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Caseload and Workload Management

Large caseloads and excessive workloads can make it difficult for child welfare caseworkers to serve families effectively. High turnover rates continue to contribute to the issue, resulting in many agencies focusing on staffing and retention to maintain reasonable caseloads and workloads among staff. Manageable caseloads and workloads can make a difference in a caseworker's ability to engage families, deliver quality services, stay with the agency, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes for children and families.

Reducing and managing caseloads and workloads are not simple tasks for child welfare administrators. Agencies face several challenges, including the complexity of child and family needs; staff turnover and vacancies; funding; implementation of best-practice approaches; and time required for documentation, administrative activities,

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coordination of services, and travel (Collins-Camargo et al., 2018). It can even be difficult to determine what the caseload and workload levels currently are and what they should be.

Nevertheless, agencies are addressing these challenges and successfully implementing a variety of strategies to make caseloads and workloads more manageable. This issue brief provides an overview of the knowledge base about caseload and workload issues and can help State and local child welfare managers, administrators, and others learn how they can improve caseload and workload situations in their agencies.

Definitions

Caseload: The number of children or families assigned to an individual caseworker in a given time period. Caseload reflects a ratio of cases to staff members and may be measured for an individual caseworker, all caseworkers assigned to a specific type of case, or all caseworkers in a specified area (e.g., agency, region).

Workload: The amount of work required to successfully manage assigned children and families and bring their cases to resolution. There is no universal formula for determining acceptable workloads (Collins-Camargo et al., 2018). However, workload generally reflects the average time it takes a caseworker to (1) do the work required for each assigned case and (2) complete other noncasework responsibilities.

BACKGROUND

The issue of high caseloads and workloads has been a challenge for the child welfare field for decades and continues to negatively impact children and families served by the system. Data from the latest round of Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) showed that high caseloads and workloads negatively affected caseworkers' ability to achieve permanency goals, respond to maltreatment reports in a timely manner, efficiently file court documents and paperwork, and attend training (JBS International, Inc., 2020).

The issue stems from a variety of circumstances, including understaffed and undersupported agencies, increasingly complex needs of families, high caseworker turnover, and limited funding (Kim et al, 2019). Service availability and program capacity may also affect workloads. When families cannot access the services they need, caseworkers often must do more work to fill in gaps, and it may take longer to resolve cases. Changes in laws and policies may also lead to an increased number of families involved with the system and increased expectations of caseworkers.

Turnover among caseworkers continues to be a leading cause *and* consequence of high caseloads and workloads. The median caseworker handles 55 cases per year; however, the median caseworker stays on the job for only 1.8 years (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). (See this [data visualization](#) from the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development [QIC-WD] for caseworker turnover rates by State.) When a caseworker quits, transfers, or leaves their role, the

consequences are costly for families, whose cases may be reassigned and delayed; for agencies, which take on additional recruiting, interviewing, and training expenses; and for remaining caseworkers, who take on additional cases. Turnover has increased in many fields in recent years as a record number of workers in the United States continue to [quit their jobs](#) (a movement dubbed the Great Resignation, which many associate with the COVID-19 pandemic), and high turnover continues to be a persistent challenge in the child welfare field. As the turnover crisis continues, many agencies are increasingly looking to improve staffing and retention as a strategy to combat high caseloads and workloads and improve outcomes for families.

BENEFITS OF REASONABLE CASELOADS AND MANAGEABLE WORKLOADS

Caseload and workload management often appear as key ingredients in a State or local agency's comprehensive strategy to produce better outcomes for children and families. There are many benefits of reasonable caseloads and manageable workloads:

- **Engaging families and delivering quality services.** Essential child welfare processes—including family engagement, relationship building, assessment, permanency planning, and service coordination—are time intensive and require frequent caseworker-client contact. Manageable caseloads and workloads permit caseworkers the time they need to invest in these activities to support families.
- **Achieving positive outcomes for children and families.** Effective caseload and workload management allows caseworkers to better do their jobs, which can result in improved safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and youth. It may also help improve sustainability of those outcomes and reduce recidivism.
- **Improving caseworker retention.** Workforce turnover is a critical issue for the child welfare field, with a median national turnover rate estimated between 14 and 22 percent (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). A frequently cited cause of turnover is caseworker burnout. Caseworkers with manageable job demands—including reasonable caseloads and workloads—and supportive workplaces have significantly higher rates of retention (Radey & Wilke, 2021).
- **Supporting caseworker attitudes and well-being.** Workers' perceptions of their workloads are related to work-family conflict, job satisfaction, mental well-being, strain, depression, distress, fatigue, physical symptoms, burnout, and absenteeism (Bowling et al., 2015). Efforts to ensure workloads are manageable may prevent workers from experiencing myriad negative outcomes and may enhance job satisfaction.
- **Improved performance on the CFSRs.** Beginning with the first round in 2001, CFSRs have frequently noted the need for improvements in workloads or caseloads. States continue to address caseloads and workloads and related issues (e.g., recruitment, retention, training, supervision, systems reform) in their Program Improvement Plans as a way to improve CFSR outcomes and achieve compliance with Federal standards.

