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Informational Letter

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I. Purpose

The purpose of this Informational Letter is to share the Report Overview, written by Walter R. McDonald and Associates (WRMA), of the New York State Child Welfare Workload Study with local departments of social services (LDSS) and voluntary authorized agencies. The entire report can be accessed on the agency's website <http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/>

II. Background

The New York State Legislature directed the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to contract with a national child welfare expert to review and recommend manageable workloads for child protective services, foster care, and preventive services in order to allow sufficient time for each worker to meet all requirements and allow for comprehensive assessment of services for children and families. OCFS contracted with WRMA to complete the study by December 1, 2006. WRMA has national experience in human services research and evaluation and has completed workload studies for other states.

The study included a review of state and federal laws and regulations regarding New York State's child welfare delivery system, interviews with LDSSs, the collection of staffing data from the LDSSs and voluntary agencies that participated in the study, and a two-week time study. The time study was a daily recording of workers' time and activities between September 11, 2006, and September 29, 2006.

A total of 11 LDSSs, including the Administration for Children Services (ACS), and 42 voluntary authorized agencies participated. A list of the participating districts and agencies can be found in the Report Overview. Over 2,000 caseworkers, case planners, case managers, and supervisors who carry a caseload were involved in the time study.

The collection of data was done via a Web-based tool that was easily accessed and completed on each participant's computer. The tool was purchased through a New York State vendor, Libera. Paper copies of the tool could be printed and used by participants as they went into the field.

Training of participants was done in collaboration with OCFS's training partner, SUNY Training Strategies Group. Train-the-trainer sessions or direct instruction were provided to all participants. Additionally, each LDSS and voluntary agency selected a project coordinator who was a liaison to OCFS for this project. During the two-week data collection, technical assistance from OCFS was provided to all participating LDSSs and voluntary agencies.

III. Program Implications

The report recommended that caseload sizes in New York State be reduced for child protective services investigations, foster care case planning services, and preventive

case planning services. This recommendation applies to both LDSSs and voluntary agencies that provide these services. The study found that currently caseworkers spend, on average, only between 0.6 and 1.5 hours of face-to-face contact time with children and their families per case per month. The report identifies the need for performance improvement in child welfare in New York and states, “reducing caseloads will be an important step towards achieving, within required timeframes, the safety, permanency and well being of all children and their families.” The report recommends the following caseload goals:

- Child Protective Services – 12 investigations per worker per month
- Foster Care Case Planners – 11 to 12 children per worker per month
- Preventive Case Planners – 12 to 16 families per worker per month

The report recommends the “next steps” listed below. The participation of LDSSs and voluntary agencies in exploring the feasibility of these next steps will be critical.

- Consideration of hiring of additional staff, recognizing the impact this will have on training and supervision for new staff, and that managers will need to bring or acquire experience in managing a changing environment.
- In collaboration with LDSSs, OCFS will need to develop consistent measures to determine what are the existing caseloads; and to translate the caseload recommendations based on the unique service delivery of each LDSS and agency.

S/S Jane Lynch

Issued By:

Name: Jane G. Lynch

Title: Deputy Commissioner

Division/Office: Development and Prevention Services

REPORT OVERVIEW

During the spring of 2006, the New York State Legislature directed the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to:

“contract with a national child welfare expert to review and recommend manageable workloads for child protective services, foster care, and preventive services in order to allow sufficient time for each worker to meet all requirements and allow for comprehensive assessment of services for children and families.”

In response to the legislative mandate, OCFS contracted with Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc. (WRMA), and its partner, the American Humane Association (AHA), to conduct the study and prepare a report for submission to the Legislature by December 1, 2006.

STUDY SUMMARY

This study is the first child welfare workload study that addresses the work of voluntary agency staff, in addition to public agency staff. This is an important advance in understanding the total effort required to assess, plan, provide, and document the broad array of child welfare services. Understanding the contribution of both the districts and their voluntary agencies is critical to the process of addressing the basic requirement of the New York State Legislature. Eleven district offices, including the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), and 42 voluntary agencies participated in the study. Detailed time log data from more than 2,200 caseworkers were analyzed.

The local districts that agreed to participate included: ACS, which serves the five boroughs that comprise New York City; the large counties of Erie County, Monroe County, Onondaga County, and Suffolk County; the medium-sized districts of Broome County, Jefferson County, and Orange County; and the smaller districts of Lewis County, Schoharie County, and Seneca County.

