with Senator Guess and Representative Dahlstrom last year to discuss this issue. As you know, we've pushed for a reduction in social worker caseloads since 2003.

In our conversations last year, we discussed waiting for the results of the workload study, and then introducing a bill to implement the recommended changes. Because of the bill introduction deadline of February 13<sup>th</sup>, we've decided to introduce the bill we wrote last year, but are committed to work with you to update it once the study is released.

Thank you again for your commitment to helping children in foster care and state custody. I look forward to working with you.

Best Regards,

Les Gara

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Les Gara", written over the printed name.

cc: Rep. Nancy Dahlstrom  
Sen. Gretchen Guess

E-mail: [Representative\\_Les\\_Gara@legis.state.ak.us](mailto:Representative_Les_Gara@legis.state.ak.us)



# STATE OF ALASKA

## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

FRANK H. MURKOWSKI, GOVERNOR

P.O. BOX 110630  
JUNEAU, ALASKA 99811-0630  
PHONE: (907) 465-3170

February 28, 2006

*Bill File*

Honorable Representative Les Gara  
Alaska State Legislature  
State Capitol Building, Room 418  
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Representative Gara:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and your staff on February 15<sup>th</sup> to discuss the Office of Children's Services (OCS) workload study and staffing needs.

During our meeting, you requested a current caseload count and suggested interest in a comparison to Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) caseload standards. As you probably know, the CWLA has different standards for different phases of child protective services case work. Since many of our workers do all phases of the work, calculating caseload standards based on CWLA definitions is not necessarily comparable for Alaska.

In our effort to understand the data we received from Hornby, Zeller, Inc., we learned that as of February 17<sup>th</sup>, ORCA reflected approximately 4,164 open cases statewide. Based upon the corresponding number of open cases per region and front-line workers in each region, the approximate average caseloads per worker are as follow:

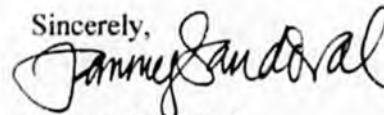
Anchorage - 30; Northern - 16; Southcentral - 15; and Southeast - 15

We believe the high numbers of cases in the Anchorage region can be attributed to the fact that Anchorage has been more successful at closing their assessments and re-opening cases for in-home services when it has been determined that the family could benefit from further intervention. OFCA is currently reflecting a more realistic picture of the in-home cases for Anchorage staff, as compared to staff in any other region.

In an on-going effort strengthen the integrity of our data, I have requested that a statewide data clean-up effort will be complete by the end of March. I expect more accurate caseload numbers on April 1<sup>st</sup>. I have received a commitment from our workload study contractor to recalculate, using their workload formula, and I expect to have a more accurate count with which to better analyze our needs at that time.

As always, I truly appreciate your support.

Sincerely,



Tammy Sandoval  
Deputy Commissioner

# LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

JANUARY 12, 2005



REPORT NUMBER 05.065

## OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES FRONT-LINE SOCIAL WORKERS AND THEIR CASELOADS

PREPARED FOR REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA

BY CHUCK BURNHAM, JOYCELYN WARD, AND ROGER WITHINGTON,  
LEGISLATIVE ANALYSTS

You asked for information on the Office of Children's Services (OCS).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, you asked for a comparison of the OCS front-line Social Workers to their caseloads for FY2004 and FY2005. Further, you asked for an estimate of what the front-line Social Worker caseloads will be if Governor Murkowski's proposal for 31 new OCS workers is adopted for FY2006.<sup>2</sup> You also wanted to know how these caseloads compare to the caseload standards established by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA).

Unfortunately, the OCS was unable to provide us with all of the specific information you requested. One of the principal reasons behind this inability is that the manner in which the OCS delivers child protective services does not precisely match the categories used by the Child Welfare League of America in calculating recommended caseload standards.<sup>3</sup> The CWLA views service delivery as three separate functions: initial assessment and investigation, ongoing cases, and foster family care. The CWLA does not appear to provide a caseload standard that "mixes" these functions—that is, a standard that assumes social workers perform multiple aspects of service delivery—which would more closely reflect the circumstances experienced by front-line Social Workers in many areas of Alaska. Further, some front-line Social Workers in Alaska license, or help in licensing, foster homes and residential care facilities. The CWLA standards do

<sup>1</sup> Governor Murkowski reorganized the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) through Executive Order 108. Beginning on July 1, 2003, the duties of the Division of Family and Youth Services (DFYS) were merged with some duties formerly in the Divisions of Public Health and Medical Assistance, forming the Office of Children's Services (OCS). The OCS is responsible for Child Protective Services, Adoption, Foster Care, Family Services, Healthy Families Alaska, Infant Learning Program, WIC, and Behavioral Rehabilitation Services. Alaska Statutes 47.10, Children in Need of Aid, and 47.17, Child Protection, delineate most of Alaska's child protection laws.

<sup>2</sup> On November 29, 2004, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services issued a press release indicating that Governor Frank Murkowski would request 34 new positions for the OCS in his FY2006 budget. On December 16, 2004, Governor Murkowski released his FY2006 budget proposal that included only 31 new employees for the OCS.

