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# Staffing and Training

## CHAPTER 5

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**D**uring the course of our study, many people told us that the job of a child protection employee is a difficult one. These employees make judgments that can affect the lives of families profoundly. Employees are expected to understand numerous federal, state, and local laws and policies, and they are expected to work closely with the courts, county attorneys, law enforcement agencies, health professionals, school professionals, and others. Consequently, it is important for child protection agencies to attract and retain good staff, and it is important for staff to have reasonable workloads. We asked:

- **How many cases does a typical child protection worker handle?**
- **What types of educational backgrounds do child protection staff have? Do employees have adequate opportunities for continuing education?**
- **How much turnover is there among child protection staff, and where in Minnesota is turnover the highest?**

Overall, we found that some counties in Minnesota have child protection caseloads that are higher than those recommended by national experts, and many people we surveyed believe there is a need for additional child protection staff. Staff turnover has been higher in outstate counties than in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and a much higher percentage of staff in the Twin Cities area have master's degrees than do staff in outstate Minnesota. Most county human services officials said they have usually been satisfied with opportunities for their staff's continuing education.

## **CHILD PROTECTION CASELOADS**

Child protection staff are county employees, and the Minnesota Department of Human Services has not routinely collected information on the number or types of staff in counties. Thus, in September 1997, we asked county human services directors throughout Minnesota to provide us with information on each of their child protection employees. This information enabled us to compute the number of "full-time-equivalent" (FTE) employees who

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**We collected information on counties' child protection staff and caseloads.**

performed various child protection functions in each county.<sup>1</sup> Statewide, all counties combined reported that they had 61 full-time-equivalent screening staff, 184 assessment/investigation staff, and 400 caseworkers for families needing protective services.

The Department of Human Services annually collects information from counties on all maltreatment cases that were investigated and recommended for protective services during the year, but it does not have information on the number of open cases on a given date. Consequently, we asked county human services directors to provide us with information to help us examine the caseloads of staff who (1) *investigate* allegations of child maltreatment, and (2) *monitor* families that have been determined to need protective services. Table 5.1 shows child protection caseloads in the ten counties with the state's largest populations under age 18. The data reflect caseloads as of the time of our survey (September 1997). We found that:

- **Statewide, there were 16 cases under investigation per full-time-equivalent child protection investigator. Half of Minnesota counties had 10 or more cases under investigation per full-time-equivalent investigator.**
- **Statewide, there were 15 cases open for protective services per full-time-equivalent child protection caseworker. Half of Minnesota counties had caseloads of 18 or more.**

The information reported in the survey indicated that there may be wide variation in the caseloads of individual counties. For example, 13 counties had fewer than 10 cases open for ongoing protective services per FTE caseworker, while 7 said they had 40 or more cases per FTE caseworker.

There are several reasons to consider these data with caution. First, the number of cases handled by counties can fluctuate during the year. For instance, some counties told us that they receive fewer reports of maltreatment when school is not in session, so their child protection caseloads might sometimes be higher than they were at the time of our September survey. Stearns County had only seven cases under investigation at the time of our survey, but county officials told us that this was unusually few. Second, caseloads of workers *within* a county may vary. For example, certain caseworkers may be assigned relatively few families but are expected to work very intensively with each. Third, some of counties' "open" investigations are cases where the investigative fieldwork has been completed but the paperwork has not. For example, Hennepin County staff estimated that about 20 percent of its open investigations are of this type.

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<sup>1</sup> A county with two full-time staff who each devote half of their time to investigations would have 1.0 full-time-equivalent investigator.

**Table 5.1: Child Protection Caseloads in Selected Counties, September 1997**

Counties	Protective Services Cases		Assessments	
	Open Cases	Cases/FTE	Open Cases	Cases/FTE
Hennepin	800	8.4	711	22.5
Ramsey	614	16.8	424	20.2
Dakota	279	8.7	246	23.4
Anoka	293	20.1	93	13.5
Washington	230	20.9	215	30.7
St. Louis	303	14.8	63	6.1
Stearns	157	19.6	7	1.5 <sup>a</sup>
Olmsted	131	16.4	60	15.0
Wright	60	20.0	44	16.6
Scott	49	14.0	33	17.4
Twin Cities Metropolitan Counties	2,317	11.5	1,730	21.6
Outstate Counties	3,528	17.7	1,177	11.4
Statewide	5,845	14.6	2,907	15.8

<sup>a</sup>Stearns County told us that an average caseload of about five was more typical of the county's recent experience.