The voluntary agencies that participated in the study included: Abbott House; Baker Victory Services; Berkshire Farm Center & Services for Youth; Buffalo Urban League Builders for Family and Youth; Cardinal McCloskey Services; Catholic Charities of Buffalo; Catholic Guardian Society & Home Bureau; Cayuga Home for Children; Child and Adolescent Treatment Services; Child and Family Services of Erie County; Children’s Aid Society; Children’s Home of Wyoming Conference; Concord Family Services; East Harlem Council for Community Improvement; Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families; Elmcrest Children’s Center; Episcopal Social Services of New York; Forestdale, Inc.; Gateway-Longview, Inc.; Good Shepherd Services; Gustavus Adolphus Child and Family Services; Harlem Children’s Zone, Inc.; Heartshare Human Services of New York; Hillside Family of Agencies; Hopevale, Inc.; House of Good Shepherd; Jewish Child Care Association of New York; Joan A. Male Family Support Center; McQuade Children’s Services; Mercy First; Native American Community Services of Erie & Niagara Counties, Inc.; New Alternatives for Children; New Directions Youth & Family Services; New York Foundling Hospital; Ohel Children’s Home and Family Service; Rochester Society for the Protection and Care of Children; SCO Family of Services; St. Dominic’s Home; The Salvation Army-Syracuse Area Services; Timothy Hill Children’s Ranch; and Youth Advocate Program.

The final study report to OCFS consists of six chapters.

- Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study, the New York State child welfare system, and Federal and State laws and policies.
- Chapter 2 summarizes the study methodology.
- Chapter 3 provides an overview of aspects of service provision at the local district level.
- Chapter 4 provides detailed information gathered on the work activities of caseworkers during the 2-week time log data collection period.
- Chapter 5 discusses estimates by program and service of workload (the number of hours per caseworker per month) and caseload (the number of cases per caseworker per month that can be served based on time expended) for all study participants.
- Chapter 6 considers the findings from the detailed time log study in light of the other study components—the policy review, the literature review, and the surveys and interviews with the districts and voluntary agencies. Performance data are also reviewed, and Statewide caseload recommendations, which apply to local districts and their voluntary agencies, are made.

This Report Overview provides excerpts from the final sections—Recommendations, Next Steps, and Summary—of Chapter 6. Technical notes and references are not included in this overview, but are included in Chapter 6.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the time log data collection and the other components of this study lead us to recommend that New York State reduce its caseloads for Child Protective Services Investigations, Foster Care Case Planning Services, and Preventive Case Planning Services. This recommendation applies to both district offices and voluntary agencies that provide these services.

Based on the time log data, we estimate that, on average, district offices and voluntary agencies are spending between .6 and 1.5 hours (approximately 35 to 90 minutes) of face-to-face contact with children and their families per case per month. Face-to-face contact consists of in person contact with children and/or parents or caregivers, including conducting assessments, planning services, and providing direct services. Additional time may be spent in accompanying and assisting clients in receiving services in other venues. The average amount of time being spent in face-to-face contact with children and their parents and caregivers is not enough to meet their needs or the policy and best practice mandates of the State and the local districts.

We recommend the following caseloads for New York State, for both the district offices and the voluntary agencies.

- For Child Protective Services Investigations, we recommend that New York State achieve the goal of 12 active investigations per caseworker per month, compared to the current estimated caseload (based on time spent per case) of 20 investigations per month for ACS and 27 for the other 10 participating districts.
- For Foster Care Case Planning Services, we recommend that New York State achieve the goal of 11-12 children per caseworker per month, compared to the current estimated

caseload (based on time spent per case) of 17 children per month for ACS and its voluntary agencies, and 20 per month for the other 10 participating districts and their voluntary agencies.

- For Preventive Case Planning Services, we recommend that New York State achieve the goal of 12-16 families per caseworker per month, compared to the current estimated caseload (based on time spent per case) of 27 cases per month for ACS and its voluntary agencies, and 22 per month for the other 10 participating districts and their voluntary agencies.

Achieving such caseloads would increase the average amount of case-related time per month as follows.

- For Child Protective Services Investigations, on average, a caseworker would be able to spend 10.5 hours per investigation per month compared to the current estimates of 6.4 hours per investigation per month for ACS and 4.7 for the other 10 participating districts.
- For Foster Care Case Planning Services, on average, a caseworker would be able to spend 10.5 to 11.5 hours per child per month compared to the current estimates of 7.5 hours per child per month for ACS and its voluntary agencies, and 6.2 hours for the other 10 participating districts and their voluntary agencies.
- For Preventive Case Planning Services, on average, a caseworker would be able to spend 7.9 to 10.5 hours per family per month compared to the current estimate of 4.6 hours per family per month for ACS and its voluntary agencies, and 5.6 for the other 10 participating districts and their voluntary agencies.

These caseloads might vary from month-to-month over the duration of a case, but represent an average amount of case-related work per case per month.

These recommendations take into consideration the need to improve performance on many indicators including: completing investigation determinations in a timely manner; interviewing of all alleged subjects of abuse and maltreatment face-to-face; facilitating bi-weekly visits between children in foster care and their parents or discharge resource; providing sufficient caseworker contacts to meet State requirements; and completing more comprehensive assessments within a timely fashion. Reducing caseloads will be an important step towards achieving, within the required timeframes, the safety, permanency, and well-being of all children and their families.

