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A Policy Brief On DYFS

BEYOND THE CASELOAD COUNT: DYFS Staffing Crisis Is More Than Just Numbers

Each time an abused child dies, the uproar that follows focuses on caseloads. Union representatives and DYFS caseworkers say they juggle far too many cases to protect children. They, along with some lawmakers, renew the call for a caseload cap. That is happening now, in response to the horrific child abuse case in Newark.

An ACNJ analysis found that about one-third of the state's roughly 1,300 workers carry more than the statewide average caseload. But, simply hiring more workers will not solve the problem.

A caseload cap may do more harm than good. It would siphon dollars away from other needs in a constant chase for more workers. The cap would also eliminate flexibility in allocating resources during a fiscal crisis.

The agency's staffing problems are deeply rooted in an inability to attract and retain qualified workers, inadequate training, lax supervision and civil service rules that sometimes prevent the agency from effectively managing its workforce.

The first step is to understand DYFS' current caseloads. This report begins to address caseload questions and offers recommendations for dealing with the division's staffing crisis.

Are DYFS Caseloads Too High?

The ACNJ analysis of state figures provided to the DYFS Staffing and Outcome Panel shows that most – 67 percent – of DYFS workers carry between 1 and 35 cases. Sixteen percent juggle between 35 and 50 cases, while 12 percent manage

between 50 and 75 cases. The rest -- 6 percent -- carry more than 75 cases.

These statistics represent a snapshot in time -- November 2, 2002 – the same month DYFS workers were trying to locate the children in the Williams family. At that point, average caseloads were about 33 statewide. Each case represents one child, even though some are siblings and living with the same family.

BREAKDOWN OF CASELOADS

Caseload	# Workers	% Total Workers
1 - 17	362	27%
17 - 35	519	40%
35 - 50	217	16%
50 - 75	161	12%
75 - 100	54	4%
100 +	13	1%

Source: NJ DYFS, 11/2/02

Note: There are some inconsistencies in state figures. The above breakdown of number of cases per worker equals a total of 1,326 workers on November 2, 2002. Average caseload statistics, however, indicate a total worker count of 1,289 on the same day.

The state has made progress in lowering caseloads for many workers since 1997. State officials should continue in this direction, perhaps with another hiring initiative that identifies the type of social workers needed and crafts a program to attract that type of worker.

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Child Welfare League of America standards call for 17 families per social worker for ongoing cases and 12 families for investigators. If workers are handling both investigations and ongoing family support, as many DYFS workers do, they should manage 10 cases and four investigations, according to CWLA standards.

Because the CWLA standards define a case as a family and state statistics count each child as a separate case, it's possible that some DYFS district offices actually meet the league's standards. But, for a more accurate assessment, the state needs to provide a breakdown of caseloads by office and type of worker. It also needs to provide caseload numbers in terms of families, for accurate comparison to national standards.

Average Number Misleading

Other state figures confirm that the often-cited, average caseload numbers are misleading. In November 2002, the average caseload statewide was 33 per worker. But, that number varies significantly, depending on the worker and the office.

At that time, 25 percent of DYFS caseworkers were trainees, carrying an average load of 18 cases. That means more experienced caseworkers shoulder a heavier share of the burden, handling an average of 38 cases, according to union statistics.

CASELOAD BREAKDOWN BY DYFS REGION

Region	# of Caseload Carrying Staff	Avg. Caseload	# Trainees	Avg. Trainee Caseload
Northern	318	31.76	89	20.29
Metro	378	33.17	98	19.19
Central	240	29.94	55	16.20
Southern	353	36.77	76	21.97
Total	1,289	33.31	318	18.32
Source: NJ DYFS				

The average caseload for non-trainees ranged from 18 in Sussex County to 53 in North Hudson,

according to union figures. Statewide, most -- 78 percent -- of DYFS' 32 district offices show non-trainee workers carrying more than 33 cases, union figures state.

In 13 offices, trainees are also carrying heavy loads, juggling 20 or more cases. Perth Amboy was highest, with new workers juggling nearly 35 cases – far too many for an inexperienced worker.

It's interesting to note that the Newark II office, which mishandled the Williams case, had an average caseload of about 31 - a notch lower than the state average.

The staffing numbers used here apply only to case-carrying workers in DYFS' 32 county "district offices," which handle investigations and ongoing supervision of child abuse/neglect cases. DYFS Adoption Resource Centers are not included in these numbers.

More Than Numbers

It's clear that some New Jersey caseworkers juggle too many cases, especially in light of the complicated problems many of these families face. Investigators should have much lower caseloads in order to adequately examine claims of abuse and neglect. And, the state should immediately lower caseloads for the 33 percent of DYFS workers who are carrying 35 or more cases.

But, it would be a mistake to say the solution is to simply hire more caseworkers.

DYFS should be more strategic in choosing new hires. According to sources within DYFS, a large percentage of new hires have little or no experience in social service work. Some lack the ability to do the job.

Past research has also shown that incompetent workers are often retained, simply because if they were fired, the positions would go unfilled. Union rules also make it very difficult to fire incompetent workers. When children's lives are at stake, the agency should have the power to remove employees who are failing to do their jobs.