- **Compliance with legislation and litigation.**

Several State legislatures have mandated State and local jurisdictions to assess workload issues, meet identified standards, implement specific strategies such as hiring additional staff, and report on progress.

In addition, provisions in settlement agreements and consent decrees resulting from litigation often require jurisdictions to meet specific caseload standards.

ASSESSING CASELOADS AND WORKLOADS

The most comprehensive approaches to assessing caseload and workload are [caseload and workload studies](#). These studies can help agencies compare how much time is available to complete casework with how much time is spent or should be spent completing it. The studies can be used by agencies in many ways, including developing caseload standards, assessing the number of caseworkers or positions necessary to complete the required work, and instituting methods to regularly monitor caseload and workload. Agencies can assess data across the entire staff or by region, office, or unit. Additionally, agencies can use the results from the studies to justify requests for additional funding or staffing as well as to help develop legislation or other policies outlining caseload or other practice standards. (For examples of recent workload studies, view these reports from child welfare agencies in [Wisconsin](#) and [Maine](#).)

To conduct workload studies, agencies often engage external expert assistance, which may provide the necessary credibility and

leverage university partnerships to conduct research and evaluation of caseload, workload, or workforce issues. For agencies that are not positioned to undertake a comprehensive study, the results and recommendations from other agencies may have some value. Additionally, agencies can use existing quality assurance or information system data to assess potential indicators of insufficient workforce capacity, including whether caseworkers use overtime or unpaid time to complete their work.

Many States have adopted caseload and/or workload standards as a result of these studies. Standards often vary by State and by role (e.g., intake, assessment, or ongoing workers). Some agencies take into consideration the caseload standards and guidance developed by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) in 2012. However, CWLA did not provide a recommended standard in its most recent report (Collins-Camargo et al., 2018). Instead, the organization advises agencies to create their own standards and recommends shifting away from caseload-centered standards to workload-centered standards. It recommends this since setting a specific number fails to consider the nuances and complexity of each case as well as other responsibilities outside of case-specific work, such as training and mentoring.

STRATEGIES FOR CASELOAD AND WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT

The following section includes four kinds of strategies for improved caseload and workload management: enhancing work processes and supports, prevention and permanency initiatives, staffing, and improving caseworker effectiveness.

ENHANCING WORK PROCESSES AND SUPPORTS

Agencies can improve caseworker efficiency by streamlining job requirements, providing supports, and allowing caseworkers more flexibility in meeting work demands. The following are specific strategies for these types of approaches.

Consolidated requirements and processes.

With new legislation, regulations, and technology regularly appearing within child welfare, the expectations of caseworkers are frequently changing. Agencies can use systematic and comprehensive approaches, such as process mapping, to analyze and improve workflow efficiency within jobs, units, programs, or an entire agency. To promote efficient work, agencies can implement the following strategies:

- Review existing policies and procedures to ensure they are relevant to current practice needs and ensure all stakeholders, including caseworkers, are involved in the reviews
- Streamline duplicative or inefficient expectations, processes, or forms, including across departments and systems
- Retire outdated requirements or processes that no longer add value

Continuous quality improvement. Agencies use a variety of mechanisms, including [continuous quality improvement](#) (CQI), to monitor and promote effective practice. When implementing CQI processes, staff conduct a variety of case reviews; track and report on performance measures; and

help implement statewide, regional, or local improvement plans. These types of reviews can assist caseworkers in serving clients more efficiently, which may help reduce caseload and workload.

Tools and technology. As the modern workforce continues to shift to increasingly virtual practices and procedures (see "COVID-19 and Telework" in this brief for more), mobile devices such as laptops, smartphones, tablets, mobile printers, and more have become a crucial element of day-to-day operations. They can allow caseworkers to readily access information that supports decision-making; document casework more efficiently; communicate with supervisors, providers, and families; and make more efficient use of waiting time. Large-scale technological support is being provided by analytic tools, such as [SafeMeasures](#), a service that provides staff with real-time reports and performance metrics that can help them prioritize and proactively manage their work. Some agencies are modernizing their child welfare information systems to allow mobile access, enhance interfaces, eliminate redundant data entry, and enable ad hoc reporting capabilities. Technology that helps with real-time reporting may also improve an agency's ability to accurately assess workers' caseloads and workloads.