<sup>3</sup> The CWLA's caseload standards can be found at <http://www.cwla.org/newsevents/news030304cwlacaseoad.htm>.

not account for these activities in their standard caseload. Additionally, during the initial assessment and investigation stage, some offices provide child protective services to families, but do not have custody of the child. Such situations fall under the OCS's "investigation" category but are viewed as "ongoing" by the CWLA. The sum of these limitations and inconsistencies make a direct comparison of the caseloads of the OCS front-line workers to the CWLA caseload standards problematic.

The OCS was able, however, to express the current caseloads of front-line Social Workers in a way that allows for a comparison of caseloads for FY2004 with those for FY2005, which we present in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.<sup>4</sup> Please use caution when interpreting these two tables as they measure only two service delivery components of the OCS: child protective service investigations and on-going services (cases in which the OCS has custody of a child, including children placed in Alaska pursuant to the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC)). The data the OCS provided to us does not reflect the activities of Social Workers associated with licensing or in-home services (cases in which a family receives services but no children are taken into state custody).

The OCS has 20 staff statewide who are responsible only for licensing activities and who are not front-line workers. Licensed Foster Homes are reviewed one year after they are first licensed and every two years thereafter. Licensing staff complete these reviews in addition to conducting the initial home studies. In small OCS offices, however, the front-line workers perform investigations, on-going case services, and licensing. Mike Lesmann, Program Coordinator with the Office of Children's Services, notes that although the OCS currently has some in-home cases, it does not have the resources to meet the demand for this type of service. The OCS estimates that they would need an additional 33 workers to meet the in-home case demand.<sup>5</sup>

Both Tables 1 and 2 base caseloads on *available* front-line, case-carrying staff. Please note, these figures do not include vacant positions, workers on long term leave such as Family Medical Leave Act, and newly hired workers who are in training and not yet carrying cases. Included are non-permanent case-carrying workers.<sup>6</sup>

Using FY2004 staffing levels, Table 1 calculates the caseloads of front-line Social Workers based on child protective service investigations and on-going case services active on August 2, 2004. Included in Table 1 are the following for each OCS office:

- The caseload standard,
- The number of cases per front-line worker
- The number of cases per worker in excess of the standard,
- The total number of front-line workers needed to meet the standard

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<sup>4</sup> Typically, "workload" is used to describe the aggregate of all duties assigned to social workers. "Caseload," by contrast, means the number of individual cases, or families, assigned to an individual social worker. Generally, "workload" is a measurement of time and effort and "caseload" is a measure of case volume.

<sup>5</sup> Mr. Lesmann can be contacted at 907-465-3548.

<sup>6</sup> At the time the OCS provided us with this data, they indicated that there were only two vacant front-line Social Worker positions statewide (a 3.3% vacancy rate for front-line workers). If filled, these vacant positions would reduce the number of front-line workers needed to meet the caseload standard to 38 in FY2004, 24 in FY2005, and 13 in FY2006. Please note that although we have not received the current front-line worker vacancy rate from the OCS, related material that we have received from the OCS implies the front-line worker vacancy rate is somewhat higher than 3.3%.

- The number of available front-line social workers, and
- The number of additional front-line workers needed to meet the standard.

As we noted, the typical caseload of many, though not all, front-line OCS Social Workers is comprised of a mix of investigation cases and ongoing cases (which the CWLA refers to as Foster Family Care cases). Although the CWLA standards do not precisely correspond to how the OCS delivers and accounts for its services, the OCS established its own caseload standards for each office based on the CWLA standard for providing Foster Family Care services (12 to 15 children per one Social Worker) and the geographic area covered by each office. In other words, the "Caseload Standard" provided in Tables 1 and 2 are generally based, in part, on CWLA standards.

Using FY2005 staffing levels, Table 2 also calculates the caseloads of the front-line Social Workers based on the child protective service investigations and on-going case services active on August 2, 2004. Included in the FY2005 calculation are 14 new front-line Social Worker positions.<sup>7</sup> The components and formulae in Table 2 are otherwise similar to those presented in Table 1.

As you can see by comparing the two tables, adding the 14 new workers in FY2005 reduced the overall average number of cases per front-line worker from 18 in FY2004 to 17 in FY2005. As Table 2 illustrates, the OCS still needs an additional 26 front-line workers to meet the established caseload standard.

On December 16, 2004, Governor Murkowski released his FY2006 budget proposal. This proposal includes the addition of 31 new employees for the OCS, 11 of whom are to be front-line Social Workers. According to Marcia Kennai, Deputy Commissioner, the OCS has not determined where these new employees will be located.<sup>8</sup> Ms. Kennai has indicated that the OCS plans to conduct a workload time study in the spring of 2005. Once this time study is analyzed, and if the positions are approved, she will distribute the new positions to the appropriate locations. Preliminarily, however, she anticipates that Anchorage will get at least three new positions (and one supervisor), and the other positions will be distributed to Kenai, Homer, Saint Mary's, Dillingham, and Bethel. According to our calculations, the OCS will still need an additional 15 front-line Social Workers to meet the caseload standards the OCS used in Tables 1 and 2.

