



## Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee

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### 62nd Montana Legislature

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## Case Worker Conditions: Historical Backdrop

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The following are excerpts from three past studies that examined conditions experienced by case workers in the department tasked at the given time to address Montana's family, health, and human service needs. They are not offered as a baseline, because worker conditions have changed over time, no doubt in part due to the findings put forward in studies such as these. Rather, these brief excerpts are merely offered as a reminder that the subject of "case worker conditions" often raises concerns that have been heard in periods past as well as in other places.

#### January 2006

[*Child Protective Services: Workforce Issues And Options*, Prepared for the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee By Susan Byorth Fox, Research Analyst, January 2006.]

#### Compensation, Recruitment, and Retention

[p. 6]

Numbers and compensation. [For] persons in Montana employed as "child, family, and school social workers" [the] mean annual income is \$32,640, which compares to the national mean annual salary of \$38,280.

[p. 7]

Recruitment and Retention. In the Child and Family Services Division, 69% of the degreed staff had a degree in a related area, and the department does provide a hiring preference for applicants with social work degrees. The division has experienced a turnover rate averaging about 22% for social workers and 15% for all staff from 2002 to 2004. The federal General Accounting Office (GAO) report estimated the turnover of child welfare staff annually nationally at 30% to 40%, with average tenure of less than 2 years.<sup>7</sup>

The GAO reported that holding a degree in social work (BSW or MSW) correlates with higher job performance and lower turnover rates. The causes of caseworker turnover from a study of 27 states were found to be low pay, risk of violence, staff shortages, high caseloads, administrative burdens, inadequate supervision, and inadequate trainings. Some of the practices to improve recruitment and retention include: university training partnerships, accreditation, leadership and mentoring programs, competency-based interviews, and recruitment bonuses. Montana has implemented a university training partnership with the University of Montana (see Training).

Only two states have fully accredited child welfare systems, Illinois and Kentucky, and have reported improved attractiveness to applicants and enhanced worker morale and performance, two factors critical to retention.

\* \* \* \*

May 2006

[*Montana Children and Family Services Division Work (CFSD) Measurement Study Summary*. Source DPHHS. May, 2006]

[p. 1]

The results of the time study indicate the Division is in need of 158.8% increase in workers/supervisors who are solely responsible for Intake (investigation) services to children and families. The data indicates an increase of 220.4% is needed for workers/supervisors who are solely responsible for Ongoing (children in out-of-home placement) services to children and families, and a 91.3% increase in the number of workers/supervisors in rural communities which provide both investigative and ongoing case management services. This study concluded the Division would need an additional 164 FTE.

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July 1990

[*Report To The Governor And Human Services Subcabinet On Ways To Improve Child And Family Services In Montana And To Strengthen The Department Of Family Services*, prepared by Dennis M. Taylor, Acting Deputy Director Department of Family Services, July 1990.]

[p. 2] The underlying problems have been a long time in the making. There are no single, simple or immediate solutions. But there is consensus on what must be done to begin to address the multifaceted problems. Action must be taken to:

- increase the number of social workers to reduce caseloads to a manageable level;
- provide social workers with better working conditions, more thorough and extensive training and greater administrative support;
- expand the family-based and intermediate community-based services that hold the greatest promise for social effectiveness and cost containment;
- develop appropriate services in Montana to care for children suffering from serious, long-term emotional disturbance and mental illness;
- restore the fabric of the now threadbare children's mental health service system; and commit more funding, both in terms of seed money for new services and capturing more federal funding, and resolve the thorny county administrative cost issue.

[p.13]

The Department of Family Services:  
Weaknesses

### Working conditions

DFS staff at all levels work in conditions so poor that their ability to perform their jobs is seriously hampered. Caseloads and workloads are routinely too high; training and support are too limited; office space and equipment are woefully inadequate. Staff morale is consequently very low.

### Funding and resources

The department lacks the funding to provide the resources necessary to fulfill its legal mandates. This is true of internal resources such as staff, basic equipment and support as well as the programs and services needed to protect and appropriately serve Montana youth and to strengthen their families.

### Department identity and direction

Staff at all levels are unclear about the department's mission, core values, philosophy and direction. There is also a general lack of clarity regarding staff responsibilities and how the department's various functions fit together. This confusion leads to inconsistencies and inadequate internal and external communication. Poor communication, lack of direction and confusion about the department's priorities further erode the department's sense of identity and the public's confidence in DFS.

### Organization

Inconsistent direction, uneven leadership, geographic variation and regional differences contribute to the sense that the department is floundering, confused and lacks focus. Under these circumstances, accountability and credibility at all levels of the department has emerged as an area of concern.

### Management information systems and data

The lack of an adequate management information system seriously impedes the department's ability to plan for and manage the services it provides. Without credible and timely information about current service levels, costs and unmet needs, the department is hampered in its roles as a systems planner and service developer.

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### **3. Child protective services caseload and workload**

Child protective service caseloads are too high—sometimes as high as two and three times national standards. Caseload is no more than the numbers of cases; workload is determined by factors like distances traveled, complexity of cases, the number of children and family members, and the experience of the social worker. By any measure—caseload or workload—the responsibilities of Montana's child protective service workers are staggering.