COVID-19 and Telework

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, telework and virtual service delivery are major changes that the child welfare workforce has been navigating since 2020. Nearly every State and U.S. territory enacted lockdown restrictions in the spring of 2020 to reduce the spread of COVID-19. As a result, at least 22 State child welfare agencies transitioned to a combination of virtual and in-person investigations and assessments (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2022).

Early in the pandemic, the abrupt shift to a virtual workforce created several challenges, such as acquiring appropriate office equipment and ensuring children and families had the right technology to receive virtual services. However, as agencies have adjusted and established new policies and procedures to support virtual work, many caseworkers have reported benefits, such as greater family participation and increased time spent with and focusing on families (He et al., 2020). In some cases, virtual visits and telework have helped caseworkers better manage their workloads since they could reallocate time spent driving toward completing other tasks. This may be particularly true in rural areas where caseworkers may need to drive considerable distances to reach families.

With the pandemic still impacting many lives and many Americans continuing to work from home, it is unclear whether increased telework and virtual services will continue to be commonplace in child welfare agencies, and there is limited research on the impact of telework on caseload and workload management. There will always be certain practices that benefit from in-person contact, such as investigations and hearings; however, the pandemic has likely introduced a new way of working that could contribute to improved caseload and workload management.

For resources to support virtual casework, visit the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute's [Virtual Workforce Supports](#) webpage.

PREVENTION AND PERMANENCY INITIATIVES

Some agencies are using broader approaches to improve caseload and workload, such as focusing on reducing the number of children and youth coming into care and increasing safe and permanent exits.

Prevention and early intervention. The 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act requires States to develop, implement, expand, and improve community-based [prevention programs](#) designed to strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect. By decreasing the number of incoming cases, caseworkers can spend more time on existing and complex cases.

Permanency initiatives. Some States and jurisdictions focus on [permanency initiatives](#), such as family preservation, reunification, kinship care, and adoption, as a way to reduce caseloads. By finding more permanent homes for children in the child welfare system, agencies can reduce workers' caseloads.

STAFFING

Manageable caseloads and workloads are dependent on the number of qualified staff available to handle cases. Therefore, when States and agencies prioritize retention and recruitment, they help all caseworkers—new and existing—maintain manageable caseloads and workloads. The following are examples of caseload and workload strategies related to staffing.

Retention of existing staff. When a caseworker leaves an agency, they leave cases, investigations, and other tasks unfinished, which adds to the caseloads and workloads of remaining staff. It also takes time to hire and onboard a replacement and bring them up to speed. Therefore, [improving workforce retention](#) is a crucial strategy many agencies are prioritizing to maintain healthy caseloads and workloads at an agency. This may include introducing employee recognition and reward programs, providing mentoring and coaching initiatives, enhancing supervision and support, enabling job sharing and flex time, and offering opportunities for professional development and advanced education. Many agencies conduct exit interviews to determine

why staff leave and use findings to inform new retention initiatives. Stay interviews with employees are also becoming more commonplace to help managers understand why employees stay and what might cause them to leave.

Reallocation of positions. To manage workloads and caseloads with existing staff, agencies can reallocate staff positions to different regions, offices, or units. Oklahoma Human Services uses a workload dashboard to predict which counties and teams may need more support and then shifts vacancies to where they are most needed. (For more information, see "State Example: Oklahoma Human Services" in this brief.)

State Example: Oklahoma Human Services

Over the last 10 years, Oklahoma Human Services (OKDHS) has used a focus on data usage to transform the way the State manages caseloads and workloads among child welfare caseworkers. The State's primary data tool is a workload dashboard that automatically updates daily to document whether caseworkers are meeting, close to meeting, or over State-determined caseload standards. State leaders conduct a weekly call with Oklahoma's five geographic regions and the State foster care and adoption field team and use the workload dashboard to troubleshoot issues. This involves identifying which counties and teams are short-staffed, whether the issue is short term or long term, how neighboring teams can assist, etc. Leadership then may shift positions and vacancies to where they are needed, regardless of county and regional lines.

Since the dashboard updates automatically, leaders can put time and energy into solving problems rather than identifying them. The dashboard also allows leaders to prevent future challenges by predicting future workload needs and allocating frontline workers accordingly. Another part of OKDHS' workload reform involves training supervisors to understand case capacity data and use it as a management tool when distributing assignments.

