

UC Davis/CPPR Report of Child Welfare Budgeting Issues  
Appendix D

**STATEMENT BY**

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**on**

**HOUSE BILL 1554  
DFCS Safe Staffing**

**Before the**

**Committee on Children and Youth**

**THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA**

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Representative Sinkfield and Members of the Committee:

My name is Pamela Day. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss standards for child welfare practice in the context of House Bill 1554, the DFCS Safe Staffing Bill. This legislation represents an important opportunity to enhance the ability of child protective services workers to protect the safety and well being of Georgia's children.

I direct the Child Welfare Standards Program for the Child Welfare League of America. I have worked in the child welfare field for 30 years as a worker, supervisor, program manager, administrator, trainer and teacher. Through my writing, training, and consultation, I have focused on ways to improve child welfare programs and practice using family-centered, strengths-based approaches. The goal has been and continues to be: ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and their families who come to the attention of the child welfare system.

CWLA is a national membership-based organization, founded in 1920, dedicated to promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm. A major goal of CWLA is to develop and disseminate practice standards as benchmarks for high-quality services that protect children and youth and strengthen families and communities. For many years, CWLA has been the principal national organization responsible for developing child welfare standards. CWLA's twelve volumes of standards provide best practice guidance on many aspects of child welfare including the quantification of caseload ratios.

The purpose of the CWLA Standards is to ensure that children and families everywhere have the benefit of good services. The Standards describe and promote best practice in child, youth, and family services. They serve as a guide to agency administrators, program planners, practitioners, and the broader social service community—including policy makers—in their various roles as they seek to build and strengthen services to children, youth, and families.

### **Why We Need Standards**

Child welfare work is challenging, difficult work that can result in wonderful or tragic outcomes. Therefore:

- Agencies and staff must be equipped with the best possible guidance and tools.
- Our efforts should result in better outcomes for children and families and *we must do no harm*.
- It's a big country with diverse governmental structures and delivery systems. Standards provide for greater consistency and standardization across states and programs.
- There is an increased focus in human services on accountability: reduced spending, managed care, etc.

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- There is an increased focus on quality and accreditation as a means of improving services and meeting funding and contract requirements.
- The recent Child and Family Service Reviews in states across the country have highlighted the need for improvements. States are looking for assistance as they develop and implement their Program Improvement Plans.

### Development of CWLA Standards

The preparation of standards involves an examination of current practices and the assumptions on which they are based; a survey of the professional literature and standards developed by others; and a study of the most recent scientific findings of social work and related fields such as early childhood development, education, mental health, psychology, medicine, psychiatry, and sociology, as they bear on child welfare practice.

CWLA's preparation of standards involves the wide participation of local, state, and national agency representatives. The full formulation of standards follows an extended discussion of principles and issues by committees of experts in each area of service, the drafting of a preliminary statement, and a critical review by CWLA member agencies and representatives of related professions and other national organizations.

### CWLA's Recommended Caseload Standards

The CWLA standards most requested are those that provide recommended caseload ratios for workers in child welfare program areas, such as child protective services, foster care, adoption, and residential services. These numerical ratios are included in each program volume. For example, the following recommended caseload standards for child protective services are excerpted from the *CWLA Standards of Excellence for Services to Abused or Neglected Children and their Families*, Revised 1999:

Service/ Caseload Type	CWLA RECOMMENDED CASELOAD/ WORKLOAD
Initial Assessment/ Investigation	12 active cases per month, per 1 social worker
Ongoing Cases	17 active families per 1 social worker and no more than 1 new case assigned for every six open cases
Combined Assessment/ Investigation and Ongoing Cases	10 active on-going cases and 4 active investigations per 1 social worker
Supervision	1 supervisor per 5 social workers

These ratios of client to staff members offer guidance based upon the field's consensus of what constitutes best practice. They also are supported by the findings of caseload and workload studies<sup>1</sup> and by projects that show particular success in reaching agency goals.<sup>2</sup> The ratios are consistent with the caseload ratios contained in HB 1554.

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### **Why Caseload Standards Are Important**

- **People are the key ingredient in an effective child welfare system.**

Child welfare work is labor intensive. Caseworkers must be able to engage families through face-to-face contacts, assess the safety of children at risk of harm, monitor case progress, assure that essential services and supports are provided, and facilitate the attainment of the desired permanency plan. This cannot be done if workers are unable to spend quality time with children, families, and caregivers.<sup>3</sup>

When systems are short staffed, bad things can happen. Studies of critical incidents, including child deaths, child injuries, and children missing from foster care, almost always involve an overworked caseworker who did not have sufficient time to adequately assess and/or monitor the child's situation. In addition to leading to such tragedies, insufficient staffing results in inefficient services.<sup>4</sup>

- **The goal of child welfare is to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being for all children who come to the attention of the child welfare system. We need to focus on what it takes to achieve these service goals.**

In the Child and Family Service Reviews,<sup>5</sup> conducted in 32 states, those states that showed strength in such areas as family involvement and worker contact with children in foster care were more likely to achieve safety and permanency goals. Caseloads must permit such activities and opportunities.