As you will note from Tables 1 and 2, there are several OCS offices that appear to be overstaffed as indicated by a negative number in the "Number of Additional Front-Line Workers Needed to Meet Standard" column. This is one illustration of the limitations of the OCS's analysis. In an effort to provide a more complete picture, we contacted three Social Workers at the Juneau OCS office. Each of these three employees indicated that staff turnover rates, burdensome administrative functions, case complexity, and unpaid overtime work do not receive sufficient

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<sup>7</sup> The OCS created 26 new positions in the FY2005 budget; 14 of those positions are front-line case-carrying Social Workers. According to Debra Wahl, Administrative Manager for the OCS, as of December 8, 2004, not all of these positions had been filled.

<sup>8</sup> Marcia Kennai, Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Children's Services. 907-465-3191.

consideration in caseload calculations.<sup>9</sup> Administrative staff at the OCS also expressed similar concerns regarding the shortcomings of the current caseload accounting system.

In 2002, the CWLA published a "Research 2 Practice" report on the child welfare workforce in which many of these issues are discussed. We include a copy of this report as Attachment A.

I hope you find this information to be useful. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have questions or need additional information.

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<sup>9</sup> Of these three Social Workers, none had less than six years experience at OCS. One supervisor indicated that turnover had been "almost 100% since June" in her unit. One stated that he worked six hours overtime weekly, on a year-in, year-out basis.

**Table 1: OCS Caseload on August 2, 2004, Using FY2004 Staffing Levels**

| Region        | Office                                | Caseload Standard                  | Cases per Front Line Worker | Cases per Worker in Excess of Standard | Total Number of Front Line Workers Needed to Meet Standard | Number of Available Front Line Workers | Number of Additional Front Line Workers Needed to Meet Standard |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| Anchorage     | Anchorage                             | 15                                 | 24                          | + 9                                    | 87   | 55                                     | + 32  |
|               | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)</sup></b>    | <b>13.6</b>                        | <b>18</b>                   | <b>+ 4</b>                             | <b>56</b>  | <b>42</b>                              | <b>+ 14</b>   |
| South Central | Bethel                                | 13                                 | 13                          | - 0                                    | 10   | 10                                     | - 0   |
|               | Kenai                                 | 14                                 | 24                          | + 10                                   | 10   | 6                                      | + 4   |
|               | Mat-Su                                | 14                                 | 12                          | - 2                                    | 10   | 11                                     | - 1   |
|               | All Other SCRO <sup>(a)</sup>         | 13.1                               | 23                          | + 10                                   | 26   | 15                                     | + 11  |
|               | Aniak                                 | 12                                 | 22                          | + 10                                   | 4  | 2                                      | + 2   |
|               | Cordova                               | 14                                 | 13                          | - 1                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|               | Dillingham                            | 13                                 | 52                          | + 39                                   | 4  | 1                                      | + 3   |
|               | Homer                                 | 14                                 | 39                          | + 25                                   | 6  | 2                                      | + 4   |
|               | King Salmon                           | 12                                 | 16                          | + 4                                    | 1  | 1                                      | + 0   |
|               | Kodiak                                | 14                                 | 9                           | - 5                                    | 1  | 2                                      | - 1   |
|               | Seward                                | 13                                 | 14                          | + 1                                    | 1  | 1                                      | + 0   |
|               | St Mary's                             | 12                                 | 27                          | + 15                                   | 7  | 3                                      | + 4   |
|               | Unalaska                              | 12                                 | 0                           | - 12                                   | 0  | 1                                      | - 1   |
|               | Valdez                                | 12                                 | 30                          | + 18                                   | 3  | 1                                      | + 2   |
|               | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)(b)</sup></b> | <b>13.6</b>                        | <b>16</b>                   | <b>+ 2</b>                             | <b>42</b>  | <b>36</b>                              | <b>+ 6</b>  |
| Northern      | Fairbanks                             | 15                                 | 17                          | + 2                                    | 21   | 19                                     | + 2   |
|               | Nome <sup>(b)</sup>                   | 13                                 | 13                          | + 0                                    | 5  | 5                                      | + 0   |
|               | All Other NRO <sup>(a)(b)</sup>       | 11.4                               | 16                          | + 4                                    | 16   | 12                                     | + 4   |
|               | Barrow                                | 13                                 | 20                          | + 7                                    | 3  | 2                                      | + 1   |
|               | Delta                                 | 13                                 | 15                          | + 2                                    | 2  | 2                                      | + 0   |
|               | Galena                                | 12                                 | 12                          | + 0                                    | 1  | 1                                      | + 0   |
|               | Fairbanks Bush                        | 12                                 | 9                           | - 3                                    | 2  | 3                                      | - 1   |
|               | Kotzebue <sup>(b)</sup>               | 13                                 | 23                          | + 10                                   | 5  | 3                                      | + 2   |
|               | McGrath                               | 12                                 | 11                          | - 1                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|               |                                       | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)</sup></b> | <b>14.8</b>                 | <b>10</b>                              | <b>- 4</b>   | <b>18</b>                              | <b>25</b>   |
| Southeast     | Juneau                                | 15                                 | 11                          | - 4                                    | 10   | 14                                     | - 4   |
|               | Ketchikan                             | 15                                 | 9                           | - 6                                    | 3  | 5                                      | - 2   |
|               | All Other SERO <sup>(a)</sup>         | 14.1                               | 10                          | - 4                                    | 4  | 6                                      | - 2   |
|               | Craig                                 | 15                                 | 11                          | - 4                                    | 1  | 2                                      | - 1   |
|               | Petersburg                            | 13                                 | 9                           | - 4                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|               | Sitka                                 | 14                                 | 10                          | - 4                                    | 1  | 2                                      | - 1   |
|               | Wrangell                              | 12                                 | 9                           | - 3                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|               |                                       | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)</sup></b> | <b>14.6</b>                 | <b>18</b>                              | <b>+ 4</b>   | <b>198</b>                             | <b>158</b>  |