Since OKDHS began its system reform efforts in 2013, caseload and workload management among caseworkers has improved significantly. Baseline data from 2013 and 2014 show that 27 percent of caseworkers were meeting State-determined caseload standards (Oklahoma Human Services, 2022). For the reporting period ending in December 2021, 88 percent of caseworkers met caseload standards.

Recruitment of new staff. Vacancies pose significant challenges for caseload management. The first step in filling positions is implementing a recruiting plan that targets the optimal candidates. Common [recruitment](#) strategies include job boards, agency websites, social media, employee referral incentives, and college and university partnerships. Additionally, rather than only hiring when vacancies arise, agencies may host rolling mass-job interviews throughout the year to maintain a steady stream of applicants. When faced with a limited pool of qualified local candidates, agencies could consider whether they can restructure

positions to accommodate remote staff. Employees recruited through inside methods, such as referrals by employees, rehires of former employees, and internal transfers, are more likely to stay in the position longer and perform better than employees recruited through outside methods (Paul, 2020). Many agencies aim to maintain a diverse workforce that reflects the races and ethnicities of the communities the agencies serve. In order to meet that goal, agencies can share job postings through networks of organizations that serve those specific communities (Casey Family Programs, 2022).

Supporting Bilingual Staff

It is important that agencies recruit and retain bilingual staff to better serve Spanish-speaking families who become involved with the child welfare system. However, these caseworkers often end up taking on additional responsibilities that contribute to overwhelming workloads, such as spending extra time helping clients with tasks outside of their typical job duties and helping translate and interpret for monolingual peers in their agency (Lanesskog et al., 2020).

One way to better support bilingual caseworkers is to provide appropriate supervision. When available, agencies should assign bilingual caseworkers with bilingual supervisors (Lanesskog et al., 2020). In addition to recognizing and appreciating the contributions of bilingual workers, Spanish-speaking supervisors may be able to provide concrete strategies for serving immigrant families. When it is not possible to assign a Spanish-speaking worker to a Spanish-speaking supervisor, agencies should provide training to English-speaking supervisors so they are better able to anticipate and address the challenges their bilingual staff are likely to encounter.

Agencies can also provide support by having forms translated into Spanish so that workers do not have to translate themselves. By formalizing this process, it can reduce the translation duplication that may be occurring throughout the agency.

Selection of new staff. Once an agency has attracted a pool of applicants, it must [screen and select](#) the best candidates. Common steps include an application, screening for minimum qualifications and goodness of fit, a structured interview, and reference and background checks. Many agencies present candidates with [realistic job previews](#) designed to present a balanced view of the demands and rewards of child welfare work. Hiring the right staff may help with retention, since staff who are aware of work demands before starting the job may be less likely to leave. To ensure the hiring process is not a barrier to staffing, it is important to create streamlined and efficient procedures.

Online applicant tracking systems or talent management software may expedite the application process for candidates and hasten the internal exchange of information between human resources staff and hiring teams. Creating pools of prescreened or prequalified candidates can accelerate the hiring process by requiring fewer steps when vacancies arise.

Organizational culture and climate. A positive organizational climate where caseworkers feel valued, competent, and supported by both their supervisors and agency leadership can reduce caseworker turnover and prevent associated workload increases that occur for existing staff when a caseworker leaves an agency. Agencies with a more positive climate have higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment

among workers, less turnover, better service quality, and more positive outcomes for children (Glisson & Green, 2011; Glisson, Green, & Williams, 2012). Strategies that may have the potential to enhance organizational cultural and climate include improving training and education for caseworkers, offering incentives for excellent work, implementing an improved evaluation system, developing a mentorship program, offering flexible scheduling options, and supporting self-care within the agency (Griffiths et al., 2019). With high turnover rates and vacancies in the child welfare field, it is especially important that organizations foster a climate in which caseworkers know they are more than just a body to fill a position (Griffiths et al., 2020). Caseworkers should be treated with respect and recognized for the personal sacrifice and emotional burden that comes with the job.

Specialized and support staff. Some agencies develop specialized staff units or positions to allocate workloads more efficiently; others assign support staff to help lessen caseworker paperwork and administrative tasks. See "State Example: Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services" in this brief for an example of a support staff position designed to alleviate caseworkers' time spent on administrative work.

Teaming. To reduce individual workloads and strengthen decision-making and service delivery, some agencies use a teaming model in which multiple caseworkers share casework responsibilities. When several caseworkers collaborate on a case, all members of the team are able to contribute their expertise, and there are multiple caseworkers available to respond to or address the needs of a family. Benefits of teaming include greater cohesion within an agency, a greater sense of self-efficacy among staff members, and improved ability to help children and families due to shared decision-making and workload responsibilities (Casey Family Programs, 2021). The New York State Office of Children and Family Services has been implementing casework teaming in several counties for more than a decade.

