

Special Report: Measuring the Strengths and Needs of DYFS Workforce

Special Report to Governor Chris Christie
and the New Jersey Legislature

New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect
Staffing and Oversight Review Subcommittee

December 2011



**NEW JERSEY TASK FORCE ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT
STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT REVIEW
SUBCOMMITTEE (SORS)**

MEMBERSHIP LIST

Cecilia Zalkind, Esq., Chair
Advocates for Children of NJ

Amy Fischer, Assistant Family
Division Manager – Mercer Vicinage

Rita Gulden, Executive Director
Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)

James Chester
Foster and Adoptive Family Services (FAFS)

Kara Wood, Director
Division of Youth and Family Services

Barbara Rusen, Chief of Staff
Department of Children and Families

Cassandra Simmel
Department of Children and Families
Office of Continuous Quality Improvement

Marygrace Billek, director
Mercer County Dept. of Human Services

Maura Somers Dughi
Family Advocate

LaTasha Holmes, Special Assistant to the
Commissioner
Department of Children and Families

Patricia Myers, Supv. Social Worker
Legal Services of New Jersey

Nancy Parello, Communications Director
Advocates for Children of NJ

Laurie McCabe, Senate Designee
Senate, District 19
569 Rahway Avenue

Debra Gise Jennings,
Executive Co-Director
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, Inc

Clarence Whittaker, Constituent Affairs
NJ Division of Child Behavioral Health

Kathy Collins, Director
Monmouth Cares

STAFF

Adrienne E. Jackson, Executive Coordinator
NJ Task Force on Child Abuse & Neglect
20 West State Street, PO Box 950
Trenton, NJ 08625

PHONE: (609) 292-0888

FAX: (609) 292-3767

E-MAIL: Adrienne.e.jackson@dcf.state.nj.us

The following SORS members participated in the work group responsible for this project: Amy Fischer, Rita Gulden, LaTasha Holmes, Laurie McCabe, Patricia Myers, Nancy Parello and Cassandra Simmel.

SORS Special Report:

Measuring the Strengths & Needs of DYFS Workforce

Executive Summary

In March 2011, the Staffing and Oversight Review Subcommittee (SORS), in partnership with the Department of Children and Families (DCF), conducted a survey of Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) caseworkers, supervisors and casework supervisors.

The survey was designed to identify areas of strength upon which DCF could continue to build, as well as target areas that require additional attention. The goal is to strengthen our child protection system and keep children safely at home with their families, whenever possible.

Several positive trends emerged from the survey, including a strong and consistent message that workers felt particularly good about the quality of supervision they receive – a critical area in any agency, but especially so in the child welfare field. Not only did respondents feel generally supported by supervisors, they also said their supervisors were knowledgeable. This is an area of considerable progress and DCF should be commended for its work in this area.

Respondents were also very positive about the nature of the work they do, expressing satisfaction at their ability to assist New Jersey's children and families.

Other key findings:

1. Nearly all respondents hold a college degree, with 46 percent having earned that degree in social work or a social work related field. Forty-one percent do not hold a college degree in a social-work related field.
2. Fifty-eight percent of caseworkers who responded strongly or moderately agreed that their caseload size is manageable, with just 16 percent disagreeing.
3. Roughly three-quarters of supervisors who responded strongly or moderately agreed that their caseload size is manageable, with just 3.5 percent disagreeing.

4. Availability of a relevant array of services, convenient to families, was consistently identified as an area needing improvement.
5. Training is highly-valued by the agency, but respondents said the courses offered through DCF's training program should be more relevant to the real challenges they face in the field, especially in dealing with resistant families.
6. Agency resources – cars, cell phones, aides – were identified as the number one employment issue facing staff.

Why SORS Conducted the Survey

A stable, experienced child welfare workforce is the cornerstone of an effective child welfare system. While DYFS experiences a low staff turnover rate (12%), little data have been gathered to provide deeper insight into the strengths and needs of the DYFS workforce. Such information can lead to a more effective and efficient child welfare workforce.

