



Wisconsin County Human Service Association

Caseload Standards for Child Protective Services

Updated: September 4th, 2018

The Wisconsin County Human Service Association (WCHSA) recognizes the importance of maintaining reasonable workloads for child protective services (CPS) caseworkers and their supervisors¹. Unlike the majority of other states with county-administered child welfare systems, Wisconsin currently lacks having state-level caseload standards for CPS workers, a determination of statewide staffing needs through a comprehensive workload study, or comparable state-level recommendations related to workload. In light of this critical gap, WCHSA endorses the standards detailed below² as a basis to evaluate the status of Wisconsin's child welfare system and its resource needs³.

Recommended Caseload Standards

The recommended caseload standards for child protective services are as follows:

Service Type	WCHSA Recommended Caseload / Workload
Supervision	1 supervisor per 5 case carrying CPS workers.
Ongoing	10 active cases per case carrying CPS worker, with no more than 15 children .
Initial Assessment	11 active assessments per 1 worker at any given time with no more than 6 new assessments assigned during a one month period.
Access	8 newly assigned reports per day per worker.
Foster Parent Licensing	8 active home studies for general foster homes. 6 active home studies for relative homes (including "like-kin").

It should be noted that the caseload is based on new and active cases assigned to a worker at any given time. In other words, new cases should not be added unless a comparable number of cases have been closed, assuming that a worker has a full caseload.

For the purposes of these standards, a "case" means an assigned family case that likely often includes more than one child.

Although these standards are useful in evaluating statewide resource needs, each county is in the best position to speak to local needs. For example, it is recognized that the staffing structure for child protective services varies from county to county. Several (especially less populous) counties may have staff who perform services in one or more service type and may also service cases from other program areas (i.e., juvenile justice services, children with special needs). Many counties also operate on less than a 40 hour workweek. These and other operating variations may impact how the standards apply to particular counties.

Background

Wisconsin counties have become increasingly concerned about the status of child protective services. Recent years have seen a surge in the number and complexity of cases due to the opioid and methamphetamine epidemics. The number of children requiring placement in out-of-home care has increased significantly, overwhelming placement capacity. Mandates that increase the time to complete reports and perform casework continue to multiply. Rising pressures on frontline caseworkers and their supervisors appear to be driving high turnover in many counties, which can have a significant impact in the time it takes to either reunify children with their parents or, as necessary, achieve another safe and permanent outcome. All of these factors are driving Wisconsin's child welfare system to an inevitable breaking point.

State funding plays a critical role in ensuring Wisconsin's CPS system is adequately staffed so that a breaking point is never reached. The State shares liability for the CPS system, along with assuring compliance with federal performance benchmarks. With local costs exploding and counties under state-imposed levy limits, state-level funding is often the only viable option for addressing the need for additional funding. Yet, Wisconsin's lack of caseload standards or a comprehensive workload study has deprived legislators of key information for making resource decisions. This may be a factor as to why Wisconsin has not increased supports to its child welfare system to the extent other states have in response to the recent drug epidemics.

With rising urgency to address these issues, WCHSA created a special committee in August of 2017 to develop caseload standards that could be used to evaluate CPS resource needs in Wisconsin. The committee created the above standards based on extensive research of national standards and discussions with CPS administrators, front-line workers and other subject matter experts throughout the state.

Purpose

The caseload standards herein endorsed are an important step in evaluating the status and resource needs of Wisconsin's child welfare system. The standards will be used as a basis for determining WCHSA's request to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Governor and the Legislature for the 2019-21 biennial budget. They also will be a resource for counties wishing to use them to evaluate local staffing needs.

Further Recommendations

These caseload standards can play an important short-term role in identifying the level of resources necessary to bring stability to Wisconsin's CPS system. They are not, however, an effective long-term substitute for the state-level action necessary to ensure Wisconsin's CPS system continues to have the resources and capacity to meet its obligations to children and families. For that to happen, we recommend the following:

1. Wisconsin DCF formally adopt these standards or work in partnership with WCSHA to develop different standards – without creating requirements pertaining to caseload sizes that are not fully funded at the state-level. DCF already has standards which it recognizes for the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services (DMCPS) and uses as a basis for its biennial funding requests to the Legislature. Counties, legally constrained by tax-levy caps and already overmatching state child welfare funding requirements by 1,600 percent, are not in a position to shoulder an additional funding mandate. Thus, caseload standards should either be adopted as a non-enforceable practice guideline (similar to the current Wisconsin Child Welfare Model for Practice) or be fully funded at the state-level.
2. Wisconsin DCF, during the next biennium, complete a comprehensive CPS workload study. The evaluation should have the purpose of both identifying statewide CPS staffing needs along with the state-level funding required to support counties in meeting those needs. States that have initially adopted caseload standards have followed-up with comprehensive workload studies, which provide a more precise way of evaluating staffing needs.
3. An appropriate State agency complete a report for the Legislature in conjunction with the biennial budget process that provides a basis for determining statewide CPS resource needs based on changes in trends and mandates. Along with other information (i.e., changes in the number of children in out-of-home care, changes in out-of-home care provider rates), the report should include an analysis of statewide CPS staffing needs (either through caseload standards or a workload evaluation). Currently, as a matter of routine, such an evaluation of resource needs is completed only for DMCPS.

¹The following benefits of reasonable child protective services caseloads are among those which have been identified by the Federal Children's Bureau: (1) Permitting workers the time they need to engage in aspects of the child welfare processes that require frequent worker-client contact; (2) Workloads and caseloads have been linked to performance on Federal Child and Family Services Reviews and achievement of safety and permanency outcomes; and (3) Manageable workloads may help agencies retain workers who would otherwise opt to leave as a result of feeling overloaded. See Child Welfare Information Gateway Issue Brief, "Caseload and Workload Management", July 2016, Children's Bureau/ACYF/ACF/HHS.

²This document and the standards therein were approved by the WCHSA Executive Committee on September 6th, 2018.

³Research commissioned by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families supports the conclusion that caseload standards can be used in an evaluative sense to gauge the extent to which a state's child welfare system is adequately meeting its obligations for serving children and families. See: University of Wisconsin School of Social Work Memo regarding Case Ratio Standards in Child Protective Services. October 27, 2016.