



MEMORANDUM

Prepared for: Senator Sara Gelser
Date: May 7, 2019
By: Jamie Hinsz, LPRO Analyst
Re: Qualifications for Child Welfare
Caseworkers

LPRO: LEGISLATIVE POLICY AND RESEARCH OFFICE

Education and Training for Child Welfare Caseworkers

Most states allow child welfare agencies to determine qualifications for staff. Several states statutorily require background checks for any child welfare staff or service provider. Employees who investigate child abuse reports have a separate set of qualifications in many states, most requiring specialized training in child forensic interviewing. Some states require collaboration between law enforcement agencies and child welfare agencies, as well as multidisciplinary teams, in conducting child abuse investigations.

According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, which examined the characteristics of 5,052 caseworkers between February 2008 and April 2009, less than 0.5 percent reported having less than a bachelor's degree.¹ Another survey of child welfare agencies, completed in 1999 by the Child Welfare League of America, found that fewer than 15 percent of agencies required staff to have a social work degree.²

Every six years, the Children's Bureau conducts Children & Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), which evaluate state child welfare agencies on compliance with federal law and outcomes for families and children receiving child welfare services. The 2016 CFRS of Oregon found that trainings for child welfare staff needed improvement and that current training is not effectively preparing staff with the skills and knowledge required for their roles in child welfare.³ Results from CFRSs reiterate research findings of a need for a well-qualified staff with the knowledge, skills and commitment to provide quality services to children and families.⁴

¹ Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families (2011). NSCAW II baseline report caseworker characteristics, child welfare services, and experiences of children placed in out-of-home care. Washington, DC. www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nscaw2_cw.pdf

² Child Welfare League of America. "Minimum Education Required by State Child Welfare Agencies, Percent, By Degree Type, 1998." *State Child Welfare Agency Survey*. 1999.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). Child and Family Services Reviews: Oregon Final Report. <https://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/Documents/Oregon%20CFRS%20Round%203%20Final%20Report%202016.pdf>

⁴ Perry, R. E., & Ellett, A. J. (2008). Child welfare: Historical trends, professionalization, and workforce issues. In K. M. Sowers, & C. N. Dulmus (Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of social work and social welfare*, vol. 1 (pp. 143–184). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. Zlotnik, J., DePanfilis, D., Lane, M., Daining, C., Summers, L., & Wechsler, J. (2005a). *Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research*. Baltimore, MD: The Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, University of Maryland

Recent research on the child welfare workforce has examined factors that impact the growth and retention of caseworkers. The most common barrier discovered to hinder the ability of child welfare agencies to attract and retain caseworkers is offering low salaries.⁵

Turnover Among Child Welfare Caseworkers

In 2018, the Oregon Secretary of State completed an audit of Oregon's foster care system and found that the turnover rate for caseworkers in 2016 was 23 percent.⁶ Turnover rates at 10 percent are considered optimal in any agency.⁷ Turnover rates exceeding 25 percent are considered high.⁸

A qualitative study examining the youth perspective of the impact of turnover among caseworkers assigned to them found that children with more than one caseworker were 60 percent less likely to be placed in permanent setting within federal timelines compared to those with just one caseworker.⁹ Several studies have found that lower turnover rates correlate with caseworkers who have a bachelor's degree in social work or a master's degree in social work.¹⁰

Mississippi's Family Protection Workers

The Mississippi Office of Family and Children's Services is required by law to establish formal standards for family protection workers and family protection specialists.¹¹ Family protection workers are caseworkers or service providers who provide services in child abuse or neglect cases and youth court proceedings. Family protection workers may or may not have a social work license but must be supervised by family protection specialists who are licensed social workers.

Family protection workers who are not licensed social workers must be certified by the Office of Family and Children's Services and have a bachelor's degree in either psychology, sociology,

School of Social Work.