NOTE: The counties shown here are the 10 counties with the largest 1995 population ages 0-17. Protective services caseloads were computed based on the number of full-time-equivalent (FTE) employees who manage cases open for protective services, and assessment caseloads were based on the number of assessment/investigation FTEs.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division survey of county human services directors, September 1997 (N = 82).

**Staff in some counties have high caseloads.**

Without knowing more about the nature of the services provided to families in each county, it is difficult to conclusively evaluate whether Minnesota's child protection caseloads are appropriate. The Child Welfare League of America has recommended that child protection caseworkers not have more than 17 open cases, and that investigators not have more than 12 active cases per month.<sup>2</sup> But this organization and others have stated a preference for "workload" rather than "caseload" standards. Rather than simply considering the number of cases per worker, estimates of workload could consider the intensity of services, the risk levels of the families served, travel time, and other factors that may affect the time needed to provide effective services. Staff in several counties told us that they are handling more difficult

<sup>2</sup> Child Welfare League of America, *Standards for Service for Abused or Neglected Children and Their Families* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 52. Staff with this organization told us that investigations should generally not take longer than two to four weeks and that the organization is considering reducing its investigative caseload standard from 12 to 10.

cases than they used to, including more families that have multiple problems and service needs. Presently, however, there is no way to reliably compare among counties the risks of families or the quantities of services provided. Also, no statewide studies have examined whether child protection employees are complying with state requirements for monitoring open cases.

Data on the size of existing caseloads may not reflect the full demand for child protective services. For example, counties may limit the number of cases investigated or opened in order to avoid placing undue burdens on their staff. If so, counties may not be serving families for whom interventions would be appropriate. Thus, although the average caseloads of many counties are at or below the Child Welfare League's maximum caseload standard, it is still possible that staffing levels in those counties are inadequate to meet the needs of troubled families.

There are indications that some important child protection tasks have not been done in some counties, perhaps reflecting staffing shortages. As we discussed in Chapter 4, child protection staff appear to provide little feedback to reporters of maltreatment in many parts of the state. In addition, we observed during our visits to counties that some staff have been unable to keep case records up-to-date. In one county we visited (Polk), each of the child protection workers had 15 to 20 cases open for protective services, plus 35 to 50 cases for which assessments (or the paperwork for assessments) were being completed. We were unable to use case records to determine how this county handled some cases because the records were incomplete. And, in some other counties, staff told us they have not always had time to monitor families or update case plans as often as required by state rules due to other demands on their time.

Our surveys of mandated maltreatment reporters (see Chapter 4) did not explicitly ask respondents to evaluate child protection agency staffing levels or caseloads, but we did offer respondents an opportunity to suggest improvements in child protective services. The most common suggestion was for child protection agencies to provide better feedback on cases to the mandated reporters, but the second most frequent suggestion was for additional staff in child protection agencies.<sup>3</sup> Some of the comments we received include the following:

“Greatly understaffed at child protective services—need more caseworkers for quicker response and follow through. These people must be totally overwhelmed. Could not possibly do the kind of job they need or want to. I have reported to local police for quicker responses.” (School social worker in the Twin Cities area)

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**Many people we surveyed said that child protection agencies need more staff.**

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<sup>3</sup> About 20 percent of school social workers, 12 percent of pediatricians, and 12 percent of law enforcement officials made comments on their surveys about the need for additional staff.

“Teachers would not even be asked to work with over 30 students in a classroom. Social workers don’t have any “protection” like this. They need a caseload limit so they can work effectively with families.” (School social worker in northeastern Minnesota)

“Give them enough money to be adequately staffed with adequately trained personnel to respond to the incredible need for their service.” (Pediatrician in the Twin Cities area)

“We need more child protection workers—they are totally overbooked. They need caseload relief in order to do better referral and follow-up work.” (School social worker in southeastern Minnesota)

“The child abuse reporting law and the amount of staff that are allocated to uphold that law are very incongruent. . . . It seems virtually futile to waste my time and theirs to call on issues that I know [child protection staff] don’t have time [to investigate]. They are so busy/overwhelmed that unless I can tell them that I have observed a bruise, they cannot open [an investigation].” (School social worker in the Twin Cities area)

