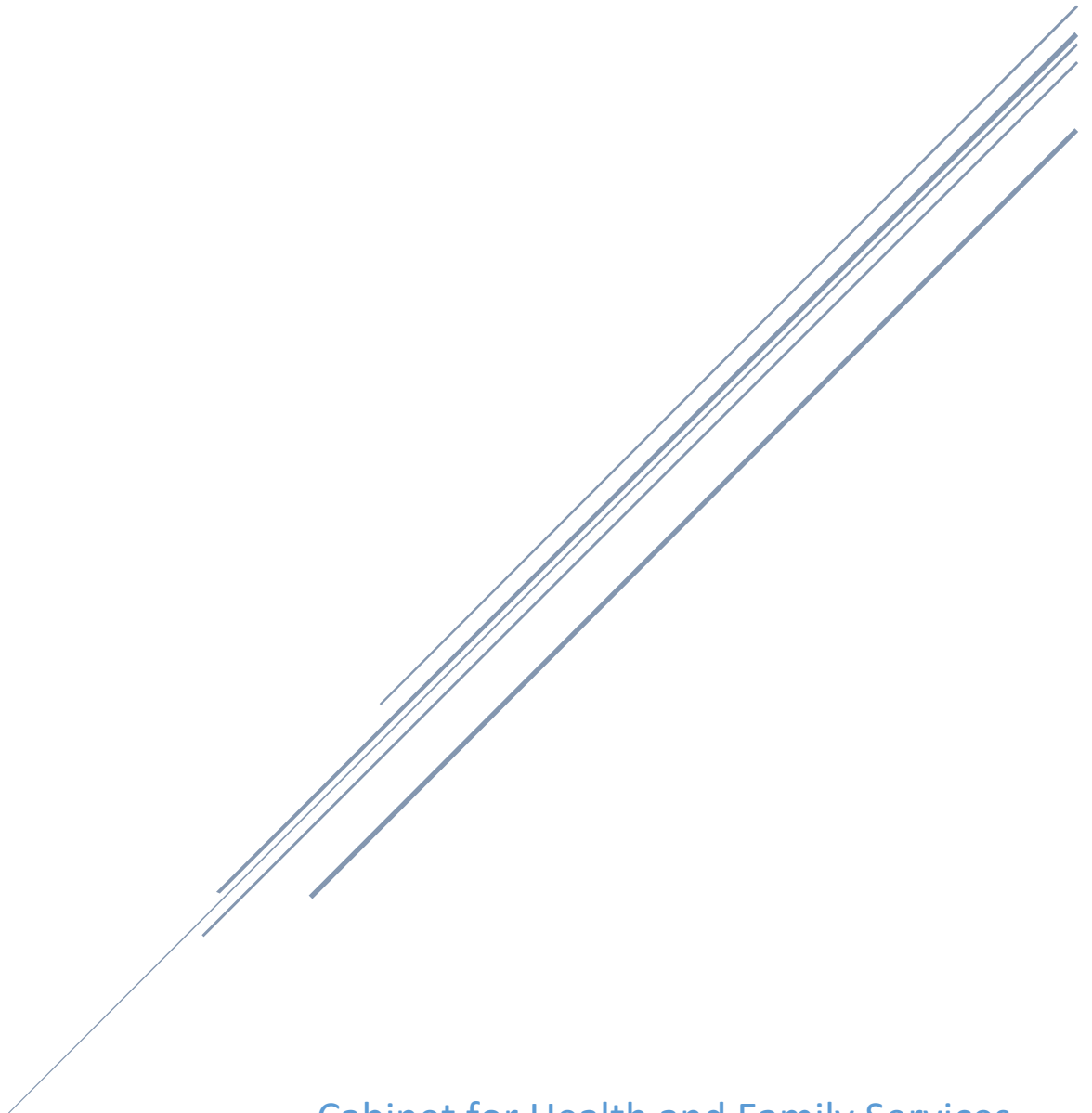


Social Worker Alternative Work Program Recommendations

2022 Regular Session, House Bill 1



Cabinet for Health and Family Services
Department for Community Based Services

Introduction

During the 2022 Regular Session of the Kentucky General Assembly, House Bill 1, the Executive Branch Budget, included in Section G8(20) that the Department for Community Based Services (DCBS/department) shall examine the feasibility of establishing an alternative work program for social service worker classifications within the department. This program would be intended to provide social service personnel who have completed a minimum of four years of service a period of respite from their regular duties while remaining state employees. The legislation included that the department shall provide recommendations on the eligibility criteria for participating in the program, allowable activities, duration of the respite period, process for resumption of regular duties within DCBS, and other factors as deemed pertinent.