**Notes:** The OCS established caseload standards for each office based on the CWLA standard for providing Foster Family Care services (12 to 15 children per one Social Worker) and the geographic area covered by each office. These caseloads include investigations, children in legal custody or supervision, and children placed in Alaska pursuant to the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC). Cases involving in-home services (where no children are in legal custody) and licensing caseloads are not included in this table. All worker counts are based on front-line, case-carrying staff. The calculation for front-line, case-carrying staff excludes vacant positions, workers on long term leave such as Family Medical Leave Act, and new workers who are in training and not yet carrying cases. It includes non-permanent case-carrying workers.

(a) The caseload standard is weighted. The base caseload standard is 15, but the standard for an office may be adjusted based for the size of the geographic area served and the availability of transportation. Subtotals may not add to totals due to rounding

(b) Workers employed by Kawerak in Nome and workers employed by Manilaq in Kotzebue, who provide child protective services are not counted in this analysis.

**Sources:** Mike Lesmann, Program Coordinator with the Office of Children's Services, 907-465-3548

**Table 2: OCS Caseload on August 2, 2004, Using FY2005 Staffing Levels**

| Region                                | Office                                | Caseload Standard | Cases per Front-Line Worker | Cases per Worker in Excess of Standard | Total Number of Front Line Workers Needed to Meet Standard | Number of Available Front Line Workers | Number of Additional Front Line Workers Needed to Meet Standard |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| Anchorage                             | Anchorage                             | 15                | 21                          | + 6                                    | 87   | 62                                     | + 25  |
|                                       | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)</sup></b>    | <b>13.6</b>       | <b>16</b>                   | <b>+ 2</b>                             | <b>56</b>  | <b>47</b>                              | <b>+ 9</b>  |
| South Central                         | Bethel                                | 13                | 11                          | - 2                                    | 10   | 12                                     | - 2   |
|                                       | Kenai                                 | 14                | 24                          | + 10                                   | 10   | 6                                      | + 4   |
|                                       | Mat-Su                                | 14                | 11                          | - 3                                    | 10   | 12                                     | - 2   |
|                                       | All Other SCRO <sup>(a)</sup>         | 13.1              | 20                          | + 7                                    | 26   | 17                                     | + 9   |
|                                       | Aniak                                 | 12                | 22                          | + 10                                   | 4  | 2                                      | + 2   |
|                                       | Cordova                               | 14                | 13                          | - 1                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|                                       | Dillingham                            | 13                | 26                          | + 13                                   | 4  | 2                                      | + 2   |
|                                       | Homer                                 | 14                | 26                          | + 12                                   | 6  | 3                                      | + 3   |
|                                       | King Salmon                           | 12                | 16                          | + 4                                    | 1  | 1                                      | + 0   |
|                                       | Kodiak                                | 14                | 9                           | - 5                                    | 1  | 2                                      | - 1   |
|                                       | Seward                                | 13                | 14                          | + 1                                    | 1  | 1                                      | + 0   |
|                                       | St Mary's                             | 12                | 27                          | + 15                                   | 7  | 3                                      | + 4   |
|                                       | Unalaska                              | 12                | 0                           | - 12                                   | 0  | 1                                      | - 1   |
|                                       | Valdez                                | 12                | 30                          | + 18                                   | 3  | 1                                      | + 2   |
|                                       | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)(b)</sup></b> | <b>13.6</b>       | <b>15</b>                   | <b>+ 1</b>                             | <b>42</b>  | <b>38</b>                              | <b>+ 4</b>  |
| Northern                              | Fairbanks                             | 15                | 15                          | + 0                                    | 21   | 21                                     | + 0   |
|                                       | Nome <sup>(b)</sup>                   | 13                | 13                          | + 0                                    | 5  | 5                                      | + 0   |
|                                       | All Other NRO <sup>(a)(b)</sup>       | 11.4              | 16                          | + 4                                    | 16   | 12                                     | + 4   |
|                                       | Barrow                                | 13                | 20                          | + 7                                    | 3  | 2                                      | + 1   |
|                                       | Delta                                 | 13                | 15                          | + 2                                    | 2  | 2                                      | + 0   |
|                                       | Galena                                | 12                | 12                          | + 0                                    | 1  | 1                                      | + 0   |
|                                       | Fairbanks Bush                        | 12                | 9                           | - 3                                    | 2  | 3                                      | - 1   |
|                                       | Kotzebue <sup>(b)</sup>               | 13                | 23                          | + 10                                   | 5  | 3                                      | + 2   |
|                                       | McGrath                               | 12                | 11                          | - 1                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|                                       | <b>Region Total <sup>(a)</sup></b>    | <b>14.8</b>       | <b>10</b>                   | <b>- 4</b>                             | <b>18</b>  | <b>25</b>                              | <b>- 7</b>  |
| Southeast                             | Juneau                                | 15                | 11                          | - 4                                    | 10   | 14                                     | - 4   |
|                                       | Ketchikan                             | 15                | 9                           | - 6                                    | 3  | 5                                      | - 2   |
|                                       | All Other SERO <sup>(a)</sup>         | 14.1              | 10                          | - 4                                    | 4  | 6                                      | - 2   |
|                                       | Craig                                 | 15                | 11                          | - 4                                    | 1  | 2                                      | - 1   |
|                                       | Petersburg                            | 13                | 9                           | - 4                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
|                                       | Sitka                                 | 14                | 10                          | - 4                                    | 1  | 2                                      | - 1   |
|                                       | Wrangell                              | 12                | 9                           | - 3                                    | 1  | 1                                      | - 0   |
| <b>Statewide Total <sup>(a)</sup></b> | <b>14.6</b>                           | <b>17</b>         | <b>+ 2</b>                  | <b>198</b>                             | <b>172</b>   | <b>+ 26</b>                            |   |