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**It may be possible to shift some resources from investigation to direct services.**

Overall, many people we heard from have the perception that child protective services are inadequately staffed to meet the needs of troubled families. If staffing *is* inadequate, it remains unclear whether the appropriate legislative response would be to help counties fund additional child protection staff, to redefine existing staff responsibilities, or both. According to some child protection officials we spoke with, fewer staff resources should be directed toward investigating whether maltreatment occurred and more should be spent directly brokering services to families that need help. The 1997 Legislature authorized a series of pilot projects that will examine alternative approaches to family assessment and investigation. If these projects (or similar efforts in other states) show promising results, we suggest in Chapter 7 that the Legislature consider clarifying which maltreatment allegations require investigation and maltreatment determinations and which do not. Chapter 7 also suggests that legislators consider the possible need for additional state funding for child welfare services.

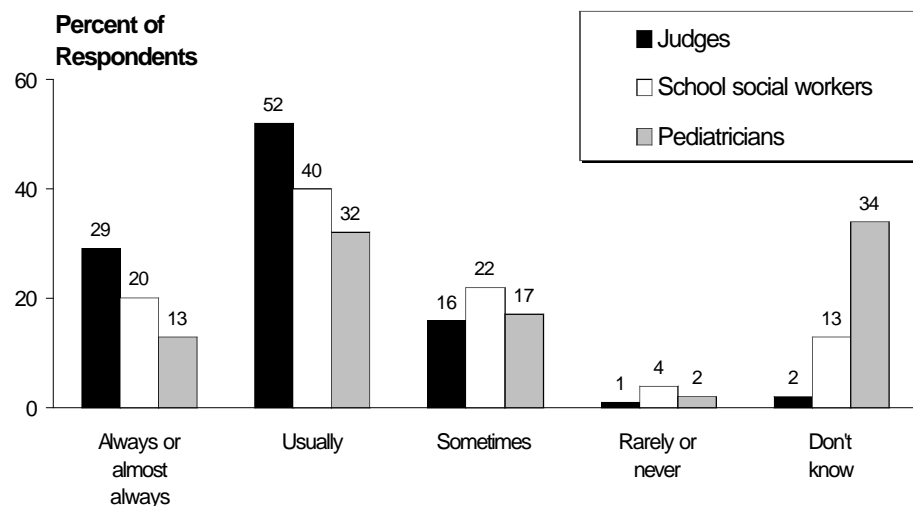
## STAFF TRAINING

Our surveys of judges, school social workers, and pediatricians asked respondents to evaluate the overall skill levels of child protection employees. As shown in Figure 5.1,

- **Survey respondents tended to say that child protection staff “usually” or “always” have the skills needed to do their jobs, although judges had a more favorable impression of the skills of child protection employees than did pediatricians and school social workers.**

**Many professionals think that child protection staff usually or always have the skills they need.**

**Figure 5.1: Perceptions About Whether Child Protection Staff Have the Skills Needed**



SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division surveys, August-September 1997 ( N=140 judges, 385 school social workers, and 225 pediatricians).

Eighty-one percent of judges said that child protection staff “usually” or “always” have the necessary skills, compared with 45 percent of pediatricians and 60 percent of school social workers. The percentage who said that child protection workers “sometimes” or “rarely or never” have the necessary skills ranged from 17 percent (judges) to 26 percent (school social workers).

Standards developed by the Child Welfare League of America indicate that child protection employees “should have training in social work,” but they do not prescribe particular degrees.<sup>4</sup> The League’s standards suggest that child protection supervisors and administrators should have master’s degrees in social work. Guidelines developed by the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators state that child protection staff should have a bachelor’s degree in social work, sociology, guidance and counseling, or psychology, “and ideally a master’s degree in social work or a closely related field.”<sup>5</sup> We collected information from counties about the educational backgrounds of each of their child protection staff. Among staff who spend at least half of their time screening, assessing, or managing child protection cases, we found that:

<sup>4</sup> Child Welfare League of America, *Standards for Service*, 50.

<sup>5</sup> National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, *Guidelines for a Model System of Protective Services* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 35.

- About 32 percent of Minnesota’s child protection staff have master’s degrees, typically in social work. Another 67 percent of the staff have bachelor’s degrees, of which a majority had social work majors.
- More than half (55 percent) of the county child protection workers in the seven-county Twin Cities region have master’s degrees, compared with only 12 percent elsewhere.