In a 2003 report, *Workforce Data Collection Field Guide for Human Service Agencies*, the American Public Human Services Association said:

“One of the most important workforce applications of social research is the employee survey...Although more complex than exit interviews and focus groups, employee surveys can provide invaluable information about an organization's workforce strengths and weaknesses. Since it is widely agreed that any agency is only as good as its employees, it is critical to get direct, honest feedback from those employees on their workforce needs, perceptions, ideas, and suggestions.”

The Staffing and Oversight Review Subcommittee is statutorily charged with reviewing DYFS staffing levels and identifying effective methods of recruiting, hiring and retaining staff within the division. This project aligns with that mission and will enable the SORS to provide critical information to assist the Department in building a stronger, more stable workforce that excels at keeping children safe.

Survey Respondents

A total of 524 DYFS employees completed the survey, representing 17 percent of the targeted audience of frontline caseworkers, supervisors and casework supervisors. Nearly all of the respondents – 98 percent—work in a local office setting.

The SORS recognizes that this is not a representative sample of the DYFS workforce. However, the respondents provided significant insight into the agency’s strengths and needs. This information should be used to continue building on areas of improvements and as a compass for further exploration of areas in which DCF can improve policy and practices.

(Please note that all percentages cited in the text of this report represent those who answered each particular question).

Respondents’ Demographics

Forty-five percent of respondents were Caucasian, while roughly 23 percent were black/African American and about 17 percent were Hispanic/Latino. Most – 30 percent – work in the northern region of the state, while 24 percent work in central New Jersey, 19

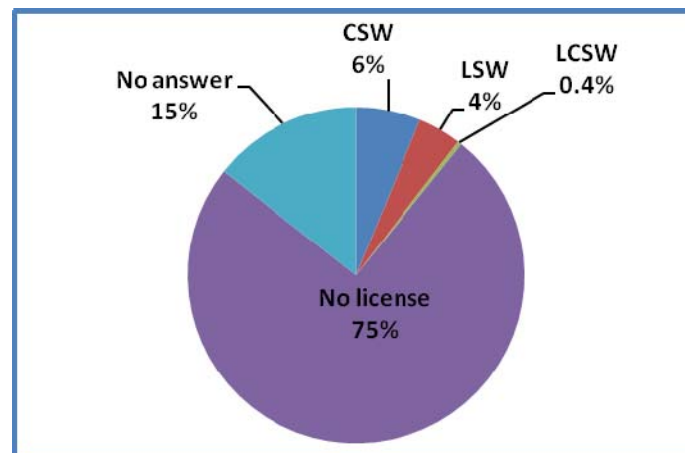
percent in the southern part of the state and 13 percent in the Metro region, which encompasses Middlesex, Essex and Union counties. The average length of time that respondents have worked for DYFS is about five years, with time of service ranging from one year to 20 years.

Respondents’ Education

Three-quarters of respondents indicated that they do not hold a New Jersey social work license. Just 4.4 percent of respondents are licensed social workers, while 6 percent are certified social workers. The vast majority – 85 percent -- hold a college degree, with 21 percent having earned their master’s degree. Nearly half – 46 percent – hold an undergraduate degree in social work or a related field. Forty-one percent earned an undergraduate degree in a field other than social work.