The unintended result of unmanageable caseloads is unnecessary out-of-home placement. If caseloads can be significantly lowered more families can remain intact, children currently placed out of the home can return sooner and inappropriate placements in juvenile correctional facilities, out-of-state programs, residential treatment and inpatient psychiatric hospitals can be reduced, at no small benefit to the children, their families or the Montana taxpayer.

[pp. 32-34]

## 6. **Leadership**

Child and family services in Montana suffer from a lack of clear, unified leadership. The governor and the legislature should designate a lead agency to plan for, provide, purchase and monitor the full continuum of child and family support services. Top management in state government, from the legislative leadership to the governor and his human service subcabinet should make a strong policy commitment to children's services.

The needed and anticipated changes in the child and family service system can be more easily achieved if a lead agency is clearly assigned to take overall responsibility for cases and case management conducted through an interagency supported system. Without specific, assigned responsibility for the task as a whole, progress toward an integrated child and family service system in Montana will be slow.

## 7. **Working conditions**

Department employees are working under conditions that undermine rather than promote professionalism and effectiveness. Work environments offer little or no privacy; equipment is limited or lacking altogether; clerical services are inadequate and other agency supports that are taken for granted in the private sector are missing or so grossly underfunded as to be ineffective. The deplorable working conditions sap morale and limit productivity of workers throughout the department. Basic equipment such as desks, chairs, locking filing cabinets and office dividers are in short supply. Most of the equipment that DFS does have is thread bare hand-me-downs that are generally unserviceable relics that wouldn't even be worth sending to surplus property. Basic office automation equipment such as telephone systems, personal computers and dictating equipment are in very short supply or do not exist in most field offices.

Work spaces in the field and state offices are generally overcrowded, noisy and poorly ventilated. Private offices or visiting rooms for social workers conducting sensitive and confidential protective service investigations are extremely limited. The department needs more office space to reduce chronic overcrowding and potential breaches of confidentiality at both the state and local levels.

## 8. **Staff Training**

Training for all categories of DFS workers is not adequate. All too frequently new protective service workers are thrust into complex abuse and neglect investigations, court cases and complex family problems without even a basic orientation. Due to the shifting of already meager

travel funds to cover county administrative costs in counties refusing to contribute, the travel funds necessary to attend periodic training have been drastically reduced.

Social worker training in child abuse and neglect is not conducted in a timely or routine fashion. Advanced training in federal and state laws on youth services and other skills training for social workers have been identified as priorities by recent training needs assessments, as have basic and advanced training for staff at the two juvenile correctional facilities. More management and supervisory training is essential for social work supervisors and for all first line supervisors in the department. Training should reinforce the mission, values and principles of DFS.

#### **9. Staff turnover**

Demanding working conditions, low salaries, unmanageable caseloads and chronic stress lead to caseworker "burnout," low morale and high staff turnover rates that consistently run in excess of 17% year after year. Turnover is especially acute for experienced protective service workers. The department, with its limited ability to provide appropriate initial and on-going training, experiences a "double whammy" when a seasoned caseworker leaves. This "brain drain" was especially noticeable during the difficult transition period when the department was first created.

#### **10. Staff morale**

DFS staff are generally demoralized, disaffected and alienated workers. Poor working conditions, deplorable equipment, staggering caseloads, poor communication, lingering classification problems, limited service system capacity, uncertainty about the future of the department and the increased public scrutiny the department is currently receiving have adversely affected morale throughout the department. Yet despite problems and low morale, front line caseworkers still maintain a strong personal commitment to the protection of children and families.

[pp. 36-37]

#### **17. Public relations/public awareness**

Lack of communication between the public and DFS has led to negative perceptions about both service programs and staff. Media coverage tends to focus on sensational cases, but rarely follows them into the treatment and rehabilitation phase, and the confidential nature of court proceedings and casework activities necessarily limits communication on certain issues. The net result is that the total perspective on youth issues and services—what the system really has to offer—has not been made available to the public.

The department needs to undertake a positive public information campaign to let people know what the department's mission is, what services the department is (and is not) responsible to provide, and what can be expected of department staff. In addition, in its leadership and advocacy role, needed improvements in the child and family service delivery system should be articulated by DFS on a regular basis. Any major initiatives the department undertakes should be the focus of a comprehensive and routine public awareness campaign that provides a more

balanced and positive view of children's services and the department.

[p. 48]

### **WORKING CONDITIONS**

The working conditions of the staff of the Department of Family Services and the providers who contract with the department received strong criticism from all sources involved in the study. Providers are seen as inadequately compensated. Many are poorly trained and supported for the services they provide.

Forty-six letters identified the need for more staff for the Department of Family Services. Adequate staffing to meet the mandates of the department is a frequently mentioned improvement. Required vacancy savings, deletion of home attendant programs and cut backs in clerical and other support staff have taxed existing staff to the limit. Social worker caseloads and workloads are too high to allow for more than crisis intervention, while continual pressure is levied to perform more prevention and family preservation activities. Workers who do exceptional jobs are not recognized and workers who do less than expected are not adequately dealt with. Training is not available due to the lack of travel budgets and time during which staff can escape from the demands of their daily responsibilities. Communication within the agency is lacking and contributes to the feelings of isolation and nonsupport expressed by many DFS staff.

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