Table 5.2 shows the educational achievement of line staff in county child protection agencies. Only about 30 percent of the county human services directors in Minnesota reported to us that they have at least one child protection employee with a master’s degree in social work, either in a supervisory or line staff position.

**Table 5.2: Percentage of Child Protection Staff with Various Educational Backgrounds**

	<u>Statewide</u>	<u>Twin Cities Metro Counties</u>	<u>Outstate Counties</u>
Master's degree in social work	25%	45%	8%
Other master's degree	7	10	4
Bachelor's degree, social work major	40	21	56
Bachelor's degree, other major	27	22	32
High school graduate	1	2	0

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division survey of 82 county human services directors, September 1997 (N = 634 staff).

**Child protection staff in the Twin Cities area are more likely to have master’s degrees than staff elsewhere.**

At the beginning of our study, legislators asked us to consider the adequacy of continuing education for child protection staff, in addition to their formal educational training. State law requires that child protection staff annually receive 15 hours of continuing education “relevant to providing child protective services.”<sup>6</sup> In our survey of county human services directors, 71 percent said that they have “always” or “usually” had adequate training opportunities for their new staff, and 83 percent said they have “usually” or “always” had adequate training opportunities for other staff.<sup>7</sup>

The 1993 Legislature required the Department of Human Services (DHS) to develop “foundation training” for child protection employees to take during their first six months of employment. In addition, DHS has provided training in specialized topics, such as individual service planning, Indian child welfare,

<sup>6</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §626.559, subd. 1.

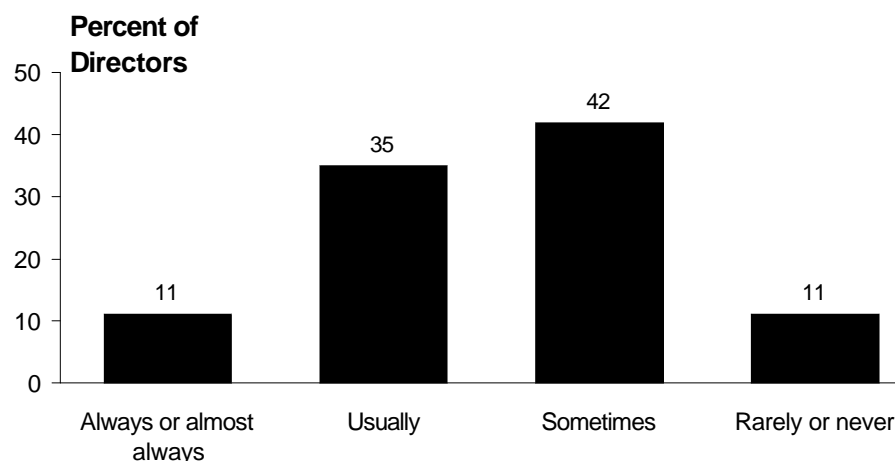
<sup>7</sup> For new staff, 28 percent of directors said that training opportunities were “always or almost always” adequate, 43 percent said “usually,” 23 percent said “sometimes,” and 5 percent said “rarely or never.” For other employees, 35 percent of directors said training was “always or almost always” adequate, 48 percent said “usually,” 15 percent said “sometimes,” and 1 percent said “rarely or never.”

**DHS has expanded training opportunities for child protection staff in recent years.**

CHIPS and child abuse prosecution, forensic interviewing, foster care, adoption, crisis nurseries, services for adolescents, and multi-disciplinary investigation and intervention approaches. DHS records indicate that more than 800 county and tribal child welfare staff have been trained in the department's programs since Fall 1994, including both new and experienced employees. As shown in Figure 5.2, a majority of county human services directors (53 percent) said that their staff were "sometimes" or "rarely or never" satisfied with DHS' training during the past year, so there may be ways that DHS can better address county training needs.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, we reviewed evaluation forms submitted to DHS by trainees for some of the 1997 courses, and most of the ratings and comments were very positive. In addition, the Minnesota Association of County Social Services Administrators supported DHS' efforts in 1997 to obtain funding for regional training centers that can offer expanded training opportunities for new and experienced staff.