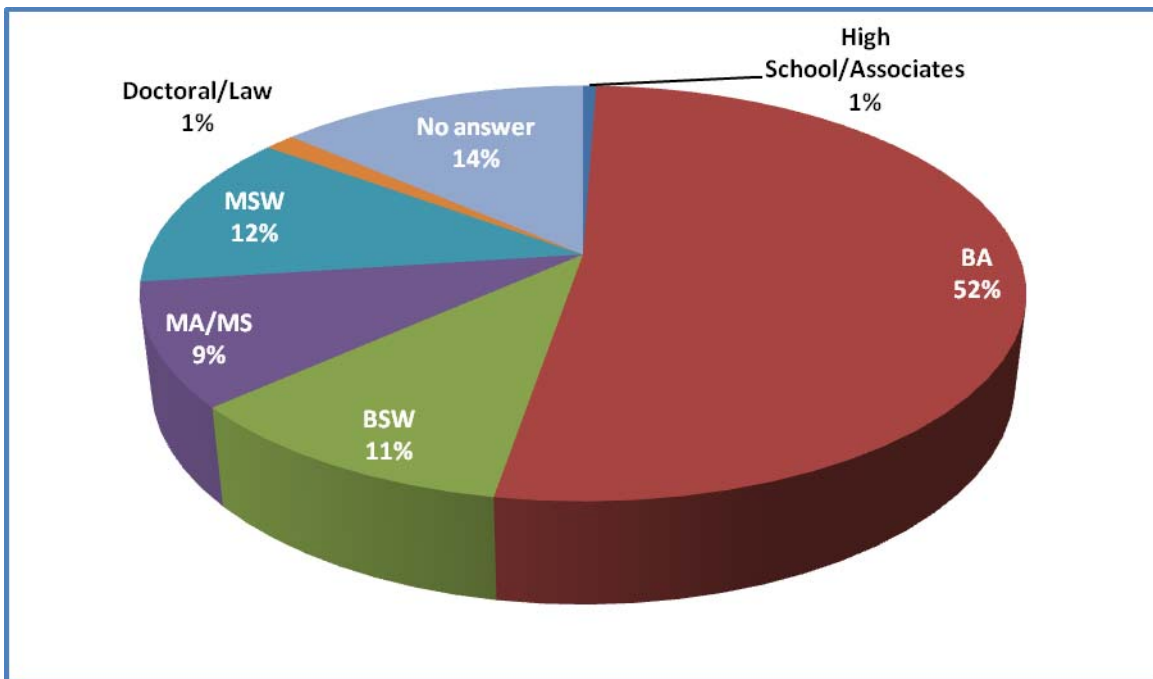
Of those who completed a post-graduate degree, 66 percent earned the higher degree in a social work-related field. In addition, out of these respondents, 34 stated that they earned their masters’ degree through one of DYFS’ continuing education programs.

Graph 1: NJ Social Work License



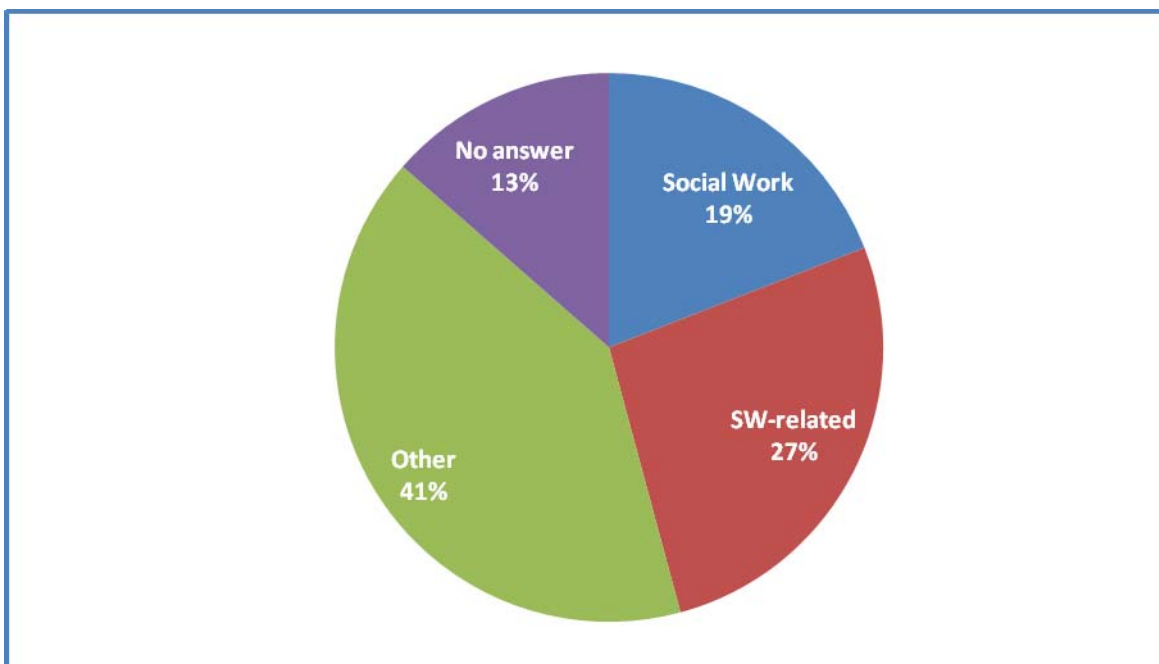
(N=524)