**Notes:** The OCS established caseload standards for each office based on the CWLA standard for providing Foster Family Care services (12 to 15 children per one Social Worker) and the geographic area covered by each office. These caseloads include investigations, children in legal custody or supervision, and children placed in Alaska pursuant to the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC). Cases involving in-home services (where no children are in legal custody) and licensing caseloads are not included in this table. All worker counts are based on front-line, case-carrying staff. The calculation for front-line, case-carrying staff excludes vacant positions, workers on long term leave such as Family Medical Leave Act, and new workers who are in training and not yet carrying cases. It includes non-permanent case-carrying workers.

(a) The caseload standard is weighted. The base caseload standard is 15, but the standard for an office may be adjusted based for the size of the geographic area served and the availability of transportation. Subtotals may not add to totals due to rounding.

(b) Workers employed by Kawerak in Nome and workers employed by Maniqaq in Kotzebue, who provide child protective services are not counted in this analysis.

**Sources:** Mike Lesmann, Program Coordinator with the Office of Children's Services, 907-465-3548.

**Attachment A**

*Child Welfare Workforce, Child Welfare League of America, September 2002,  
<http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p/rrnews0209.pdf>*

September 2002

# Child Welfare Workforce

## Overview

According to the results of the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA's) *2000 Membership Trends and Issues Survey*, public and private nonprofit agencies report that the greatest concerns for the child welfare field are the increasing number of children needing services and the lack of qualified staff.

No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to effectively serve vulnerable children and families than the shortage of a competent and stable workforce. Without an adequate workforce, agencies are not able to adhere to national service and caseload standards, maintain a climate that supports the delivery of high quality services, or adopt evidence-based practices.

Nearly every American industry has experienced labor shortages at some time, but shortages in the helping professions are especially troublesome. Effectiveness in this area comes from increasing staff expertise, building rapport, and establishing stable, trusting relationships with children, families, and communities. These prerequisites for success are undermined by high turnover. Child welfare agencies experience turnover that frequently exceeds 50% per year. Position vacancy rates often surpass 12% (Drais-Parrillo, in press). The shortage of qualified workers affects these agencies at almost every level, including child and youth care staff, social workers, and support and administrative staff.

At the agency level, the current workforce crisis is evident in three ways. First, an insufficient number of qualified candidates are in the recruitment pool. Second, agencies are often unable to compete with other segments of the economy in terms of salary, benefits, and working conditions. Third, agencies are unable to retain workers.

These are not new challenges for child welfare agencies. In 1991, Helfgott reviewed literature and recommendations from child welfare leaders. It outlines many of the difficulties agencies report today. Items specifically cited as key challenges for staffing child welfare agencies were:

- increasingly complex demands for services and workloads,
- lack of resources for clients,
- insufficient training,
- inadequate financial compensation,
- safety and liability concerns, and
- poor physical and organizational working conditions.

In the past decade, these issues have not improved, and some have worsened. The cumulative effect

on agency service provision is complex and will not respond to a quick fix. Some of the solutions are so obvious to many child welfare professionals that formal research seems unnecessary. The lack of progress in resolving these problems, continued negative public perception of the child welfare field, and an unwillingness to invest public resources in children, families, and those who work with them, however, demand a multifaceted approach.

Because an adequate workforce is fundamental to the delivery of services by child welfare agencies, CWLA's Research to Practice (R2P) Initiative has selected it as a focus area. The expectation is that bringing together a summary of the literature and the research efforts to date will provide agencies and advocates with the foundation to make productive decisions and changes, whether they are revising the workforce policies of a small work unit or of a statewide system.

### TRENDS

- The increasing number of children needing services and the lack of qualified staff affect children and families.
- Turnover often exceeds 50% per year in the child welfare field, and position vacancy rates often surpass 12%.