Finally, during our site visits, we examined the 1996 training records of child protection employees to determine whether they complied with state training requirements of 15 hours per employee per year. We counted any courses that appeared to pertain to social services topics, but we did not count topics of more general interest, such as training in computer software, voice mail, sexual harassment policies, and defensive driving. Using this fairly broad

**Figure 5.2: County Staff Satisfaction with DHS Child Protection Training**



SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division survey of county human services directors, September 1997 ( N=82).

<sup>8</sup> The directors provided their responses to the following survey statement: "During the past year, our staff have been satisfied with training provided by the Department of Human Services." The directors were not asked to specify the types of training they would like to see improved, and it is possible that some directors were dissatisfied with the amount of DHS training available rather than the quality of the courses their staff took. DHS staff told us that they have tried to improve training for experienced staff, some of whom previously enrolled in courses for new employees.

definition, we estimated that more than one-third of child protection employees in the eight counties we visited did not have at least 15 hours of relevant continuing education in the previous year.<sup>9</sup>

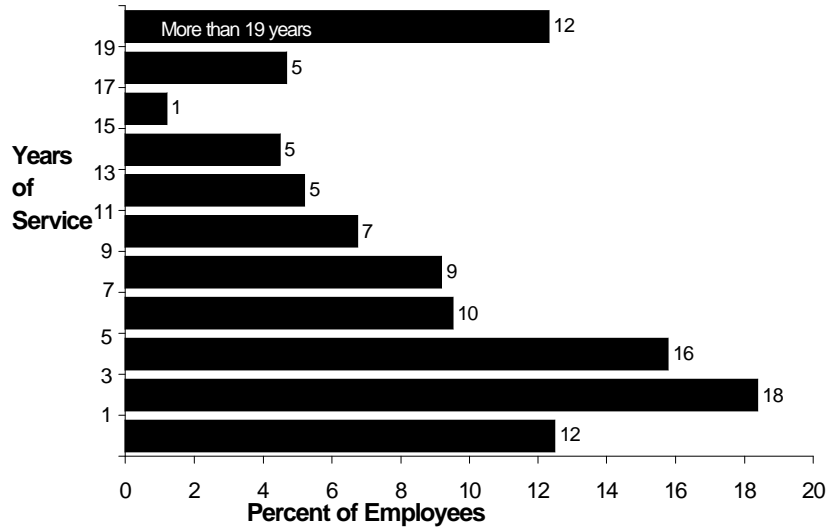
## STAFF TURNOVER

Early in our study, some legislators expressed concern about the ability of child protection agencies to retain qualified staff. In our September 1997 survey of county human services directors, we collected information on the amount of time that child protection screeners, investigators, and caseworkers had worked for their current child protection agencies. We found that:

**There is more staff turnover in outstate Minnesota than in the Twin Cities area.**

- **Statewide, the average child protection worker has worked for his or her current agency for 8.2 years.**
- **The average tenure of child protection workers in the Twin Cities seven-county metropolitan area (10.6 years) is greater than the average tenure of child protection employees from elsewhere in the state (6.5 years).**

**Figure 5.3: Child Protection Staff’s Years of Service with Current Employer**



SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division survey of county human services directors, September 1997 ( N=577 county employees who work at least half-time in line child protection positions).

<sup>9</sup> It is possible that some of the employees whose records we reviewed did not work as child protection staff for all of 1996.

Figure 5.3 shows that about 30 percent of the state’s child protection staff have worked for their current agencies for three years or less, and 46 percent have worked for their agencies for five years or less. Among individual counties, the longest staff tenure is in Ramsey County, where the average child protection worker has been employed for about 17 years.<sup>10</sup>

## SUMMARY

Although average caseload size varies considerably among counties, many child protection employees probably have caseloads that are too large. In addition, this report has discussed the possibility that some services—such as intervention in cases of chronic neglect, or preventive services to families that are not yet the subject of maltreatment determinations—are not provided often enough. Thus, there may be a need for additional child protection (or “child welfare”) staff, although the Legislature could also consider giving counties flexibility to shift some staff resources from investigative duties to direct services. The child protection system not only needs adequate staffing, but it also needs staff who are well-trained. This may be a particular challenge in outstate Minnesota, which has had more difficulty than the Twin Cities area attracting staff with master’s degrees and retaining staff over time.

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<sup>10</sup> We limited our analysis to employees who had a total of at least 0.5 FTE devoted to the functions of screening, assessment/investigation, and casework.