Graph 2: Highest Level of Education



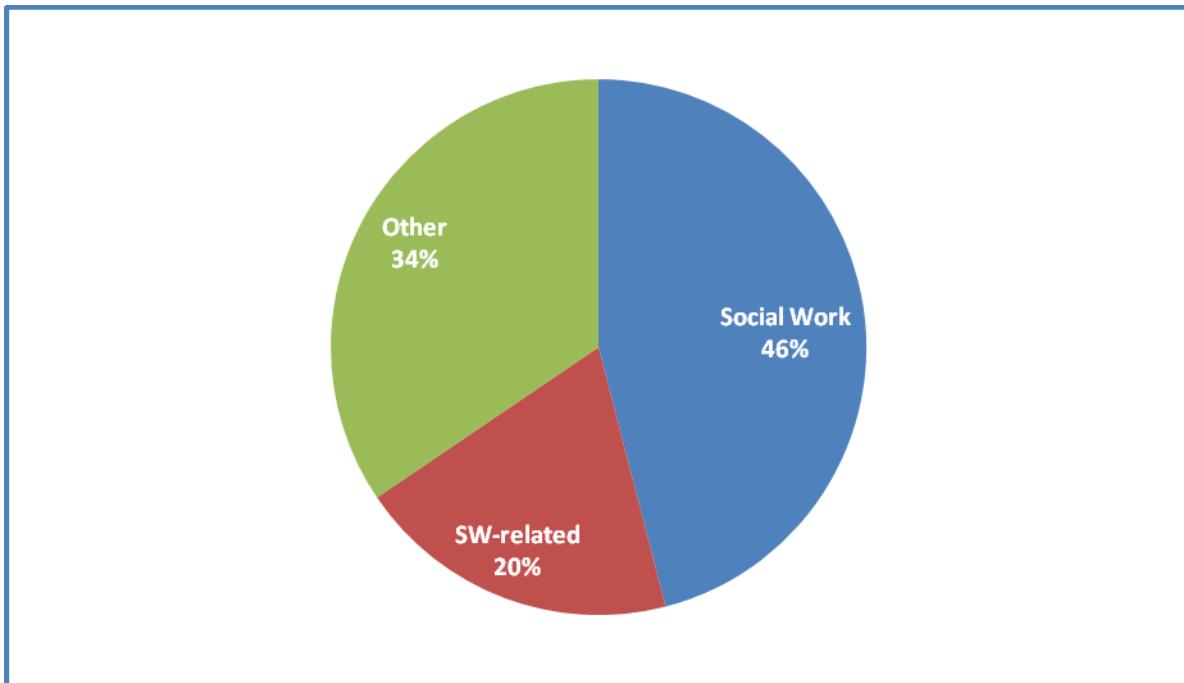
(n=524)

Graph 3: Social work related undergraduate degree



(n=524)

Graph 4: Social work related post-graduate degree



(n=174)

Caseworker Caseload

When asked about caseload size, 130 caseworkers responded. Of those:

- 78 percent said they have a caseload size of 0-12 families;
- 19 percent (24 respondents) stated they had a caseload size of 16+ families;
- Five provided illegible answers.
- Roughly 58 percent of these respondents agreed that their caseload size is manageable, with 16 percent of respondents saying their caseload size is unmanageable and the rest expressing more neutral answers.

Supervisor Caseload

When asked about caseload size, 113 supervisors responded. The number of employees supervised ranged from zero to 52 (one person gave this latter response). The mean number of employees supervised was 7.75. Roughly three-quarters of these supervisors

agreed that their caseload size is manageable, with only 3.5 percent disagreeing with this statement.

Supervision

As mentioned previously, the quality of supervision received high marks from respondents. A scale of 10 items was used to measure respondents' perceptions of the quality of supervision. The mean score for all items was generally positive.