State Example: Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services

In partnership with the QIC-WD, the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services has implemented a job redesign intervention to strengthen its child welfare workforce. The intervention, which launched in 2019, involved restructuring the department's three programs—child protective services, family services, and foster care—into two teams: prevention teams and permanency teams. Within each of these teams, pairs of caseworkers shared caseloads, with one dedicated to working with children and the other dedicated to working with families. In addition, a new position called the child welfare team specialist (CWTS) was added to each team to take on administrative tasks previously left to caseworkers.

Preliminary findings from December 2021 demonstrated that the addition of the CWTS helped caseworkers be more available to families and complete tasks more quickly (QIC-WD, 2021). In addition, survey results from the preliminary findings demonstrate positive impacts on work-related stress among caseworkers.

IMPROVING CASEWORKER EFFECTIVENESS

Agencies also address workload management through practices, such as training and supervision, which aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of caseworkers.

Training and ongoing support. Lack of adequate training and preparation can add to caseworkers' stress and prevent them from closing cases quickly, which can result in cases piling up. In some cases, lack of support may contribute to increased caseworker turnover (Radey & Schelbe, 2017). To combat these challenges and prevent training-related turnover and high caseloads, agencies should ensure new employees receive high-quality training and support and that existing caseworkers receive ongoing support and development.

Some strategies to prevent new workers from being overwhelmed while transitioning to fieldwork include greater exposure to field experiences during training, agency-specific procedural training, and supportive work environments. Another strategy to improve caseload pressures while a new employee is transitioning from training to fieldwork is a period of "caseload protection" during which they are assigned fewer cases than the average caseworker. Lengthening the caseload protection period and adding more cases gradually could be a long-term strategy for caseworker retention.

Beyond new employees, ongoing support for caseworkers from organizations, supervisors, and peers can influence well-being and retention. Continued training and professional development may also help caseworkers find strategies to streamline work processes and manage workloads. When caseloads and workloads are high, however, it can be

challenging for caseworkers to take time to attend training, and new practices may be time consuming to learn and implement. When appropriate, training can be delivered more efficiently through webinars, videos, and podcasts as well as on-the-job training via mentors, coaches, supervisors, or field training specialists. These methods can minimize caseworkers' time away from direct field work and allow them to get the training they need at the time they need it.

Supervision. Many supervisors are directly responsible for making case assignment decisions. Thus, it is essential that supervisors have a system for assigning cases in a fair and equitable manner. The process should consider the anticipated workload of a case, the caseworker's experience and capabilities, and the caseworker's current caseload and workload. Although there may be pressure to do so, supervisors should resist the urge to give high-performing caseworkers higher caseloads or more complex cases. This approach can backfire by unfairly overloading the best caseworkers, prompting them to leave. When heavy caseloads and workloads are inevitable, high satisfaction with supervision has been demonstrated to be a protective factor to reduce the negative outcomes of high workloads (Kim et al., 2019).

In addition to making intentional case assignment decisions, the following are strategies supervisors can use to help caseworkers manage their caseloads and workloads:

- Provide clear direction about goals, priorities, and next steps in a case.
- Teach time-management strategies.
- Schedule regular, uninterrupted case conference time with staff.

- Respond in a timely manner to requests for signatures, approvals, or other additional support.
- Provide constructive feedback.
- Monitor hours to ensure staff are not compensating for excessive workloads by working off the clock.
- Advocate on behalf of caseworkers to influence systems and procedures that facilitate or impede workload management.
- Conduct regular stay interviews for feedback on their role, leadership, and gaps.
- Model positive work/life balance behavior.
- Be available, understanding, and supportive.

For more information about supervision, refer to Information Gateway's [Supervising for Quality Child Welfare Practice](#) or its [Workforce webpage](#).

CONCLUSION

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to reducing and managing caseloads and workloads. However, there is a wide range of promising practices that administrators can utilize to meet the needs of their staff and agency. Aside from obtaining additional funding for staff positions and supports, agencies can seek ways to further support their caseworkers and improve retention in order to achieve improvements in caseloads and workloads, with many strategies not requiring additional funding to be implemented. Striving to ensure staff have manageable caseloads and workloads will help them better support families in achieving positive outcomes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

QIC-WD: Works to understand how to improve child welfare workforce outcomes by developing and testing promising workforce interventions and best practices, synthesizing workforce research, identifying workforce trends, preparing sites for continued workforce development, and improving outcomes for children and families service through the workforce.

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute: Seeks to increase child welfare practice effectiveness through partnerships that focus on workforce systems development, organizational interventions, and leadership.

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