

Nebraska Children's Commission Workforce Workgroup

March 17, 2015

The Workforce workgroup of the Nebraska Children's Commission has identified two key areas of focus to recruit and retain Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) child welfare caseworkers in Nebraska: increased salary and compensation and the development of career trajectories. Increasing the professionalism and expectations of front line workers and their supervisors is critical to improving outcomes for children in out-of-home care and in the juvenile justice system. Recommendations are listed in priority order.

Role and Importance of Child Welfare Workers

Child welfare caseworkers are critical to the safety, permanency and well-being of children in Nebraska. Caseworkers must be given the tools necessary to effectively perform their jobs and help vulnerable children and families.

Studies abound on the importance of stable and effective caseworkers. The Foster Care Review Office recently cited two studies in its 2014 annual report, noting that caseworker turnover is consistently associated with delays in achieving permanency and increased numbers of placement.

Caseworkers also play a pivotal role in the experience of the child, especially when the child is in an out-of-home placement. Children experiencing the upheaval of being removed from the home need stable and caring adults in their lives. The repeated change of caseworkers removes an important opportunity to provide vulnerable children with much needed stability and certainty.

The average length of tenure for a caseworker in Nebraska is 3.19 years. This not only leaves a vulnerable population of state wards facing the decreased outcomes associated with caseworker changes, but also imposes a significant fiscal cost on the state. Training associated with hiring a new caseworker ranges between \$30,000 and \$36,000.

Salary and Compensation

Improved salary and compensation should include bringing caseworker salaries in line with national averages and creating salary differentials. Salary differentials should be available for performance and education. Performance incentives include an increased salary differential for achieving key competencies in casework. Caseworkers should also continue to receive salary increases when moving from frontline casework to mentor and supervisor roles.

Educational incentives include a salary differential for attaining higher education and loan forgiveness programs. Tuition reimbursement and loan forgiveness is a sub-topic of compensation that is closely linked to retention and recruitment. Higher loan forgiveness for caseworkers employed in underserved areas assists in rural communities attracting and retaining child welfare professionals.

Recommendations:

1. Caseworker salaries should be brought in line with regional averages, taking into account variations in caseworker education, experience, and caseload.
2. A loan forgiveness program for attainment of higher education should be established, with higher loan forgiveness for employment in underserved areas and rural areas.
3. A comprehensive Interim Study regarding child welfare caseworker professionals should be undertaken by the Legislature and include the issue of caseworker salary in Nebraska.

Education and Professionalism

The role of child welfare caseworker is of critical importance, and should not be considered an entry level position. Caseworkers are in charge of ensuring that families and children receive services and support and making recommendations to the Judge regarding permanency. It is clear that this pivotal role requires attaining high levels of competency through education, training and experience. It is important to encourage caseworkers to attain levels of higher education, including the attainment of a Master's of Social Work. Incentives may include a salary differential for attaining higher education, loan forgiveness programs, or tuition reimbursement.

Recommendations:

1. A comprehensive Interim Study regarding child welfare caseworker professionals should be undertaken by the Legislature and include the issue of incentives to encourage the attainment of advanced degrees, including through loan forgiveness programs.

Career Trajectories

Establishment of career trajectories strengthens retention and professional development. Caseworkers should receive increased salaries for performance and supervisory duties. New job classifications can be based on achievement of key competencies with salary increases at each level. Competencies may include the ability to work with specific populations, maintain high-risk caseloads, attain cultural competency, or speak multiple languages.

Recommendations:

1. Career steps should be identified with accompanying salary differentials for:
 - a. Achieving specialized competencies (expertise with specific populations; high risk caseloads; cultural competency; multiple language proficiency);
 - b. When moving from frontline casework to mentor to supervisor roles; and
 - c. Education achievement beyond bachelor's degree.
2. Encourage and support the continued efforts of the DHHS and NFC.