When looking at the percentage of respondents agreeing with statements on this scale, 69 percent said their supervisors are knowledgeable – the highest on the scale. The second-highest ranking was given for supervisors reinforcing the training curriculum, with roughly 62 percent of respondents agreeing with that statement.

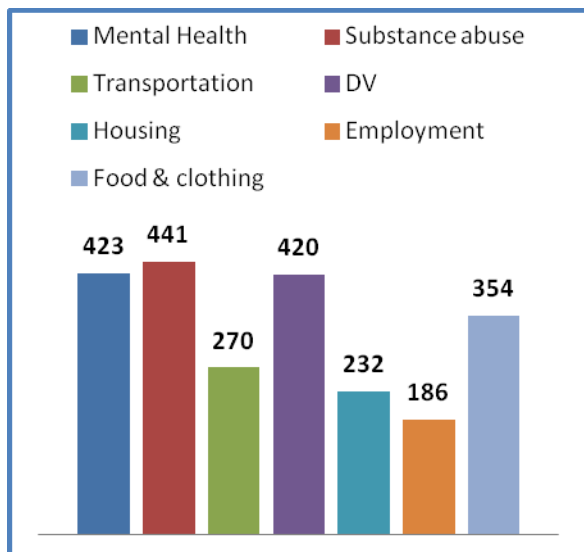
The lowest marks were for “supervisor helped me learn the ropes of the agency” (45%), and “cases are assigned in fair manner” (50%). Still, just a minority of respondents disagreed with these statements, 28 percent and 23 percent, respectively.

The full scale and complete scores for the supervision scale can be found in Appendix A.

Services

The survey asked respondents about the types of services available to families. Of the 524 respondents, more than 400 said families have access to substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence services. More than 300 respondents indicated that families had access to food and clothing. The least endorsed services were housing services (232), transportation (270), and employment services (186).

Graph 5: Access to Services



(N=524)

Analysis of Open-Ended Question About Services

While the quantitative data about services seemed generally positive, the open-ended question elicited responses that strongly suggest a lack of relevant services that are accessible to families at convenient times and in places close to families' homes. This theme carried over to two other open-ended questions – one about additional supports needed and the other about barriers to implementing the Case Practice Model (CPM).

A general lack of relevant services, especially financial assistance services, was mentioned most frequently, followed by long waiting lists and a lack of transportation to services.

Cost of services, especially for families whose income is slightly higher, was also mentioned frequently as a barrier to providing families with the services they need to remain together. The need for jobs and affordable housing was a major theme, as was lack of services for undocumented immigrants and non-English speaking clients.

This open-ended question elicited 215 responses. Following are the top five needs identified, with the number of people who mentioned this issue.

- General lack of relevant services, 44 responses
- Lack of financial assistance services, 44 responses
- Long waiting lists, 35 responses
- Lack of transportation, 33 responses
- Services not offered at times convenient to families, 29 responses

A sampling of representative comments can be found in Appendix B.

Training

The survey used a 13-item scale to measure respondents' attitudes toward the training they receive and how well that training prepares them for the challenges of their jobs. In addition, the survey asked two open-ended questions about training.

The data from both the scale and the open-ended questions were consistent. Respondents said that DCF generally values training and that supervisors support workers attending those trainings. Roughly three-quarters of respondents answered positively to those two questions.

However, respondents gave low marks – both in the closed- and open-ended questions – on how well the training provided by DCF prepares them for the difficult situations they face in their everyday work life. Only 32 percent agreed, strongly or moderately, that the training prepared them well for the job – the lowest mark on the training scale. Just 37 percent said that available training opportunities are “highly relevant.”

