

# MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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# **Child Welfare Caseload and Workload Analysis**

October 1, 2019

Required by:

Public Law 2019, Ch. 34 (LD 821)



## **Introduction and Background**

L.D. 821 (Public Law 2019, Ch. 34) requires “the Department of Health and Human Services to review case load standards for child welfare caseworkers and develop standard case load recommendations with input from child welfare caseworkers and the Public Consulting Group contracted by the Department.” It further requires that “the department shall submit an initial report with its findings and recommendations on staffing in the department’s child welfare program in relation to the standard case load recommendations no later than October 1, 2019.”

At the same time that LD 821 was being considered and ultimately passed, the Department’s Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), guided by the belief that a thorough analysis of both caseload and workload was necessary to ensure appropriate staffing and manageable work expectations, had undertaken work with contracted provider Public Consulting Group to conduct an analysis and develop a workload analytic tool. In conjunction with this work, OCFS was working to prioritize recommendations for systemic improvements received from various entities over the previous year. In completing both of these initiatives, OCFS partnered with Public Consulting Group and with national and regional experts, including the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), Casey Family Programs, and the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD). OCFS was also able to capitalize on the knowledge and experience of OCFS staff and stakeholders in Maine. Their input was invaluable and ensured the work completed reflected the needs of Maine’s child welfare system.

CWLA has published a National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare. Within that document are standards for workforce development, which include the need to assure that each staff person’s workload is reasonable and allows the employee to perform the required duties.<sup>1</sup> OCFS, in seeking to improve the child welfare system in Maine, adopted this recommendation and recognized that staff are tasked with the complex and difficult work of ensuring child and family safety and wellbeing throughout the state each day. This includes intake staff who receive reports of abuse and neglect, assessment staff who receive reports deemed appropriate and complete an investigation into the allegations made in the report, permanency staff who support the reunification process when children have been removed from their home, adoption staff who seek adoptive homes for children who cannot return to their biological parents, and licensing staff who provide critical support to foster parents and oversee the licensing process. Each group of staff has specific duties and functions guided by policy and procedures. The ability of staff to complete these functions is impacted by the specific policies and procedures of OCFS, as well as the needs of the children and families served. OCFS undertook this work with the understanding that the process of establishing and adhering to reasonable caseloads would increase effective engagement with families, ensure quality services statewide, and improve child welfare outcomes for children and families.

In the last two years, OCFS has seen a tremendous increase in calls to intake, new assessments assigned to staff, and children in care. On July 1, 2018 there were 1,724 children in care. On September 1, 2019 there were 2,195. In 2016 the Department received 7,463 reports of abuse and/or neglect that were deemed appropriate for assessment, by 2018 that number had surged to 11,831. The number of staff has not increased commensurately. As such, the increase in workload strained OCFS staff and many reported being overwhelmed by the amount of work. This reinforced the need to ensure that workload and caseload were properly studied and understood in order to develop thoughtful recommendations that were solidly grounded in the realities of the day-to-day practice of Maine’s child welfare workforce.

### **Workload vs. Caseload**

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<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare League of America, National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare (2013).

OCFS almost immediately identified the need to clearly define workload and caseload. A shared understanding of each term eliminated confusion and allowed staff and stakeholders to provide specific information on their experiences and those of their colleagues. OCFS once again turned to the experts at CWLA to assist in articulating the distinction.<sup>2</sup>

**Caseload = Cases / Workers:** The number of cases (children or families) assigned to an individual caseworker in a given time period. Caseload reflects a ratio of cases (or clients) to staff members and may be measured for an individual caseworker, all caseworkers assigned to a specific type of case, or all caseworkers in a specified area (e.g., agency or region).

**Workload = (Time required for cases + Non-casework responsibilities) / Workers:** The amount of work required to successfully manage assigned cases and bring them to resolution. Workload reflects the average time it takes a caseworker to (1) do the work required for each assigned case; and (2) complete other non-casework responsibilities.