NEXT STEPS

The addition of caseworkers in New York State will be critical, but not sufficient, to improving the standard of child welfare practice, as measured by State and Federal performance indicators. Increasing the numbers of caseworkers, in order to reduce caseloads, will also necessitate increasing the number of supervisors and other infrastructure staff.

As each district goes forward, it will need to address training and management needs, which are discussed below. Suggestions for additional analyses are also discussed.

Training and Supervision Needs

A stable and highly skilled workforce is a prerequisite to achieving desired child welfare outcomes. Whenever districts and voluntary agencies have high turnover, there is the likelihood of

an increased workload on remaining caseworkers and supervisors. There are also human and fiscal costs when an agency is hiring and training new staff.

Training and supervision are critical components of maintaining a highly skilled workforce. Caseworkers in modern child welfare agencies need specialized training in a wide range of areas including child development, risk assessment, culture and ethnicity, service trajectories, and evaluation of parental functioning. Communication skills, use of electronic data systems, knowledge of judicial processes, and an understanding of child abuse and maltreatment are core competencies that must be obtained. Such training must be supported by effective supervision and technical assistance.

This study found that, while some agencies are experiencing a stable workforce, other agencies are experiencing high turnover. As of August 1, 2006, staff vacancies or positions filled by trainees carrying reduced caseloads, accounted for 5.5 percent to 28 percent of the workforce among the agencies in the study. Districts reported that delays in processing new hires also contributed to gaps in staff coverage.

Management Needs

Just as the nature of casework is changing, the nature of management of human services agencies is also changing. Administrators today must bring not only a deep knowledge of the service arena—its policies, mission, fiscal foundations, and service approaches—but they must also bring or acquire experience in managing a changing environment. Changes can be seen as opportunities or threats. For the sake of the children being served, the benefits of change or reform must be assessed and maximized. Workloads and caseloads need to adjust as the environment changes, and managers must be able to make additional refinements to meet the needs of their local communities.

From the perspective of the caseworkers in the field, three factors need the critical attention of management. These are differential complexity of cases, the requirements of documentation, and the work related to the courts.

- A caseworker's workflow will rarely be smooth or predictable. Different needs of families require different services. Factors such as the seriousness and complexity of the case, the number of children and their needs, and the strengths or weaknesses of parents all contribute to the unique aspects of each case. Sufficient time must be available to meet the mix of issues in a caseload. Sufficient ratios of supervisors to caseworkers will be needed to provide guidance to caseworkers as to priorities and also to adjust caseloads, as needed. In addition, well-run districts will require sufficient administrative support staff, human resources staff, training staff, information systems support staff, and other infrastructure staff so that caseworkers may be productive and efficient.
- The impact of requirements for documentation and maintaining electronic records on workload is of high concern in the field. The time study found that overall 31 percent of case-related time is spent on documentation, compared to 17 percent of case-related time spent on face-to-face contact with children and their families, and an additional 7 percent spent on other forms of communication with children and their families. Additional attention will be needed to adjust these proportions in order to increase the amount of contact and communication with families and children even with reduced caseloads. Additional training or infrastructure staff may be needed.

- Furthermore, the need to prepare for court, attend hearings, and follow up on hearings is a demanding part of the caseworker's week. The time study found that some caseworkers are spending an average of 15 percent of their time on court-related matters.

Therefore, if caseloads are to be well-managed, each district must have sufficient infrastructure and management support for its caseworkers.

Additional Analyses

Suggestions are made for future analyses, which could elaborate upon the findings of this report. These are:

- *Provide each district and voluntary agency with more detailed information on its workload and caseload so that the variations noted in this report can be further studied at the district level. This would assist each district in determining what will be needed in order to meet these recommendations.*
- *Conduct a more detailed review of practices in the field by experienced caseworkers, supervisors, and administrators in each of the districts, to assess whether the proportions of time spent on different case-related tasks can be realigned to provide more time for work with children and families.*
- *Conduct an analysis of outcomes of cases and link outcomes to time spent on cases. While not all cases in this study will have achieved an outcome in the next several months, it may be possible to gather additional data on the cases included in this study to further examine the relationship between intensity of work and case outcome.*
- *Provide OCFS, all its districts and, to the extent possible, all its voluntary agencies, with a mechanism for monitoring workload and estimating caseloads, which could be used periodically to develop information for managers and administrators. Such data gathering would improve the ability to manage child welfare services in the districts.*

SUMMARY

Based upon the time log data collected from over 2,200 caseworkers, and the review of State policies, best practice guidance, indicators of current performance, national standards, and findings of other workload studies, this study recommends that New York State reduce the caseloads of caseworkers providing Child Protective Investigation Services, Foster Care Case Planning Services, and Preventive Case Planning Services.

The study recommends that New York State implement caseloads of 12 active CPS Investigations per caseworker, 11-12 active child cases per caseworker for Foster Care Case Planning Services, and 12-16 active family cases per caseworker for Preventive Case Planning Services in all districts and among all voluntary agencies.