Chart1: Training scale

Item	Strongly to moderately agree (1)	Slight agreement (2)	Moderately to strongly disagree (3)	Mean Score
My education prepared me for job	60.6%	27.9%	11.5%	1.51
I had enough information to decide about job	49.9%	31.5%	18.6%	1.69
Training prepared me well for job	31.9%	38%	30.1%	1.98
Available training opportunities are highly relevant	37.4%	40.2%	22.4%	1.85
Training is highly valued by agency	74.3%	18.2%	7.5%	1.33
Supervisors encourage staff education & professional development	40%	40%	20%	1.80
Training has improved my ability to do my job	55%	35.4%	9.5%	1.54
Training reflects culture and values of agency	56.8%	34.1%	9.1%	1.52
Supervisors support those attending training	72.3%	23%	4.8%	1.32
Training meets needs of agency	55%	33.7%	11.3%	1.56
Skills-based training teaches working with diversity	52.9%	37.8%	9.3%	1.58
Use skills learned in training	55%	31.5%	13.5%	1.58
Supervisors encourages me to use skills learned in training	55%	31.5%	13.5%	1.58

(n= 505)

Analysis of Open-Ended Questions on Training

These themes were echoed in the open-ended question about the quality of training, which elicited 203 comments. Respondents had a clear message: Connect training to the real-life issues workers encounter each day, especially resistant families. Make that training more convenient to their office locations and provide a wider array of offerings.

The most comments – 70 – centered on the theme that the training they receive fails to take into account the difficulties they face when trying to engage unwilling families, dealing with the courts and navigating the child welfare system.

Many respondents also said the training should recognize the education and experience level of

trainees. So, a caseworker with a master’s in social work and 10 years on the job would require a much different type of training than a less experience, less educated worker.

Following are the top five needs identified, with the number of responses indicated.

- Make training more relevant to the job and/or experience level, 70 responses
- Logistical suggestions (location, food, dates, etc.), 30 responses
- Quality of trainers, 29 responses
- A wider selection of courses needed, 26 responses
- Suggestions for additional types trainings, 25 responses

Some respondents suggested cross-training with other agencies – county welfare departments, the State Police forensic investigations training, for example. Several expressed dissatisfaction with the trainings offered through the statewide training academy.

The second most common theme was that trainings are too far from their office and the offerings are repetitive. Some said they are required to take too many hours of training and feel they take the training just to satisfy the requirements.

The third most common theme pertained to the quality of the trainers. Here, respondents' message was once again clear and consistent: Use trainers who have frontline child welfare experience and can appreciate and address the difficulties they face in the field.

Despite these criticisms, many respondents indicated that training is valuable and should be continued.

In a related question, respondents were asked to identify specific trainings they would like to receive. Training on mental health issues topped the list, followed closely by personal development/dealing with job stress and practical workplace skills. Following is a breakdown of responses, with the number of people requesting these trainings in parenthesis.

- Mental health, (23)
- Personal development/dealing with job stress, (21)
- Workplace skills (time management, writing, computer skills, etc.), (21)
- Documentation/NJ Spirit, (21)
- Accessing services for children and families, (20)
- Substance Abuse, (18)
- Supervisor training/organization issues/getting along with colleagues, (17)
- Investigations/interviewing children, (15)
- Family engagement/dealing with resistant clients, (14)
- Cultural competence/immigrants, (11)
- Domestic violence, (9)
- Sexual abuse, (9)
- Assessing risk and child safety, (8)DYFS policy, (8)
- Adolescents, (6)
- Adoptions, (6)
- Gangs, (6)

(It should be noted that the SORS has since gained more information about positive changes to DCF's training program and will report more on this issue in the future).

Staff Retention

Consistent with DCF data, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they are **not** planning on leaving the agency in the next year. Just 11 percent said they planned to leave within the next 12 months. Thirty percent said they “prefer to leave” but that salary and benefits are a strong incentive to stay. Only 29 percent said they had looked for other job opportunities in the past year, but it is unclear how many of these respondents may have looked for positions within DCF.

Employment Issues

To learn more about employment-related issues, the survey used a 16-item scale.

Most respondents identified the following as the three most positive areas, reporting that they never or seldom encounter problems in these areas:

1. Lack of training opportunities
2. Insufficient help from supervisors around difficult cases
3. Lack of support by supervisors

Most respondents identified the following as the three most negative areas, reporting that they often encounter problems in these areas:

1. Lack of agency resources (i.e. cars, computers, aides, etc.)
2. Lack of multi-lingual staff
3. Lack of client resources (i.e. counseling, substance abuse, foster homes, etc.)