The development of reasonable workload standards helps to guide an organization towards the establishment of caseload expectations. In order to understand how many cases a caseworker can effectively manage, one must first understand the work inherent in each case and the time necessary to complete all parts of the work, as well as any expectations which do not directly serve children and families but are required when carrying cases.

### **Key Assumptions**

In order to be functional, workload recommendations (and resulting caseload recommendations) must account for other factors which impact OCFS staff, such as vacancies, new/inexperienced staff, staff who (as part of their job duties) do not carry cases, and the workload each case requires. After careful consideration and consultation with experts, OCFS staff, and stakeholders, OCFS chose to focus on two primary areas of assumption.

**Experience:** Over the last few years OCFS has seen significant turnover. In 2017, OCFS had a 35.3% vacancy rate for the year and that increased to 37.4% in 2018. While OCFS has been working to reverse the high level of turnover, and we have seen an overall reduction in our turnover rate thus far in 2019, it was also necessary to account for the relative level of experience of OCFS' workforce. Staff who are new to the work take longer to complete each task and require more guidance and supervision, both from supervisors and from their more experienced co-workers. Child welfare work is complex, and it takes a significant amount of time for workers to gain the experience and knowledge necessary to function effectively with a full caseload of families and children. Until a caseworker has established significant experience in the field it is likely that the work will take them longer to complete when compared to more experienced staff.

**Geography:** Maine is primarily a rural state. Although cases are assigned to the Districts based on geography, it is not uncommon for assessment, permanency, adoption, and licensing workers to find themselves crisscrossing the state to ensure they complete their work according to OCFS' policies and procedures. At times critical members of an assessment or case live far apart and in other situations the geographic area of OCFS Districts is so vast that it requires significant travel time. Travel time directly impacts the amount of time that staff have available to conduct the work necessary to meet workload expectations.

The Department used these assumptions to inform the development of a workload analytic tool to determine the need for additional staff and the distribution of those staff throughout OCFS' Districts. The

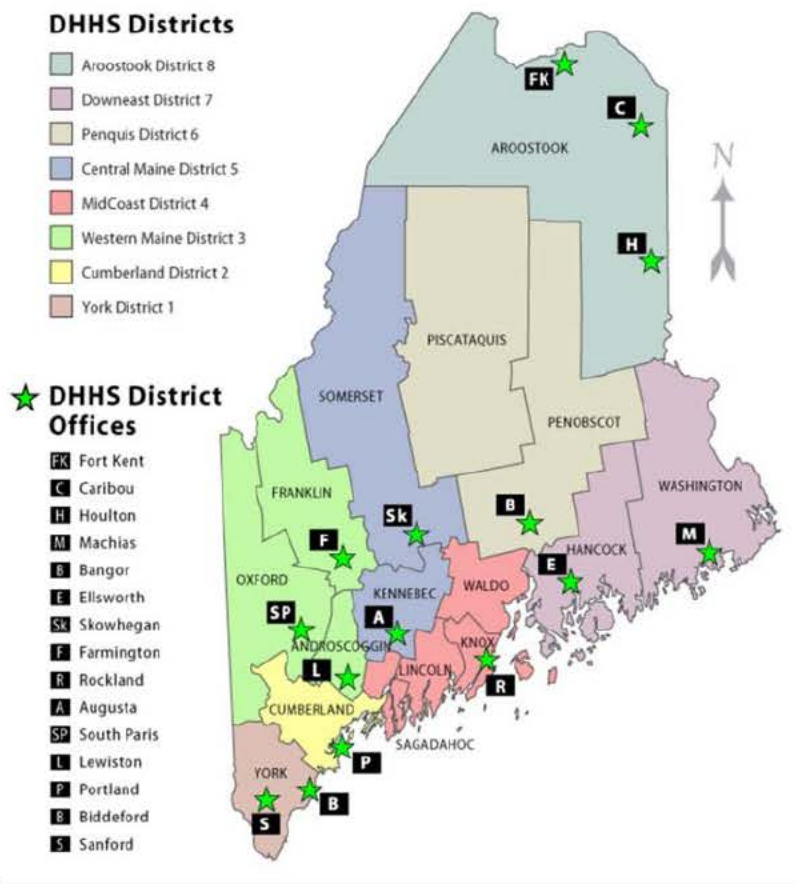
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<sup>2</sup> Child Welfare Caseload and Workload: A Synthesis of the Evidence Base, Current Trends and Future Directions (2018).