The department is appreciative of the support the General Assembly has demonstrated for state employees in general and for social service workers, recognizing that the job they do every day is vital to protecting the most vulnerable citizens of our commonwealth.

Staffing Challenges

Caseloads

A social worker's caseload is the number of cases assigned to an individual worker in a given time period. A case may be made up of multiple adults and children, may vary in complexity and risks to children involved, and involves direct contact with clients and collaterals as well as many administrative tasks to ensure the safety of children and wellbeing of families. The Child Welfare League of America recommends that social workers have a caseload between 12 and 15 children per worker. The Council on Accreditation recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 per worker. DCBS is required by KRS 199.461(4) to report on social service worker caseload averages on a regional and statewide basis and according to these reports, the statewide caseload average frequently exceeds 25. In the most recent quarterly reporting period, more than half of DCBS' nine service regions also exceeded averages of 25, mostly ranging between 30 and 40 except for the Jefferson service region, which showed social service worker caseload averages exceeding 100. Having high caseloads creates a cycle of stressed-out social workers who resign and cause even higher caseload averages among remaining staff. High caseloads and past due cases happen when there is not enough staff to manage workload demands; however, another factor that contributes to past due cases is related to workers leaving the agency with incomplete work assignments that are then reassigned. Reassigned work is a significant cause of past due cases and the high number of caseloads staff experience. The retention of front-line social service workers and their supervisors is critical in preventing incomplete work assignments and past due cases. Children and their families (biological, foster, or adoptive) deserve to have workers assisting them who complete their assignments and close cases as timely as possible. It can be further traumatic for the children the department serves to have constantly changing case workers.

Staff Turnover

The department expects some staff turnover given the stress and secondary trauma that may be experienced in these positions, and turnover is something that department and regional leadership are always working to prevent and address; however, since June 2021, there has been a significant increase in the number of staff leaving the department. The department continues to struggle to recover from that turnover and to recruit new staff. The pandemic has changed the workforce, and the department is trying to adapt and understand how to recruit and retain staff. DCBS staff experience continuous exposure to traumatic events; toxic stress, burn out, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue; and secondary post-traumatic stress disorder. DCBS staff are making decisions to seek less stressful jobs, and it is unknown how much salary contributes to that decision. Staff turnover needs to be addressed now, more than ever, in order for DCBS to have a resilient, skilled, and qualified workforce to serve the most vulnerable citizens of the commonwealth.

Staff turnover rates have decreased this year, remaining consistent with the department’s hiring rate resulting in a more stabilized workforce than experienced in recent years. This is an improvement following the significant staff exit the department began experiencing in 2020 that appears to have peaked in 2021. Recent turnover rates for all DCBS staff and specifically for DCBS social worker classifications are included in Table 1. In 2021, 44% of DCBS caseload carrying social workers were a Social Service Worker 1, meaning that they had less than one year of professional experience.

Table 1. DCBS Staff Turnover Rate by Year.

Calendar Year	DCBS Total Staff Turnover	Social Worker Turnover
2020	12.93%	29.60%
2021	20.41%	40.44%
2022 YTD	11.53%	28.84%

The 2022 Executive Branch Budget, House Bill 1G8(14), required the cabinet to report the number of specific social worker positions filled and vacant on a quarterly basis. This data shows that the number of filled social worker and clinical positions has remained consistent through 2022, which is an improvement over past years.

Table 2. DCBS Social Worker Filled and Vacant Positions.

	12/31/21	03/31/22	06/30/22	09/30/22
Social Worker & Clinician Filled Positions				
Social Service Worker I	400	413	438	405
Social Service Worker II	249	250	233	230
Social Service Clinician I	374	355	348	341
Social Service Clinician II	200	214	239	240
TOTAL Social Worker & Clinician Filled Positions	1,223	1,232	1,258	1,216
Other Social Work Filled Positions				
Social Service Specialist	99	98	96	97
Family Services Office Supervisors	275	271	274	272
TOTAL Other Social Work Filled Positions	374	369	370	369
TOTAL Filled Positions	1597	1601	1628	1585
	FY 2022 12/31/21	FY 2022 03/31/22	FY 2022 06/30/22	FY 2023 09/30/22
CPS Caseload Carrying Filled	923	927	951	951
APS Caseload Carrying Filled	87	86	86	86
TOTAL CASELOAD CARRYING FILLED POSITIONS	1010	1013	1037	1037
Interim SSW Hires included in the Caseload Carrying Positions	N/A	N/A	10	8
Non-Caseload Carrying SSW I, SSW II, SSC I, SSC II Positions	217	219	221	179
SSW I, SSW II, SSCL I, SSCL II Vacancies	272	263	237	279