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Turnover is another major problem. In the Williams case, the state concluded that turnover "may have contributed to the fragmentation in case practice and documentation," resulting in the children being left in an abusive home.

To reduce turnover, workers need to feel supported from the highest levels of government, be presented with a strong career path and feel protected when they venture into some of the state's toughest neighborhoods. In addition, they need quick access to an array of services and cooperation from other agencies, so they can actively help families.

Lax Oversight Leaves Caseworkers With No Guidance

Caseworkers stand inside families' homes, often faced with hostile parents, and make subjective decisions about the welfare of children. Many of these workers lack the experience to make these difficult decisions. Even seasoned caseworkers struggle with separating out the families who are in need and those in which children are in danger.

All caseworkers need supportive, vigilant supervisors with solid experience. In the Williams case, managers failed to oversee caseworkers' action, as they approved closing the case without the worker ever having seen the children.

Support of supervisors has to come from the top. Reports that workers and supervisors are under pressure to close cases to keep caseloads down are disturbing. The governor, human services commissioner and future DYFS director must send an unwavering message that children must be protected – no matter the cost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To solve the DYFS staffing crisis, the governor should take some immediate steps:

Change hiring practices so new hires have experience in social work and provide more supervision and resources

In 1997, the division changed its rules to allow hiring workers with no social work experience. That enabled the agency to more quickly fill vacant caseworker positions. But, it also resulted in very inexperienced trainees struggling with difficult jobs, without the proper resources or supervision. It also allowed people with little interest and no background in social work to land a state job, with an eye toward moving into a different part of the system. This has watered down the quality of workers in the field and increased staff turnover

Increase supervisor training and immediately implement supervisor mentoring

Most supervisors are caseworkers who have worked their way up the ranks. Many lack management skills. New supervisors receive only nine days of training. A one-on-one mentoring program that was to begin in fall 2002 was put on hold because the training unit lost two staff members who trained supervisors.

In the Williams case, inexperienced caseworkers were promoted to supervisory positions, without adequate training, and failed to make appropriate decisions in the case, according to the state's report.

Change civil service rules to allow DYFS to hire experienced social workers from outside the agency and to make it easier to fire incompetent workers

The current state civil service system makes it virtually impossible for the agency to hire an experienced social worker for anything other than a trainee position. It also allows good managers to be bumped from their jobs, based solely on civil service tests. Experience and continuity in management are vital for DYFS to protect children. Civil service rules also protect incompetent workers. When children's lives are at stake, managers should have the power to fire ineffective workers.

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LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Identify The Needs

To foster long-term change, the state needs to identify exactly how many caseworkers are needed to adequately handle cases, the experience and training these workers should have and how cases should be distributed. Then, the state Legislature should pass legislation to fund these positions and initiatives.

Create a Plan To Address Staffing and Turnover

The DYFS Staffing and Outcomes Review Panel, within three months, should render a report that forwards a specific plan for attracting and retaining more qualified workers and supervisors. To do this, the panel needs immediate access to a staffing chart for every DYFS office, identifying caseload size by unit, type of case and type of worker. Caseloads should be broken down by children and families.

The panel needs a more accurate picture of the turnover rate by office and why workers leave.

Develop a Model For Specialized Casework

The staffing panel should explore whether DYFS should move to a model of specialized casework, with specially-trained workers handling investigations, drug and alcohol cases, residential and adolescent cases and permanency planning. It should make recommendations for how to do that, along with staffing levels needed to adequately implement such a model.

The Heart of DYFS

The caseworker on the street and the supervisor in the district office form the heart of the agency. Without strong caseworkers and supervisors, the division can never accomplish its dual goal of preserving families and protecting children.

It's time to look beyond the caseload debate. That's the only way we can bring real, long-lasting change to this agency in crisis. It's the only way to save children like Faheem Williams

TOP 5 DYFS OFFICES WITH HEAVIEST AVERAGE CASELOAD

Office	# Caseload Carrying Caseworkers*	Average Caseload		
Cumberland	44	42.98		
Morris	32	41.68		
Perth Amboy	42	40.61		
Union East	47	40.57		
Bayonne	41	40.29		
* Includes trainees and non-trainees.				

TOP 5 DYFS OFFICES WITH LIGHTEST AVERAGE CASELOAD

Office	# Caseload Carrying Caseworkers*	Average Caseload		
Passaic North	27	19.44		
Sussex	18	22.38		
Monmouth So.	41	24.80		
Ocean	56	27.62		
Bloomfield	36	28.13		
* Includes trainees and non-trainees.				

DYFS REGIONS

Northern Region: Bergen, Bayonne, Jersey City, North Hudson, Morris, Passaic Central, Passaic North, Sussex and Warren

Metro Region: Edison, Perth Amboy, East Orange, Bloomfield, Newark I, Newark II, Newark III, Union East, Union West

Central Region: Hunterdon, Mercer, Monmouth North, Monmouth South, Ocean, Somerset.

Southern Region: Atlantic, Burlington, Camden North, Camden Central, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Salem