workload analytic tool was informed by a comprehensive study of OCFS policies and procedures, workload information provided by staff throughout the state, focus groups with staff, and the input of national and regional child welfare experts with experience in evaluating workload in other states. Public Consulting Group (PCG) took the lead on the development of the workload analytic tool but gathered feedback from Department leadership, OCFS staff, stakeholders, and experts in order to refine the tool and ensure its accuracy.

**Results** (Open Cases as of August 31, 2019)

District	Current Number of Caseworkers	Needed Number of Caseworkers	Difference
1	42	48.6	6.6
2	54	51.3	(2.7)
3	48	61.2	13.2
4	22	23.1	1.1
5	58	78.5	20.5
6	43	62.1	19.1
7	22	23.3	1.3
8	25	32.2	7.2
Total	314	380.3	66.3



The chart above shows the current number of caseworkers in each District, the number that the workload analytic tool indicates are needed, and the difference between the two (representing the need for additional staff). The total number of caseworkers needed is 66.3. This analysis does not include in the

“number of current caseworkers” the 33 new caseworker positions created in the Biennial Budget effective 9/1/19. OCFS is currently in the process of filling these positions. OCFS anticipates that, once these additional caseworkers are accounted for (after they are trained and begin carrying cases), the needed number of additional caseworker positions is likely to decline to 33. This recommended increase could be phased in, especially in light of the state’s challenging labor market. We note that this is an analytic recommendation in response to the Legislature’s request rather than a supplemental budget request. The Governor will submit her supplemental budget in due course.

OCFS is continuing to work to refine the tool to assist in establishing any possible need for additional supervisor or case aide positions within the office. The 62 new positions funded in the recently passed biennial budget include 33 caseworkers, 6 supervisors and 4 case aides. OCFS has established standard ratios of supervisor and case aide to caseworkers. For supervisors the ratio is 5 caseworkers per supervisor and for case aides the standard is 8 caseworkers per case aide. As the workload analytic tool is refined we will be able to use these ratios to determine whether there is an additional need for supervisor or case aide positions. As you’re aware, the biennial budget also included funding for 6 background check unit staff and 13 intake staff, all of whom will also work to help prevent abuse, neglect and unhealthy experiences among our children. We also need to consider the impact on the courts and court system with regard to child protective activities, including the Child Protection Division of the Attorney General’s Office.

Another result of the collaboration with national and regional experts in the child welfare field was the development of new perspectives on the significance of appropriate caseload and workload balance for OCFS staff. Included in this was the importance of considering both caseload and workload as a part of the organization’s overall efforts. Evidence is clear that when staff are overworked – whether that is the result of the overall workload, the caseload, or both – they are more likely to rush through their work. This type of urgency does not benefit the families and can also result in mistakes and accidents that have implications for the health, safety, and wellbeing of both staff and clients. OCFS seeks to reduce risk wherever possible. Viewing the caseload and workload evaluation in this light has further emphasized the importance of a thorough and thoughtful evaluation of staff caseload and workload that takes into account the specific intricacies of child welfare work in Maine.

### **Next Steps**

OCFS is considering the work done thus far, as well as this report, to be “version 1.0” in an ongoing effort to further refine the analysis of the workload and caseload for OCFS staff. OCFS recognizes that there are specific circumstances that warrant further study to determine the true impact of increased demand on OCFS staff. This includes assessments and cases involving the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). The Federal law regarding Native American children involved with child welfare requires additional communication with the family’s Tribe, a higher standard with regard to reunification efforts, and the involvement of the Tribal court system (among other things). As a result, ICWA cases are generally more complex than non-ICWA cases and require more time to navigate, particularly for caseworkers who are not experienced in the intricacies of ICWA. Further study also includes assessments and cases involving larger sibling groups. For assessment caseworkers there is an increase in the time needed to visit, interview, and ensure safety for each child. For permanency staff there are the duties and responsibilities associated with ensuring the safety and wellbeing of each child in state custody, which includes monthly visits with each child and their caregiver.