## Literature Review

### Historical Perspective

What is now being termed the *workforce crisis* has its roots in public policy decisions made over the past 30 years. During the early years of the 20th century, the U.S. Children's Bureau, in cooperation with universities and local agencies, built a child welfare system staffed by people with professional social work educations (Schorr, 2000). As a result, the preferred standard for employment became the master's of social work degree (MSW). Child welfare came to be viewed as a prestigious specialty within the social work profession (A. Ellett, 1996; Leighninger & Ellett, 1993).

In 1962, at the federal level, child welfare merged with public assistance, which traditionally placed less emphasis on educational qualifications of staff. Later, increased recognition of child abuse led to passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974. The enactment of state child abuse and neglect reporting laws followed, leading to an avalanche of child abuse reports. There was no provision of adequate resources for the preparation and support of additional staff required to respond to the reports, however (A. Ellett & Millar, 1996; Leighninger & Ellett, 1998). Consequently, states moved quickly to reduce staff qualifications to hire enough employees (A. Ellett, 1996).

In the wake of this "deprofessionalization," agencies began to structure child welfare work differently, attempting to reduce its complexity and make it possible for people with fewer qualifications to adequately perform required tasks. These efforts are reflected in practices such as specialization, which causes families to be passed from one caseworker to another as they move through various agency programs, and the purchase of external clinical services that were formerly provided by internal agency staff (A. Ellett, 1996; Schorr, 2000).

Attempts to reform the system during the 1980s and 1990s were largely devoid of attention to the fundamental issues of workforce quality and quantity. Instead, efforts focused on external monitoring from courts and review bodies (O'Donnell, 1992). As a result, the child welfare work environment evolved into one characterized by lowered autonomy, heightened regimentation, and increased documentation (A. Ellett, 1996; Reagh, 1994; Schorr, 2000).

### Issues in Workforce

The professional literature contains a substantial body of writing based on descriptive data and observations of trends in policy and practice over the past two decades. When this work is considered as a whole, seven major areas of concern emerge.

#### *Staff Qualifications and Selection*

A national study (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988) revealed that only 28% of staff employed in public child welfare agencies had formal social work education. Recruitment and selection of qualified staff are hampered by the lack of accurate, realistic job descriptions necessary to ensure an applicant's understanding of the nature of the work and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for competent performance (Pecora, Briar, & Zlotnik, 1989; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000).

#### *Work Environment and Support*

*Work environment* includes both the physical setting that agencies provide and the resources made available to support the staff's multiple tasks and responsibilities. Child welfare practice settings are often deficient in both these areas (Pecora et al., 1989).

Perhaps the most important element of the work environment, however, is not the physical setting, but the organizational infrastructure, which includes such factors as supervision, level of organizational support, professional culture, autonomy, and flexibility. Many authors suggest that as child welfare work becomes more highly structured and regulated, it no longer has the flexibility and autonomy that characterizes a true profession (A. Ellett, 1996; Reagh, 1994). In addition, policies to which staff must conform are too often driven by external forces such as legislation and the courts. These policies are not consistent with the evidence supporting good practice (Malm, Bess, Leos-Urbel, Green, & Markowitz, 2001).

#### *Workload*

Unlike many other human service agencies, child welfare, at least in the public sector, has little ability to control work intake. Workers view high caseloads (often two to three times the amount recommended by CWLA standards (CWLA, 1991, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000) and voluminous paperwork as the norm. Agencies are also subject to changes in legislation and policy that add to the duties associated with cases. A caseload standard, there-

fore, may be reasonable one year and unmanageable the next. The best examples of this are the increase in required documentation linked to the external reviews imposed by legislative changes and the time that caseworkers must spend in court or in meetings with review boards (C. Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001; O'Donnell, 1992).

#### *Salaries and Promotion Opportunities*

Researchers point out that salaries in all areas of child welfare tend to be lower than in other jobs of comparable difficulty. As the need for social workers has expanded in other settings, this may discourage the best-qualified prospective employees from entering child welfare (Pecora et al., 1989). Agencies with a hierarchical organizational structure offer limited opportunities for promotion, and promotion typically requires that the caseworker move from direct service provision to management (C. Ellett, 1995).

#### *Professional Development*

Although professional development is valued by employees and can positively affect service delivery, both in-service training and continuing education opportunities are often greatly reduced or eliminated in times of fiscal shortfalls (Pecora et al., 1989). Even when continued learning opportunities are available, the mentoring and organizational support that staff need to transfer learning into performance may not be available (Alwon & Reitz, 2000). Furthermore, the regimented nature of work in many agencies discourages the exercise of judgment and decision-making that are critical to advanced skill development (Ewalt, 1991; Schorr, 2009).

#### *Public Image and Professional Respect*

The poor image of child welfare agencies has an adverse effect on morale and the ability of agencies to recruit and retain qualified employees (Ellett, 1995; Pecora et al., 1989). Lack of respect is shown in the attitudes of the public and the other professionals with whom child welfare staff must work each day. Staff reports of disrespectful

treatment by judges and legal professionals suggest that the interface between agencies and the courts is an area of particular difficulty in this regard (C. Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001).

