



Department of Economic Security Division of Children, Youth and Families Child Protective Services— Caseloads and Training

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Subject

This audit assesses five issues involving Child Protective Services (CPS) as specified by the Legislature: whether caseloads are in-line with Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) standards; changes in new case manager training; the adequacy of supervisory oversight and training; barriers to permanency; and the use of concurrent case planning.

Our Conclusion

Average caseloads for most case managers were 12 or fewer cases in both 2001 and 2003. While training has increased, more practical exercises are needed. CPS needs to determine an appropriate supervisor-to-staff ratio and improve supervisory training. Because the lack of concurrent planning hinders the permanent placement of children, CPS needs to fully implement this policy.



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Changes Needed To Accurately Project Case Manager Staffing Needs

The Legislature requested that the Auditor General determine the average caseload by type of worker, office, and district to help assess whether additional funding provided to Child Protective Services (CPS) has brought its caseloads in-line with the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) caseload standards.

CWLA has developed standards addressing how many cases a case manager should be assigned. There are some limitations to making direct comparisons between average caseloads in Arizona and the CWLA standards for two reasons. First, the Division uses three CWLA caseload standards—investigation, ongoing in-home, and ongoing out-of-home—to project its staffing needs, but these standards do not correspond precisely with how work is conducted in Arizona.

Second, subsequent to the completion of audit work, CWLA changed its interpretation of its investigative standard from 12 active cases at a point in time to 12 active cases in a month. However, auditors had calculated the average caseloads at a point in time, which is how CWLA indicated its investigative standard should be interpreted during the audit.

2001 average caseloads were 11 or fewer cases—The average caseloads for the majority of CPS staff managing cases on June 30, 2001, were 11 or fewer cases. The only staff who had more cases were case managers working in some of the Division's specialty units, such as the Young Adult Program. Auditors' interviews with supervisors in these units found that

higher caseloads are appropriate because, for example, case managers may have fewer responsibilities associated with their cases or fewer children per case.

2003 average caseloads were 12 or fewer cases—The average caseloads for the majority of CPS staff managing cases on June 30, 2003, were 12 or fewer cases. However, since 2001, the Division's total overall caseload increased by 30 percent from 6,561 cases to 8,562 cases. This growth occurred primarily in the investigations area, and case managers working in investigative units managed an average of 15 cases. Auditors' analysis also identified 23 case managers working in investigative units who had caseloads ranging from 30 to 82 cases. However, through interviews we found that many of the cases were completed, but just not closed on the Division's case management system.

Better data needed—The Division's case management system, caseload data, and staffing information are problematic. To ensure the Division can accurately project its staffing needs, it needs to address several factors:

- Modify its case management system to allow it to classify cases according to the three CWLA standards it uses—investigation, ongoing in-home, and ongoing out-of-home;
- Include in its caseloads only cases that are being actively worked by case management staff; and

There are indications that case managers are not able to effectively perform their jobs.

- Include all staff who regularly manage cases in its staffing needs projections. The Division only considers the job classification of CPS specialist as its case management position. However, some staff in other classifications, such as human service specialist, regularly manage cases.

Factors hinder effective caseload management—Although the average caseload for most staff managing cases was near 12, there are indicators that case managers are not able to effectively perform their jobs. CPS reports and internal reviews show:

- 32 percent of the children in out-of-home care did not receive their required monthly face-to-face visit;
- 47 percent of investigation cases reviewed showed the investigations were not initiated within required time frames; and

- 39 percent of cases reviewed lacked adequate case notes and summary documentation.

Some of the reasons case managers gave for having difficulty managing caseloads include:

- A 14.6 percent case manager turnover rate that periodically increases caseloads; and
- Burdensome paperwork and reporting requirements.

CPS needs to reduce its staff turnover and streamline its case management processes.

Establish Arizona caseload standards—CPS should assess workload factors to help determine appropriate caseload standards for Arizona. The CWLA standards are meant to be guidelines that an agency should adjust to reflect its own workload.

Recommendations

CPS should:

- Modify its case management system to classify cases according to standards;
- Include in its caseloads only cases that are being actively worked;
- Include all positions that regularly manage cases when determining staffing needs;
- Reduce staff turnover;
- Streamline its case management processes; and
- Establish caseload standards that are customized for Arizona.

Training Has Increased; Other Improvements Needed

The Legislature also asked our Office to compare how CPS' training program changed between 2001 and 2003. In January 2002, the Division established a new training program called the Child Welfare Training Institute. The new pro-

Child Welfare Training Institute

- \$1.7 million—annual cost
- 53—days of training per session
- 280—case managers trained from January 2002 to June 2003
- Locations—Phoenix and Tucson

gram improved case manager training by:

- Increasing the number of classroom hours from 138 to 190;
- Adding 200 hours of structured field activities, such as observing court hearings and ride-along home visits; and
- Adding new topics, such as behavioral health and child safety assessment.

New program has some inadequacies—

Auditors interviewed training graduates who indicated a need for more practical classroom instruction, such as more in-depth training on how to operate the computerized case management system, write court reports, make referrals for

services, and conduct interviews. In addition, the structured field exercises are not consistently implemented. For example, not all trainees get a chance to conduct a client interview.

More practical classroom instruction may help address staff retention by better preparing them for their jobs. Twenty-four percent of trainees from the January through October 2002 classes left CPS within 9 months of completing training.