Additionally, OCFS recognizes that the Federal Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) will also impact both caseload and workload. Once Family First is fully implemented, OCFS staff will be an integral part of the development of individual prevention plans, as well as the monitoring, oversight, and associated documentation of progress toward plan goals and objectives. OCFS’

permanency staff will also be involved with Family First from the perspective of children in care who are placed in residential facilities to receive treatment services. Family First requires that children in care who are placed in residential treatment facilities receive appropriate monitoring of that placement at both the clinical and judicial level in order to ensure the placement is necessary in order to meet their needs. This monitoring may involve increased responsibility for the assigned permanency caseworker.

OCFS is also aware that future shifts in policy, practice, and staffing will impact both workload and caseload. OCFS is currently in the process of reviewing and revising policies and the manner in which they are made available to staff. The goal is to improve staff's access to the information they need to complete their work. At the same time, OCFS is also in the process of implementing a multipronged effort to improve the overall child welfare system. The deployment of new trainings, policies, practices, and tools in furtherance of this effort is likely to impact both workload and caseload for staff. Included among these initiatives is the development and implementation of a new Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) to replace the state's outdated Maine Automated Child Welfare Information System (MACWIS). OCFS plans to seek efficiencies in caseworker documentation and other practice areas utilizing CCWIS, and the workload conclusions contained in the current workload analysis will have to be adjusted accordingly.

Another initiative underway within OCFS is the re-establishment of a Field Instruction Unit (FIU) for prospective caseworkers. The FIU will allow social work students nearing the completion of their studies to receive college credit for completing internships in OCFS' District offices. This allows students to develop critically important social work skills related to child welfare work in preparation to beginning a career with OCFS upon graduation and provides an opportunity for them to determine whether OCFS is a good fit for them. Staff who join OCFS after participating in the FIU are likely to need less time to come up-to-speed on training, policies, and procedures and as a result may impact the assumption regarding the relative experience of OCFS' workforce.

As noted above, this report maintains the current standard for supervisors and case aides to caseworkers. Should OCFS modify these ratios it will likely have an impact on the support available to caseworkers and may necessitate further revision of the workload analysis. These are just a few examples of the adjustments and refinements that OCFS will continue to make in an effort to improve the workload analytic tool to ensure it accurately reflects the staffing needs within OCFS and accounts for the complexities of OCFS' work.

OCFS is currently in the process of reviewing the effectiveness of the Alternative Response Program (ARP). Under current practice, appropriate reports with allegations that are of low to moderate severity can be referred to ARP instead of receiving a full child welfare assessment completed by an OCFS caseworker. ARP staff work for contracted providers and they meet with families, assess the allegations contained in the report, and work with each family to alleviate the risk of child abuse and/or neglect. OCFS is considering modifying the work of ARP to focus primarily on prevention and instead have OCFS staff assess all appropriate reports (regardless of severity). Preliminary analysis indicates an additional 20 caseworkers would be required within OCFS in order to complete these additional assessments. As OCFS moves forward with the review and development of future plans regarding ARP, the changes will need to be accounted for within the workload analysis to ensure adequate staffing throughout the State.

## **Conclusion**

The current iteration of the workload analytic tool indicates the need for 33 additional caseworkers (when accounting for the 33 positions that became effective 9/1/19 and for which OCFS is currently in the process of filling). This tool is not able to determine the impact of OCFS caseload and workload on other related entities, including the Child Protective Division of the attorney general's office,



the Maine Judicial Branch, and the attorneys and guardians ad litem who are appointed to represent parents and children. As the number of reports, assessments, cases, and children in care have risen across OCFS, there has been a corresponding impact. OCFS recommends the impact be researched so that steps can be taken to ensure all entities have the resources necessary to support the safety and wellbeing of Maine's children and their families.

OCFS will continue to refine the workload analytic tool with the next report to the Health and Human Services Committee to be presented by 1/31/20.