Chart 1: Employment Issues

Item	Often (1)	Sometimes (2)	Never/Seldom (3)	Mean Score
Concerns about personal safety	18.7%	37.3%	44%	2.25
Lack of training	7.3%	23.8%	68.9%	2.62
Difficulty with DCF system	14.4%	36.7%	48.9%	2.34
Irregular meetings w/ supervisor	19.1%	20.4%	60.5%	2.41
Insufficient help from supervisor around difficult cases	14.8%	19.5%	65.7%	2.51
Lack of support by supervisor	13.9%	20%	66.1%	2.52
Difficulty with courts	20.8%	32.2%	47%	2.26
Difficulty with probation	15%	25.3%	59.7%	2.44
Difficulty with providers	11.4%	46.8%	41.8%	2.30
Too much overtime	17.8%	28.5%	53.6%	2.36
Lack of agency resources	38.4%	31.3%	30.3%	1.92
Lack of support staff	25.3%	30%	44.6%	2.19
Lack of multilingual staff	35.6%	30.5%	35.6%	1.98
Lack of client resources	32.2%	36.7%	31.1%	1.99
Inability to schedule vacation time	21.9%	26.6%	51.5%	2.29
Inflexible work schedule	16.5%	26.2%	57.3%	2.41

(N=466)

Job Satisfaction

To measure job satisfaction, the survey used a scale containing 37 items. The following chart presents them in category groupings, such as pay scale and promotion. The lower the mean score, the more positive the respondents' perspective. The range indicates the minimum and maximum possible score for each scale.

On this scale, supervision emerged as the most positive aspect of respondents' job satisfaction, consistent with the previous scale that focused solely on supervision. This is very positive. The nature of the work received the second highest score. At the bottom of the scale were operations (paperwork, lack of communication, etc.) and lack of opportunity for promotion and lack of "contingent rewards."

Chart 2: Job Satisfaction

Subscale	Range	Median Score
Supervision (supervisor is competent; supervisors show little interest in feelings of subordinates, etc.)	4-24	7
Nature of work (I like doing the things I do at work; I sometimes feel my job is meaningless, etc.)	5-24	8
Benefits (benefits are fair; benefits are good compared to other organizations, etc.)	4-24	13
Co-workers (I like the people I work with; there is too much bickering at work, etc.)	4-24	12
Communication (communication seems good within this organization, etc.)	4-24	13
Pay Scale (paid fairly; raises are too infrequent, etc.)	5-24	15
Operations (I have too much paperwork; rules make doing a good job difficult, etc.)	4-24	17
Contingent rewards (I do not feel work I do is appreciated, etc.)	4-24	17
Promotion (chances of promotion; promotions based on performance, etc.)	9-24	17

(N=524)

Additional Open-Ended Questions

Needed Supports

Respondents were asked what additional supports they needed to effectively carry out their duties.

The need for more services was again the dominant theme that emerged from respondents, with 94 of 219 comments expressing a need for more accessible and relevant services for children and families. Bi-lingual and mental health services were mentioned frequently.

The second most mentioned support fell into the broad category of staff resources, such as cars and training. This theme was mentioned in 45 responses. Respondents said they need more reliable cars, more help from aides with tasks like paperwork and transportation, and better use of laptops and cell phones. Several also mentioned more relevant training opportunities.

In addition, several expressed a need for more time to work with families. Although the statistics show a marked decrease in caseloads, comments suggest that some workers still feel overwhelmed and unable to meet all the demands of the job, especially when it comes to paperwork and engaging families.

A representative sample of comments can be found in Appendix B.

Barriers to Implementing the Case Practice Model

Respondents were asked to identify barriers to implementing DCF's Case Practice Model (CPM), which guides the way workers interact with families. In the 151 comments, lack of relevant, accessible services and lack of time were the two top barriers identified.

Respondents again said that available services often fail to meet both the family's needs and schedules.

Services offered during the day are inaccessible to working parents. Sometimes the mandated services address symptoms, rather than the cause, some respondents said.

Time was also a major factor for respondents, with several identifying themselves as intake workers who lacked the time to do intensive work with families. Some respondents said that dealing with paperwork and other “red tape” consumes time that would be better spent with families.