Caseloads

Caseload sizes have dramatic effects for both workers and the families they serve. A burdensome caseload is the natural consequence of increased turnover, which in turn creates even more turnover when workers feel they are unable to appropriately manage their caseloads. Caseloads are not just abstract numbers; each case represents the lives of families and children. When caseworkers are assigned too many cases they are overwhelmed, lose their confidence in their ability to effectively perform their jobs, and children and families suffer the effects.

The Workforce workgroup acknowledges the work that has been done by the Legislature in the important step of creating caseload limits for child welfare case workers. DHHS and pilot project Nebraska Families Collaborative (NFC) are required by Neb. Rev. Stat. §68-1207(1) to utilize the workload standards of the Child Welfare League of America. DHHS submits an annual report to the legislature outlining the caseloads of its caseworkers

It is important to perform oversight of these numbers, to ensure compliance. One area that can be improved upon is defining vague terms in the caseload standards. Urban, rural, and mixed urban and rural caseload standards are different, due to the drive time encountered in rural cases. Although the caseloads are different, the terms are not clearly defined. Many caseworkers working in areas defined as "urban," such as Scottsbluff, also service rural areas and experience significant drive time in managing their caseloads. The workgroup recommends that "rural" and "urban" be defined to be more in line with the caseworker's experiences of the region served.

Recommendations:

1. Clarify definitions of "urban" and "rural" for purposes of calculating caseloads.
2. Create a technological solution to the complexity of calculating mixed-caseloads.
3. Increase oversight to ensure that statutory caseload limits are followed, and that the caseload limit is reviewed for appropriateness.
4. Utilize legislative oversight to ensure that compliance with the caseloads is maintained.

Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

"Vicarious trauma" and "compassion fatigue" are two terms used interchangeably to describe the secondary trauma experienced by caseworkers who witness or hear about the traumatic experiences of the people they serve. The nature of the profession attracts workers who care deeply about families, so daily exposure to traumatic events or stories can have negative effects on caseworkers. Vicarious trauma causes unhappiness and distress in caseworkers, with negative consequences for the worker's family life and job performance. Fortunately, there are excellent services and trainings available to help caseworkers prevent and lessen the effects of vicarious trauma.

Recommendations:

1. Make counseling services available to case workers experiencing vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue.
2. Ensure caseworkers are aware of resources to help with vicarious trauma and fatigue, and encourage the utilization of these resources.
3. Encourage the continued efforts of the DHHS and pilot project NFC in this area.

Training and Work Support

An effective social worker has a number of skills and competencies outside of knowledge of the child welfare system, child development, and family dynamics. Key components of the job include the ability of the caseworker to manage his or her time and organize his or her workload, while maintaining a work-life balance. A new caseworker may not have these skills upon entering the workforce. An effective training program should include information on these skills.

Stakeholders have also identified a need to provide critical thinking training for caseworkers. The role and judgment of caseworkers is critical for all families, especially court-involved families. Communication between judges and caseworkers is imperative. Judges need to be able to rely on caseworkers to explain the decisions and recommendations put forth in court. Judges are often unaware of the decision-making tools such as SOM and various assessments that result in the caseworker's recommendations. Caseworkers need to be able to explain the decision making tool utilized, and how the facts of the case were applied to support the recommendation to the Court.

Recommendations:

1. Training programs for new caseworkers should include professional development in areas such as time management and workload management.
2. Develop and utilize a program to ensure effective communication between judges and caseworkers.
3. Develop and utilize a training program that enhances critical thinking skills.
4. Perform a thorough and comprehensive review of caseworker training and curriculum to ensure that it reflects best practices in the field.
5. Encourage and support the continued efforts of the DHHS and NFC in this area.

Next Steps

After forwarding its recommendations to the Legislature, the workgroup will remain available as a resource to the Legislature and the Nebraska Children's Commission for child welfare and juvenile justice workforce related issues. The Workforce Workgroup requests that a comprehensive Interim Study be done by the Legislature to explore the components necessary for a stable, effective and professional child welfare workforce and statutory changes necessary to support the workforce.