Media coverage of child welfare agencies is often poorly researched and overly sensationalized. Such publicity, especially in the wake of a child death, may promote quickly designed changes in policy and legislation that are unsettling to staff and have unintended adverse consequences (Malm et al., 2001).

#### *Personal Safety and Liability*

Concerns about staff safety have grown over the past two decades as agencies report working with an increasingly needy and disturbed client population. Likewise, situations in which staff are placed in personal jeopardy as a result of civil litigation arising from their professional duties have increased (Alwon & Reitz, 2000).

## **Workforce Research**

Empirical exploration of workforce issues has focused primarily on the identification of factors that are related to either employee performance or turnover and retention.

## **Performance**

#### *Social Work Education*

Education is the variable that child welfare workforce researchers have explored most often in relation to performance. Several studies have found evidence that social work education, at either the bachelor's of social work (BSW) or MSW level, positively correlates with performance.

A study conducted in Maryland public child welfare agencies found an MSW to be the best predictor of overall performance as measured by supervisory ratings and employee reports of work-related competencies (Booz-Allen & Hamilton, 1987). A national study (Lieberman et al., 1988) that measured competencies related to 32 job-related

### **MOVING FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE**

R2P encourages practitioners and agencies to make critical practice changes that reflect promising strategies and research findings featured in this Roundup. CWLA can provide comprehensive consultation on practice planning and implementation that can improve your agency's workforce status. Assistance is also available in establishing an evaluation component for existing programs or practices. R2P welcomes inquiries or information about your successful efforts to improve the child welfare workforce or other child welfare-related issues. Please send them to [r2p@cwla.org](mailto:r2p@cwla.org).

For additional information about the R2P Initiative, visit [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p). To further your understanding of CWLA's Workforce Initiative, visit [www.cwla.org/programs/trieschman](http://www.cwla.org/programs/trieschman).

duties found that both MSW and BSW staff were better prepared for child welfare work than their colleagues without social work education. Research conducted with staff in Kentucky's public child welfare agency also revealed that staff with social work degrees scored significantly better on state merit examinations, received somewhat higher ratings from their supervisors, and had higher levels of work commitment than other staff (Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1990). A Nevada study (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 2003) showed that caseworkers who had a social work degree were significantly more likely to create a permanent plan for children in their caseloads within three years than their colleagues without social work education. In a study of professional staff in the public child welfare systems in Arkansas and Louisiana, Ellett (2000) found that social work education was associated with higher self-reported professional self-efficacy.

Much of the research on the effect of education has focused on the agency-university partnership programs that have been established over the past decade using federal funding provided by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. Although there is variability in these programs, they generally aim to increase educational opportunities for agency staff to add to the pool of potential child welfare employees and enhance the relevance of curricula in schools of social work.

Research to examine their effects found that students score significantly higher on measures of job-related competencies (Fox, Burnham, Barbee, & Yankeelov, 2000; Okamura & Jones, 1998). Graduates of the specialized child welfare program in New York State had higher levels of skills, confidence, and sensitivity to clients (Hopkins, Mudrick, & Rudolph, 1999).

## Turnover and Retention

### *Social Work Education*

Some research has also linked social work education to employee retention in child welfare. Russell (1987) found that agencies that require social work degrees experience lower turnover rates. A study

conducted in Maine's public child welfare agency suggested that relevant education was related to retention (Bernotavicz, n.d.). Ellett (2000) found an association between social work education and self-reported intent to remain employed in child welfare.

Studies have also shown that graduates of specialized child welfare social work education programs are more likely to remain in child welfare and experience greater job satisfaction (Harrison, 1995; Okamura & Jones, 1998; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). Lewandowski (1998) found that BSW graduates of an agency-sponsored education program in Kansas tended to remain employed longer than MSWs. This finding may be linked to the case management nature of the public agency jobs, which do not allow MSWs to fully use the clinical and decisionmaking skills they learn in master's programs.

### *Personal Factors*

A small body of research has also explored personal characteristics of staff in relation to turnover and retention. Anderson (1994) found that higher ratings on the Coping Strategies Inventory were associated with intent to remain in child welfare even in the presence of high levels of emotional exhaustion. Other researchers have found commitment, investment, and a sense of mission to be significantly related to retention (Bernotavicz, n.d.; Harrison, 1995; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994). Higher

levels of professional self-efficacy and human caring are also associated with employee intent to remain (A. Ellett, 2000; C. Ellett, 1995).

### *Work Environment and Support*

Other factors with a significant role in employee retention relate primarily to the organizational aspects of the environment. These include organizational support (Ellett, 2000; Midgely, Ellett, Noble, Bennett, & Livermore, 1994; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991), supervision, and flexibility in job assignments (Bernotavicz, n.d.; Harrison, 1995; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992; Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, 2001). In studies that include staff interviews, supportive supervision is the most commonly cited variable

### WORKFORCE

- Less than a third of staff employed in public child welfare agencies have formal social work education.
- Salaries in public and private child welfare agencies are lower than in other comparable jobs.
- The increased regulation of public child welfare work, combined with external decisionmaking make this an unattractive job setting for professionals.
- The poor image of child welfare agencies has an adverse effect on morale and the retention of qualified employees.
- Concerns about staff safety have grown over the past two decades.

related to turnover and retention. Caseworkers differentiate supervisory support from that of the larger agency, and their comments suggest that they view it as more significant.