- **Studies have shown that smaller caseloads, such as those recommended in the CWLA Standards, lead to more effective services.**
  - A 1998 study of New York's child welfare services found that high workload resulted in incomplete abuse and neglect investigations, an inability for workers to regularly monitor clients, and prolonged permanency decisions for children.
  - Conversely, the Katz study for Washington and Idaho (1990) showed that when caseloads were reduced to no more than ten children per worker, permanency for children was accomplished in a timely manner.
  - In 1994 the Institute for Family Self-Sufficiency found that the more contact a worker had with a client, the more successful workers were in reaching expected outcomes.
  - Agencies that have become accredited, measured against recognized standards, report increased effectiveness and improved outcomes for children and families. For example, Illinois, recently accredited by COA, views meeting accreditation standards as a key ingredient in the state's success in reducing the number of children in out of home care and achieving permanency for many more children in the last 5 years.

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- Studies have shown that smaller caseloads are associated with better worker retention. When workers stay longer, they are better able to master the necessary skills, case continuity is enhanced, and case goals are more likely to be accomplished.

### **Making Best Use of Caseload and Practice Standards**

A major challenge in reducing the number of children entering or remaining in out-of-home care or waiting for an adoptive family lies in the ability of a well-staffed and well-trained child welfare workforce. Caseworkers must assist families that are experiencing difficult and chronic family problems. They must also achieve the goals of safety and permanency and make lifetime decisions for the child within prescribed timelines. Yet, the safety and permanency of children is hampered due to large caseloads, caseworker turnover and minimal training.

In an effort to ensure achieve manageable caseloads for child welfare workers, a number of states have addressed these issues through legislation. The states that have been most successful have combined the achievement of mandated caseload ratios with other necessary elements of effective service delivery—notably, strong training and supervision, and the provision of the resources needed to provide prompt, responsive services to children and families.

Delaware provides a useful example of this approach. In 1998, Delaware passed Senate Bill 142, requiring the state agency to project the number of child abuse and neglect cases. Based on this information, the General Assembly must fund positions to ensure that caseloads do not exceed numerical standards based on the CWLA standards. A provision in their legislation requires that the legislature allocate additional funds for positions if the caseload average exceeds 10% over the standards in any given year.

Delaware used the opportunity of the legislation to launch a major worker retention initiative which included a redesigned, targeted hiring process, a pre-interview video, coaching supervisors and coaching units, supervisory competency training, a career ladder, and a new worker training pool. As a result of the initiative, the state agency has lowered caseloads, dramatically reduced worker turnover, improved employee morale, improved quality and consistency of work, and achieved better outcomes for children.

In conclusion, child welfare work is serious and important work. It is only as good as the people involved. To be successful, we must have well trained workers, working with a reasonable number of cases, who receive clear guidance and support from their agency. The goals of HB 1554, if fulfilled, will help the state achieve this important goal, and the children and families of Georgia will be the better for it.

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<sup>1</sup> The Public Children Services Association of Ohio, which last studied the workload issue in 1997, found that a social worker putting in a normal 40-hour week can conduct about 11 investigations per month

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(Akron Beacon Journal, 9-03-03). A recent Allegheny County, PA, study concluded that investigative workers could conduct 16 investigations per month, with the qualification that this number would not permit them to conduct "best practice." They suggested that a lower caseload ratio, such as CWLA's recommended 12 investigations per month, would permit "best practice." (Allegheny County, 2002)

- <sup>2</sup> The Oregon Project was successful in achieving permanency for children in foster care. The recommendation of this project was a maximum caseload of 15 children per worker (Emlen, 1977), consistent with CWLA's caseload recommendations of 12-15 children per worker for foster care.
- <sup>3</sup> The General Accounting Office, in its March, 2003 report, states, "Some of the caseworkers we interviewed handle double the number of cases recommended by advocacy organizations and spend between 50 and 80 percent of their time completing paperwork, thereby limiting their time to assist children and families."
- <sup>4</sup> A 1998 study of New York's child welfare services found that high workload resulted in incomplete abuse and neglect investigations, an inability of workers to regularly monitor clients, and prolonged permanency decisions for children. (State of New York Comptroller, 1998)
- <sup>5</sup> Results of the 2001 and 2002 Child and Family Service Reviews. Power point presentation.  
([www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/results.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/results.htm))