The third most dominant theme was a lack of consistent support for the CPM, from frontline staff to upper management. Some respondents said the department is too focused on statistics and meeting the requirements of the court settlement agreement, rather than on families.

There was also a theme of “office practice” over agency-wide policy. Several said that veteran DYFS workers do not embrace the new model, send that message to their subordinates and continue to do “business as usual,” which is more confrontational and authoritative over families.

Two other secondary themes were that the CPM is too “cookie-cutter” and that many families are resistant. These two themes actually intersect, with respondents saying the CPM doesn’t work with unwilling families. Many respondents specifically mentioned Family Team Meetings as working for some families, but a waste of valuable time for families who are resistant to change and/or DYFS.

Mentioned less frequently was that other stakeholders -- judges, law guardians, service providers – have not embraced the CPM.

Central Findings

As noted earlier, the SORS recognizes that this survey does not constitute a representative sample of DYFS staff. However, the themes and information that emerged from the survey merit further exploration.

This report, then, serves as a first look at the survey results. In partnership with DCF, the SORS will follow-up on several of the relevant and recurring themes, with the goal of issuing specific recommendations. Following are issues of concern and areas in which the SORS will gather more information to support specific recommendations for change.

Services

Lack of relevant, affordable services available at convenient times for families emerged as a major theme throughout the survey. Transportation was also a common barrier for families trying to access services.

Areas for SORS Exploration

1. What attempts are being made to match families’ needs with available services?
2. What is the availability of services geographically?
3. What attempts have been made to expand the availability of bi-lingual social workers and services? What are the barriers to providing these types of services and how can DCF overcome these barriers?
4. What is the availability of services on nights and weekends? What attempts have been made to expand service hours for working parents?
5. How does DCF address transportation issues? Are additional supports needed to help families travel to service locations?
6. What is the availability of financial and housing services? Are efforts being made to expand these types of services? How are families linked with existing services in other governmental departments and agencies that offer financial and housing services?
7. What is the status of DCF’s central database and map of services? Will that map be available for internal use only or are there plans to make it available to service providers outside of DYFS and DCF?

Training

While respondents felt that training was highly valued by DCF – a very positive result – they also expressed a need for training that is relevant to the real-life situations they face each day. They also want more trainers with on-the-job experience, versus academic knowledge.

Areas for SORS Exploration

1. What is DYFS’ roster of courses?
2. How frequently are courses offered? Where are they held?

3. What is the structure of DYFS' training (state academy vs. academic partners)?
4. What have been the results of DYFS' training evaluations completed by trainees?
5. What are the pros/cons of using trainers with on-the-job experience?
6. Has DCF explored accessing training available through other state and/or county departments (i.e. State Police Forensic Training)? If so, what was the outcome?
7. Are courses available for veteran workers and those with master's degrees in social work? If so, what type of courses and how frequently are they offered?

(Note: DCF is addressing some of these issues and the SORS has received answers to some of these questions. This will be reported on more thoroughly at a later date).

Agency Resources

Lack of agency resources was cited as an area needing improvement. This pertained to access to cars, cell phones and computers, as well as support staff to assist with issues like transportation of clients to services and appointments.

Areas of Exploration

1. How do workers use technology (i.e. laptops in the field)? Are there ways to maximize the use of technology to both reduce paperwork and improve record-keeping?
2. Do workers have adequate access to cars, cell phones, etc.?
3. What is the level of staffing with regard to aides? What types of duties are they assigned and is there a need for increases resources to hire more aides?

Case Practice Model

Comments around the CPM suggest that the model works well for some families, but is less effective with resistant families. How does the CPM address this issue?

Conclusion

The SORS appreciates DCF's cooperation with this project and its expressed commitment to use the survey results to build on successes and address issues. The SORS intends to repeat this survey to measure progress toward identified issues. After gathering more information, the sub-committee also plans to issue specific recommendations related to the relevant issues raised in this survey.

For more information or to provide feedback, contact Adrienne Jackson, executive coordinator, New Jersey Taskforce on Child Abuse and Neglect, at dcfnjtfcan@dcf.state.nj.us.