### Workload

Some studies have found an association between lower workload and retention (CWLA, 2001; Samantrai, 1992; Winefield & Barlow, 1995). Workload is also cited as a negative factor in research exploring job satisfaction (Midgley et al., 1994). Staff report increased clerical work, preparation for court, and time in court as major factors increasing workload, leading to loss of time with clients and diminishing their satisfaction (C. Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001).

### Salary and Promotions

Research concerning the role of salary and promotional opportunities as factors in turnover and retention has had mixed results. In a 1984 study, Jayaratne and Chess found both salary and promotion to be significant factors in job satisfaction. A national survey of public and private agencies conducted by CWLA (2001), however, showed no relationship between these factors and retention.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

A content analysis of workforce research reveals the strongest empirical support for social work education, supportive supervision, and job flexibility as factors positively associated with either performance or retention in child welfare.

Although the evidence related to educational qualifications is not unequivocal, it provides support for social work education as the best preparation for practice in child welfare. These findings tend to be most consistent with regard to graduates of specialized education programs offering enhanced child welfare content and internships in child welfare settings. Such agency-university partnerships have the potential to improve employee retention and performance.

There is evidence that at least for some jobs in child welfare, employees with BSWs may be better suited than those with master's degrees (Dhooper

et al., 1990; Lewandowski, 1998). This finding may be related to the increased regimentation that has come to characterize child welfare jobs over the past 20 years. If agencies are to attract and maintain people with MSWs, they will need to create jobs that provide a greater degree of autonomy and make use of the employees' advanced skills.

The strength of supervision as a factor in retention across several studies suggests that agencies may benefit greatly from focusing resources on the support and development of supervisors. Valued supervision in child welfare takes the form of support and consultation rather than strict direction and monitoring (Rycraft, 1994). Accordingly, selection and training for supervisory positions should emphasize these qualities. The critical nature of this role also indicates that agencies may benefit from targeting supervisors for greater organizational support and devising ways for them to have greater input in decisionmaking.

Flexibility in job assignment allows employees to find the best fit between job expectations and their skills and aptitudes (Rycraft, 1994). The strength of this finding is encouraging because it is within the power of creative managers to provide greater flexibility in job description and assignment.

### FINDINGS

- Employees with higher social work education perform more positively.
- Agencies that require social work degrees experience lower rates of staff turnover.
- Lower workload is positively associated with staff retention.
- Social work education, supportive supervision, and job flexibility are positively associated with performance and retention.
- Agency-university partnerships can improve employee retention and performance.

## Implications for Future Research

Studies need to empirically establish the duties and competencies associated with child welfare work. Such research would provide the basis for developing job descriptions that more accurately depict job requirements and for setting and defending education standards (Pecora et al., 1989; Gambrill, 1997).

Researchers should explore the relationship between workforce factors, as staff qualifications, workload, and stability, and client outcomes. The effective deployment of resources is informed by studies that tie successful interventions to staff qualifications and workload (Pecora et al., 1989) and that compare the cost-effectiveness of external purchase of services with the provision of agency staff capable of performing these functions.

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## Research to Practice

With the advice of program staff and leaders in the field, CWLA's Research to Practice (R2P) Initiative identifies well-researched, effective methods and practices in public and private agencies, both CWLA member agencies and others, that affect the lives of children, youth, families, and communities in a positive way.

Agency staff, an outside individual or group, or a university may have conducted the qualitative or quantitative research or evaluation component. R2P's goal is to support and promote the implementation of well-researched, evaluated methods. (See box on Research to Practice Levels of Rigor)

CWLA disseminates information about these programs and practices, as well as strategies for implementation or replication, to its member agencies and the field through a variety of media, workshops, consultation, and development services.

Topics the R2P Initiative is initially exploring include youth development and mentoring, family reunification, workforce issues, behavioral health, brain research and early childhood development, and juvenile justice.

*For further information, visit R2P's website at [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p), or contact the R2P team by e-mail at [r2p@cwla.org](mailto:r2p@cwla.org).*

### RESEARCH TO PRACTICE LEVELS OF RESEARCH RIGOR

Each program or practice included in the R2P Initiative has been identified as effective, with successes supported by a research component. R2P has developed four categories to describe the level of empirical support available. All programs and practices exist within an organizational context, with many factors that may influence outcomes.



#### Exemplary Practice

Research in this category has the following characteristics: a randomized study, a control group, posttests or pre- and posttests, effects sustained for at least one year, and multiple replications.



#### Commendable Practice

Research in this category has most of the following characteristics: a randomized or quasi-experimental study, a control or comparison group, posttests or pre-and posttests, follow up, and replication.



#### Emerging Practice

Research in this category has most of the following characteristics: a quasi-experimental study, a correlational or ex post facto study, posttest only, single group pre- and posttest, and a comparison group.



#### Innovative Ideas

Research in this category has most of the following characteristics: a case study, descriptive statistics only, and treatment group only.



CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA

#### Headquarters

440 First Street NW, Third Floor  
Washington, DC 20001-2085

202/638-2952 • Fax 202/638-4004 • [www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org)