Some trainees still have caseloads—

Despite a legislative mandate and CPS goal not to assign trainees caseload duties until they complete training, 38 percent of trainees from the January through June 2002 classes had some caseload duties. Two trainees carried full caseloads. This practice has continued even after auditors informed CPS management.

Recommendations

CPS should:

- Add additional practical classroom exercises to its curriculum;
- Implement field training consistently state-wide;
- Develop tools to assess turnover and address poor retention; and
- Establish and enforce a policy of not assigning trainees primary caseload duties until training is complete.

Supervisory Oversight Improvement Needed

Supervisors provide primary oversight of case managers through a variety of processes, such as reviewing and approving all child removal decisions and case plans, and providing case consultation.

Supervisory review lacking—Recent reviews by CPS found that evidence of supervisory oversight and guidance was missing. For example, a December 2002 review revealed that supervisors failed to complete the required case record review guide in the majority of the cases reviewed. The review guide ensures that case managers adhere to multiple laws and policies.

Inadequate consulting—The December 2002 review also found that supervisors did not conduct the Clinical Supervision conference in 60 percent of the applicable cases. This conference is supposed to monitor key decisions, whether policies are applied consistently, and whether appropriate services are implemented.

Poor oversight affects turnover—Eighteen of 77 case managers who left CPS employment from January 2002 to April 2003 indicated poor supervisory support was a contributing factor in their decision to leave.

Evidence of supervisory oversight was missing.

Address poor oversight factors

The Division needs to address several factors contributing to poor supervisory oversight.

Supervisory ratios—According to CWLA standards, there should be one supervisor for five case managers. While there are fewer than five staff per supervisor in rural Arizona, there are too many staff per supervisor in the metropolitan areas. If the CWLA standards are appropriate for Arizona and all supervisor vacancies were filled, the Division would need 25 additional supervisors. However, the workload factors and their impact, such as employee turnover, for CPS' supervisors may differ from those used to develop the CWLA standards. CPS should

review its workload factors and determine an appropriate supervisor-to-case manager ratio for Arizona.

Inexperienced supervisors—According to April 2003 personnel data, 17 percent of CPS supervisors were promoted to their current position in the last year and 33 percent within the last 2 years.

Supervisory training—In 2002 and 2003, CPS discontinued new supervisor training for months at a time. In September 2003, CPS resumed this training. Because the Division has a relatively new and inexperienced supervisory staff, a consistent, comprehensive training program becomes even more critical.

In addition to training new supervisors, existing supervisors need supervisor-specific continuing education.

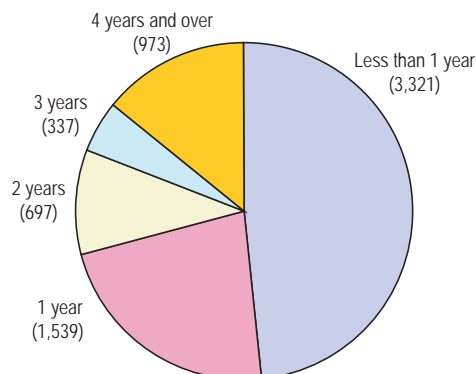
Recommendations

CPS should:

- Determine an appropriate supervisor-to-case manager ratio by assessing supervisor workload factors;
- Fill vacant supervisor positions; and
- Deliver a comprehensive training program to new and existing supervisors.

Improvement in Timely Placement of Foster Care Children Needed

Percentage of Children in Foster Care by Length of Time



Many children remain in out-of-home care for long periods at a high cost to the State and potential harm to a child's health and future self-sufficiency.

Barriers to permanent placements—Several barriers prevent achieving permanency for children. Some obstacles center on the children's characteristics. Older children and those with severe mental health issues are particularly difficult to place. There are also barriers within the CPS system, such as delays in terminating parental rights and identifying potential adoptive families.

Concurrent case planning can make placements timelier—Concurrent case planning pursues an alternative placement plan, such as adoption, at the same time as it pursues family reunification. Studies and other states' experience indicate that concurrent case planning:

- Decreases a child's time in foster care;
- Reduces the number of placements a child experiences in foster care; and
- Increases permanent placements.

Although the Division established a concurrent case-planning policy in April 2001, various reviews have observed that its implementation has been limited.

Two improvements are needed to successfully implement concurrent case planning:

- **Training**—New case managers receive only a short video and 10 minutes of discussion during their new staff training. Further, existing case managers need training. In May 2001, shortly after the policy

was adopted, an all-day training was provided, and only approximately one-quarter of case managers attended it.

- **Stakeholder support**—CPS should continue to provide information about concurrent case planning to stakeholders to obtain their support. These stakeholders include assistant attorneys general, juvenile court judges, attorneys who represent children and parents, and the State Foster Care Review Board.

Other strategies that increase permanency should continue—The Division should continue using techniques that increase permanency. These techniques include designating units of staff who solely focus on placing children in permanent homes and units for finding special-needs children homes.

The Division's participation in the Model Court, which lessened barriers to permanency in the judicial process, also increased permanency. Adopted state-wide in 1999, the Model Court shortened judicial time frames, mandated expedited service delivery for dependent children and their families, and required courts to provide more oversight of dependency matters.

Concurrent case planning decreases time in foster care.

Recommendations

CPS should:

- Enhance concurrent case planning within the new case manager training;
- Provide additional state-wide training on concurrent case planning and require attendance by case managers and supervisors;
- Continue to provide information on concurrent case planning to stakeholders; and
- Continue efforts to increase permanency.

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Department of Economic Security
Division of Children, Youth and Families
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