

SB 5529, Child Welfare
March 21, 2013

Co-Chairs Nathanson and Bates, Members of the Committee:

My name is Tonya Staines. I am a Social Service Specialist (case worker) with the Department of Human Services Gresham Child Welfare.

The work I do every day, directly impacts clients in the community and is vital to the rebuilding of families where I live. Case workers play a vital role in supporting families and providing them with preventative/restorative services to assist in creating and maintaining healthy, safe and independent lifestyles. I work daily with families who have been separated from each other due to tragedy, abuse, mental health issues, and substance abuse. As a case worker, I am responsible for providing out-of-home placement services when it is necessary to remove children from their homes.

This is very overwhelming for the families we work with, as the system is confusing and the circumstances that lead to a family's becoming involved with our agency are often times tragic. As a case worker, it is imperative that I assist the family in maneuvering through our system in an objective way, while ensuring that families are accountable to the court, service providers and the agency for their treatment and ongoing case planning. The work is designed to provide critical outcomes, in conjunction with case planning including the family, community resources, treatment providers, school officials and the Juvenile Court.

Case workers are on the front lines every day. We are often looked at to be skills trainers, advocates and crisis workers. This is beyond the scope of what we can currently do, but it is what we should be able to do—and could do—for our clients, if caseloads were not so high and staffing was not at current levels. We are responsible for regular face to face contact with our clients, attending meetings with them in order to give updates and provide input, to be available to providers and obtain input regarding clients and to ensure that clients are receiving all the necessary services to safely reunify their family. Workers are constantly asked to make critical decisions regarding the safety of children while under adverse circumstances including workload pressure, time constraints and conflicting opinions as to the necessary course of action. The impact of short staffing of case workers creates an environment that is exceptionally stressful and provides a disservice to our clients.

As a result of short staffing we are forced to take on caseloads that are unreasonable and that increase the liability of something going wrong, getting missed or not getting done. Because there are not enough workers to get everything done, every day, workers are forced to tell families that their children will not be coming home as soon as was hoped. No parent should be told that because of short staffing and budget cuts, their child will continue to languish in foster care. Families should have access to services and their case worker, and they should not have to be told that they are on a wait-list to have supervised visits with their children.

The mission of every case worker is to safely, and expeditiously reunify families. That is the natural order of things and should be the priority of our States budget. Staffing and critical

services should not be the first things on the chopping blocks when cuts are being discussed. In fact, funding should be prioritized for staffing, as this is an investment towards the sustainability of the work we do with our families and the success we hope to see our clients achieve after they leave our agency.

Currently, I am working with a family that requires an amended amount of phone and face-to-face contact. For the sake of confidentiality, we will refer to them as the "Smith" family. Young Sara Smith was brought into the custody of DHS due to delinquent behaviors. At this stage in the case, there are numerous parties involved on this case given the complexity and fragility of the family members. On this case, I am currently working with a community provider who provides intensive in-home parent skills training to the grandparents who are Sara's guardians and family counseling services to the whole family; a provider who is providing intensive outpatient counseling for Sara, who has been a victim of both sexual and physical abuse and who has been severely neglected and ultimately abandoned by her parents; the school district, which is working to keep Sara stable at school; the Juvenile Court Counselor dealing with the delinquency petition; the court; the county mental health coordinator; attorney's for the both Sara and her guardians; and the foster parent responsible for Sara's care.

In order to stay informed, keep everyone else informed, and provide the family with the ongoing, high level of care and supervision they need, I attend numerous meetings with providers, Juvenile court staff, attorneys and educational professionals. The family requires regular face to face contact, as does the child. The consumption of time dedicated to this one family is significant, and necessary to achieve stabilization. Sara goes into crisis weekly.

Despite her having an individual counselor who is contracted to deal with Sara's self-harm and suicidal threats, violent/aggressive outbursts and oppositional behavior, I, as the case worker, am almost always contacted first to respond and diffuse the situation. In this case, as with many others, the child, in this instance a teenager, typically contacts his/her case worker, as that is who they are most connected with, familiar with, and whom they feel safe with. The family, in spite of differing opinions with the case worker from time to time, nearly always contacts the worker, as that is who they end up trusting to deescalate their children and resolve issues and conflict.

This is one case. When Sara goes into crisis and I get the call that she needs me, I, like so many other workers, are forced to choose between spending the much-needed time with Sara at the expense of other families, or cut Sara and her family short to be able to tend to the needs of other families. We are forced to make this horrendous decision because we have too many cases and too few workers.

Every time this situation occurs, it is a gross injustice to the families we are dedicated to serving. The commitment to our youth and the dedication to help families in our community that have experience tragic circumstances should be considered a priority and an investment. Our budget should be focused on how to support the healthy growth of children and build up our communities, rather than leaving our clients floundering, struggling and crying out for help from agencies that are designed to help them, but not prioritized by the means of State Government.

By continuing to cut services, and by continuing to ignore the need for more case workers, our case loads will continue to grow. There are too few of us to be able to do all the work necessary to safely reunify families in a timely matter, no matter how much we continue to give of ourselves each and every day. We will continue to be forced to continue children in foster care that should be on their way home, had we had the staff to provide the necessary level of case management to them.

DHS and I have a responsibility to help shape our community. We have the unique opportunity to offer families the tools that can change their lives; yet when we open our tool box, it is empty. Critical services have been cut and we have too few staff to offer what is left. What message does this send to young Sara Smith and her family and to every other family that caseworkers invest their limited time into every day?

The fear of additional cuts and continued understaffing is on the hearts and minds of case workers daily. Because our current levels of staffing are not sustainable, we will continue to lose momentum around the work we do with the clients to we serve. Because of cuts to critical services, clients who need immediate access to drug and alcohol treatment, for example, are not able to access those services immediately, creating a situation where the client continues to use and sinks deeper into their struggle with addiction. The hole that they will need to climb out of is even deeper, and our State has contributed to the deepening of such holes. Long term prognoses for families who do not have services and case workers to support them and assist with measures of accountability is that they will remain involved longer with the State and will likely require our involvement again at a later date. Essentially, we will breed a community that cannot sustain itself, but who is dependent on the State to sustain it.

The lack of funding and continued cuts will end up costing this State more than it should. We know that each case worker, now, has far too many cases and is unable to maintain the quality of service that each family deserves. Case workers are under immense stress trying to manage each crisis that occurs, with too few resources. This is devastating to workers and the families we serve. The stress is insurmountable at times given the amount of work that is required on each and every case. There are days where one case worker does the job of five workers. How does this benefit our clients? The answer is that it does not benefit anyone. It is impossible for a worker to respond to a family in crisis without canceling three other appointments for three other families that need the attention and time of their case worker. We simply are not able to meet the demands do of our ever-increasing caseloads at current staffing levels.

The Governor's recommended budget suggested that he is looking to increase investments in DHS. As I worker, I support this. I was concerned to hear that not only were those investments not included or reflected in the Co-Chair's Budget, but that the agency is once again facing cuts.

As a resident of Oregon, an active member of my community, a parent, a case worker and an advocate for children and families, I support funding for staffing and services for DHS. I support the prioritization of funding so that the work we do is work that supports the families we serve and provides them with what they need to live productive, safe, and healthy lives. Thank you.