⁵ U.S. General Accounting Office. (2003). Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff. www.gao.gov/new.items/d03357.pdf

⁶ Oregon Secretary of State. (2018). Foster Care in Oregon: Chronic management failures and high caseloads jeopardize the safety of some of the state's most vulnerable children. <https://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Documents/2018-05.pdf>

⁷ Smith, B., & Rutigliano, T. The Truth About Turnover. (2002) <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/316/truth-about-turnover.aspx>
blog/does-your-organization-have-healthy-employee-turnover

⁸ Strolin-Goltzman, J., Kollar, S., & Trinkle, J. (2010). Listening to the voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection. *Social Work*, 55(1), 47-53.

⁹ Strolin-Goltzman, J., Kollar, S., & Trinkle, J. (2010). Listening to the voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection. *Social Work*, 55(1), 47-53.

¹⁰ Albers, E. et al (1993). "Children in foster care: Possible factors affecting permanency planning." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 10(4). Dhooper, S.S., et al (1990). "Does social work education make a difference?" *Social Work*, 35(1). Oregon Secretary of State. (2018). Foster Care in Oregon: Chronic management failures and high caseloads jeopardize the safety of some of the state's most vulnerable children.

<https://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Documents/2018-05.pdf>

¹¹ Miss. Code Ann. 43-01-55 (1) <https://codes.findlaw.com/ms/title-43-public-welfare/ms-code-sect-43-1-55.html>

nursing, family studies, or a related field, or a graduate degree in either psychology, sociology, nursing, criminal justice, counseling, marriage and family therapy or a related field.¹² Furthermore, forensic interviews of children can only be conducted by family protection workers who have received additional specialized training in child forensic interview protocols and techniques.¹³ Finally, Mississippi law requires the prioritization of employing family support specialists but allows the employment of family support workers in counties where there is not a sufficient number of family protection specialists to adequately provide child welfare services.¹⁴

Florida's Child Welfare Reform

Florida law requires the Department of Children and Families to make every effort to ensure at least half of all child protective investigators and supervisors to have a bachelor's degree or a master's degree in social work from a college or university social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education by July 1, 2019.¹⁵ The Senate President and House Speaker sponsored a bipartisan child welfare reform package in 2014, which increased child welfare expertise of child abuse investigators, expanded qualifications for child abuse investigators, and created a consortium of schools of social work to advise the state government on child welfare policy.

Alaska's Effort to Address the Child Welfare Workforce

In the 2018 Legislative Session, Alaska passed the Children Deserve a Loving Home Act (House Bill 151) which aimed at lowering caseworker turnover.¹⁶ The inspiration of House Bill 151 came from New Jersey's success in lowering the incidence of child removals by 50 percent and lowering caseworker turnover from 25 percent to eight percent.¹⁷ House Bill 151 sets caseload limits to six families in the first three months and 12 in the first six months for new caseworkers, and a statewide average of not more than 13 families per caseworker. The measure also increases caseworker training from three weeks to six weeks for new workers and requires new caseworkers to have an assigned mentor. There are currently five postings for protective services specialists in Alaska, each requiring a minimum of a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution with a specified major, or four years of postsecondary education in specified areas of study.

¹² Miss. Code Ann. 43-01-55 (2)(a) <https://codes.findlaw.com/ms/title-43-public-welfare/ms-code-sect-43-1-55.html>

¹³ Miss. Code Ann. 43-01-55 (2)(b)(4) <https://codes.findlaw.com/ms/title-43-public-welfare/ms-code-sect-43-1-55.html>

¹⁴ Miss. Code Ann. 43-01-55 (4) <https://codes.findlaw.com/ms/title-43-public-welfare/ms-code-sect-43-1-55.html>

¹⁵ Fla. Stat. 402.402.

http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=0400-0499/0402/Sections/0402.402.html

¹⁶ Chapter No. 15, SLA 2018. http://www.akleg.gov/basis/Bill/Detail/30?Root=hb151#tab6_4

¹⁷ HB 151 Presentation. http://www.akleg.gov/basis/get_documents.asp?session=30&docid=55695