



Cost Savings from Reasonable Child Welfare Workloads

A growing body of evidence indicates that maintaining reasonable caseloads and workloads will keep more child welfare workers on the job, leading to improvements in child welfare outcomes and cost savings for agencies. Requests for additional staffing and fiscal impact analysis of bills to expand the workforce and improve the quality of child welfare services should acknowledge the potential cost savings from reasonable caseloads.

While certain causes of turnover are outside an agency's control (such as retirement, death, marriage/parenting, returning to school, or spousal job move), the majority of case worker turnover is preventable. A national survey of 42 state child welfare administrators ranked high caseloads and workloads consistently as the top preventable reason for the voluntary resignation of child welfare caseworkers.ⁱ In 2006, the Government Accountability Office reported that child welfare agencies were plagued by high workloads and caseloads, which had a negative impact on child welfare outcomes and turnover.ⁱⁱ

A study that compared high-turnover and low-turnover counties in New York State found that low-turnover counties have lower median caseloads, which allows workers to spend more time directly with youth and families.ⁱⁱⁱ In a study comparing outcomes of 12 California county child welfare agencies that were grouped into three segments based on their average turnover rate, low-turnover counties had significantly lower maltreatment recurrence rates and higher compliance with recognized practice standards. High-turnover counties had the highest rates of re-abuse and had twice as many recurrences of abuse and neglect as the low-turnover counties.^{iv}

Researchers and child welfare stakeholders have consistently found that high turnover has devastating consequences for youth and families in the child welfare system, including:

- lower permanency rates;^v
- greater instability (more changes in placement);^{vi}
- longer stays in foster care;^{vii}
- decreased chances of timely reunification;^{viii}
- loss of trust between youth and caseworkers;^{ix} and
- impairment of agency functioning, such as delaying the timeliness of investigations, limiting the frequency of worker visits with children, and failure to meet a variety of federal performance standards.^x

High caseloads and workloads are costly to agencies and workers. There are direct costs related to overtime as workers and supervisors scramble to protect children. Separation, recruitment and training costs due to turnover are estimated to be between one-third to two-thirds of the worker's annual salary.^{xi} It takes about two years for child welfare employees to learn and develop the "knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions to work independently."^{xii} In the meantime, workers in understaffed and high turnover agencies must endure increased workloads, battle decreased morale, and rebuild trust with clients as agencies attempt to fill vacancies and train new caseworkers.^{xiii,xiv}

The Massachusetts Office of the Child Advocate reports, "There is no IT fix or management strategy that can substitute for workers having the time to understand, address, and document the needs of the children on their caseloads."^{xv} Children, families, and communities need governments and stakeholders to support investment in the child welfare workforce.

What should be included when calculating savings from reasonable caseloads and workloads?

- Direct costs related to overtime
- Direct costs related to worker separation
- Direct costs related to hiring and training new staff
- Indirect costs for other workers (increased paperwork and case management, emotional exhaustion, supervisors providing direct service)
- Cost of processing change in placement (staff meetings, new reports, identifying and placing a child in new placement, paperwork)
- Cost of increased time in foster care (whether group or in family) as a result of reduced permanency and decreased chances of reunification
- Cost of recurrence of abuse and neglect – cost of investigation, foster care placement, etc.
- Cost of failure to meet federal performance standards – potential loss of federal Title IV-E funding

Caseworkers leave their job the majority of the time because of organizational factors, such as high caseloads and workloads. Targeted interventions and planning that reduce caseloads and workloads to improve worker retention across the child welfare system is important. A quality, competent, and experienced child welfare workforce is essential to promote the well-being, permanency, and safety of children, youth and families. When workers have reasonable caseloads, the child welfare system can meet these goals.

ⁱ American Public Human Services Association. (2005) [Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey](#).

ⁱⁱ Government Accountability Office. (2006) [Improving Social Service Program, Training, and Technical Assistance Information Would Help Address Longstanding Service-Level and Workforce Challenges](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Lawson, H., Claiborne, N., McCarthy, N., Strolin, J., Briar-Lawson, L., Caringi, J., Auerbach, C., McGovern, B., Dorn, N., Sherman, R. (2005) [Retention Planning to Reduce Workforce Turnover in New York State's Public Child Welfare Systems: Developing Knowledge, Lessons Learned, and Emergent Priorities](#). New York State Social Work Education Consortium, University of Albany School of Social Welfare.

^{iv} National Council on Crime and Delinquency. (2006) [Relationship Between Staff Turnover, Child Welfare System Functioning and Recurrent Child Abuse](#).

^v Flower, C., McDonald, J., and Sumski, M. (2005) [Review of Turnover in Milwaukee County Private Agency Child Welfare Ongoing Care Management Staff](#).

^{vi} Pardeck, John T. (1984). *Multiple placement of children in foster family care: an empirical analysis*. Social Work. 29(6): 506-509. See also James, S. (2004) *Why do foster care placements disrupt? An investigation of reasons for placement change in foster care*. The Social Service Review. 78(4): 601-627.

^{vii} Ryan J.P., Garnier P., Zyphur M., and Zhai F. (2006) *Investigating the Effects of Caseworker Characteristics in Child Welfare*. Children and Youth Services Review. 28(9): 993–1006.

^{viii} Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2003) [The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce](#).

^{ix} Strolin-Goltzman, J., Kollar, S., and Trinkle, J. (2010) *Listening to the voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection*. Social Work. 55(1): 47-53.

^x Government Accountability Office. (2003) [HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff](#).

^{xi} Social Work Policy Institute. (2010) [High Caseloads: How Do they Impact Delivery of Health and Human Services?](#)

^{xii} Ellett, A.J., Ellis, J., Westbrook, T., and Dews, D. (2007) *A qualitative study of 369 child welfare professionals' perspectives about factors contributing to employee retention and turnover*. Children and Youth Services Review. 29(2): 264-281.

^{xiii} Yamatani, H., Rafael E., and Solveig S. (2009) *Child Welfare Worker Caseload: What's Just Right?* Social Work. 54 (5): 361-368.

^{xiv} The Center for Human Services at University of California, Davis, Extension. (2008) [A Literature Review of Placement Stability in Child Welfare Service: Issues, Concerns, Outcomes, and Future Directions](#).

^{xv} Massachusetts Office of the Child Advocate. (2015) [Interim Report to the Legislature Regarding Line Item 0411-1005 and Outside Section 209](#).