



MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families

FROM: Chuck Price, Director, Waupaca County Health and Human Services Department;
President, Wisconsin County Human Service Association

Jason Witt, Director, La Crosse County Human Services Department

Katie Herrem, Executive Director, Wisconsin County Human Service Association

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DATE: January 17, 2018

SUBJECT: Support for Assembly Bill 783 – a committee to study and make recommendations on the caseloads of child welfare workers

The Wisconsin County Human Service Association (WCHSA) and Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA) support Assembly Bill 783 which requires the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to create a “Wisconsin Task Force to Create Effective Child Welfare Caseloads” to study and report on recommended caseload standards for child welfare workers. The task force will consist of 16 members: 10 representatives from WCHSA, five representatives from DCF, and one tribal representative.

The task force must submit a written report to the governor, Joint Committee on Finance, and the appropriate standing committees of the legislature by April 1, 2019. The report must include recommended standards for the maximum average caseload sizes for child welfare workers who perform access, initial assessment, ongoing services, or foster parent support functions, over which it is not reasonable to expect a worker to be effective at conducting certain model practices while at the same time meeting the federal and state mandates that govern his/her work, and the maximum ratio of supervisors to frontline workers over which it is not reasonable to expect a supervisor to provide effective guidance and direction.

Child Welfare System Background

State statute requires all counties, except Milwaukee County, to provide child welfare services and employ personnel who devote all or part of their time to child welfare services. Child welfare services include initial assessment of reports received, investigation, the provision of services to children and families, as well the removal of children from their homes to ensure their safety (see attached).

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) distributes Children and Family Aids to counties for services related to child abuse and neglect and to unborn child abuse, including prevention, investigation, and treatment. Funding may also be used for community-based juvenile justice services. Base funding for the Children and Family Aids allocation is approximately \$73 million annually. Counties allocate an additional \$100 million plus annually.

States across the nation, including Wisconsin, are seeing an uptick in the number of individuals using, and ultimately becoming addicted to, substances such as heroin, other opiates, and methamphetamines. The drug-addiction epidemic is increasing the need for child welfare services across Wisconsin.

As an example, the number of Child Protective Services (CPS) referrals has increased significantly over the past several years. The following chart lists the number of CPS referrals from 2007 to 2016.

Calendar Year	Number of CPS Referrals
2007	55,895
2008	56,934
2009	56,619
2010	61,763
2011	64,132
2012	70,266
2013	68,943
2014	72,698
2015	76,442
2016	78,382

The chart reflects a 40 percent increase in child welfare referrals since 2007.

The Need to Examine Caseloads

Increasing child welfare caseloads have had a detrimental impact on county child welfare staff. Caseworkers are having a difficult time managing the demands of their increased caseloads.

Increased caseloads, coupled with increased case complexity (parental substance use), is leading to high rates of turnover and negative impacts on children and families.

A 2016 workforce study by the University of Minnesota found that 83 percent of child protection caseworkers across Minnesota reported experiencing secondary traumatic stress, while 45 percent had looked for new jobs within the past year. If that study were replicated in Wisconsin, it is highly likely that Wisconsin would see similar results.

Unfortunately, many child welfare workers feel that they are continuously operating in “crisis mode” with an inability to fulfill the new Wisconsin Child Welfare Model of Practice.

Wisconsin is not the only state where child welfare worker caseloads and supervisor to worker ratios appear to be an issue. In 2014, the Colorado Office of the State Auditor contracted with an outside organization to complete a workload study for child welfare staff across the state. Delaware, Nebraska, and California have all considered legislation on child welfare standards. Legislation has also been introduced at the federal level that requires states to create guidelines for the maximum size of child welfare caseloads and caseworker to supervisor ratios.

Counties across the nation have also been subjected to litigation over their child welfare caseload sizes. According to the Child Welfare League of America, there were 32 states between 1995 and 2005 that faced child welfare class action litigation. Issues commonly addressed in consent decrees and court orders relating to actions in the 32 states include:

- Placement issues such as recruitment, retention, licensing and training foster parents, relative placements and group homes (77 percent of cases).
- Caseworkers, namely adequate staffing, maximum caseloads, and enhanced training and supervision (66 percent of cases).

In 2017, Hennepin County and the State of Minnesota were sued, alleging that the system is underfunded and has too few caseworkers.

Foster families have also reported that due to the increased caseloads, they are not receiving the type of support they need from counties across the state.

Conclusion

The child welfare system, from the county perspective, is underfunded. Counties will continue to come to the state and request additional funding in the children and family aids allocation as a county’s ability to allocate property tax dollars to the child welfare system is limited. However, counties also believe it makes sense to have data supporting the need to fund increased child welfare positions across the state. The task force will allow counties and DCF to gather this critical data.

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The goal at the end of this process is to assist children in reaching permanency faster, allow families to have more quality contacts with social workers, as well as insulate child welfare workers from secondary trauma. Support for this legislation is the first step in meeting these critical goals.

WCA and WCHSA respectfully request your support for Assembly Bill 783.

Thank you for considering our comments.

An Overview of the CPS Process