Recruitment

DCBS is very focused on the recruitment and retention of social workers. The department shares employment opportunities, benefits, and highlights of working as a social worker by attending both virtual and in-person college and career fairs hosted by many educational partners. DCBS representatives in attendance share recruitment materials, which include specific information on how to create accounts to apply for positions and search the state website for position openings.

DCBS created a Handshake account, an online recruiting platform for higher education students and alums. Most colleges and universities have moved to this platform to assist their students with job recruitment initiatives. Forty-eight colleges and universities have accepted an invitation to partner with DCBS. The department has specific staff who have an identified recruiter role on this platform who can post jobs, invite other educational institutions to partner, and review and register for career fair opportunities. DCBS partners with colleges and universities with an accredited Master of Social Work degree program on behalf of the MSW Stipend Program. This program is an employment benefit

for child welfare employees and is used as a recruitment tool for applicants looking to further their education in the field of social work. Employees selected for the program receive paid tuition and stipends in exchange for an agency service commitment.

The department is also exploring other ways to help with recruitment efforts, including having a dedicated recruiter to help find suitable candidates to fill vacant positions, especially front-line positions; changing educational requirements to make positions available to individuals with studies other than social work; and adding a careers and employment section to the DCBS website, advertising vacant positions and benefits of employment with the department.

Retention

DCBS conducts exit surveys when staff leave the department. Between 2019 and 2021, the top reasons staff listed for separation from DCBS include obtaining a better job outside of state government, retirement, insufficient pay, too many cases, lack of promotional opportunities, career change, and family reasons/responsibilities.

DCBS and Eastern Kentucky University partner to conduct an employee evaluation survey every two years. According to the 2021 DCBS Employee Engagement Survey, 40.1% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are satisfied with their job, 50.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they are proud to tell others where they work; 86.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they like the people they work with; and 88.2% agreed or strongly agreed that they give high value to the work they do.

Staff Supports

Training and Experience

DCBS recognizes that staff who are more prepared and equipped are less likely to experience stress and burnout at work. The department works closely with Kentucky's educational institutions to share knowledge, enhance social work experiences, and create career opportunities in many ways. DCBS staff regularly attend social work classes at Kentucky colleges and universities to present on the topic of child welfare, Public Child Welfare Certification Program (PCWCP) opportunities, and careers available within the department. PCWCP is a collaboration between DCBS and eleven colleges and universities across the state designed to bring more students to the field of social work and provide Social Service Worker I job opportunities for beginning-level careers at DCBS upon graduation. DCBS has offered field placement and practicum opportunities for students in social work programs from colleges and universities across the state. DCBS staff provide coaching, mentoring, and hands-on job training to students to prepare them for real-life social work experiences. DCBS has recently begun using the Commonwealth's co-op and internship program in partnership with colleges and universities to provide paid opportunities for field placements and practicums for social work students and other fields of study. The intent of this is to continue to build

partnerships with educational institutions and enhance students' educational experiences. Providing students with a paid field placement and practicum allows them the opportunity to focus on their coursework and gain experience.

The Eastern Mountain Service Region has begun a pilot program on shared caseloads. This initiative allows a partnership between staff where shared workload experiences enable partner groups to pick up when one member of the team experiences an unplanned event that takes them away from the work. Team members share caseloads and assist each other. This provides training and oversight for newer staff and support for both team members. Staff can have a reprieve from front-line work in this way with assistance from the other team member. This also benefits families and children because they do not experience a lapse in service delivery.

Recognizing Trauma

DCBS continues to think of ways to offer robust and innovative flexible and hybrid work options for staff. This flexibility allows DCBS staff to work in the office while also allowing staff to work in alternate locations at times while meeting the needs of customers is more conducive. DCBS performs at its best when customers and staff can meet each other at points that are advantageous to both. This flexibility also allows staff a break from working in the field on a very temporary basis when needed.

Recognizing the trauma and sometimes real danger that staff experience in the field, the department saw a need to create a mechanism through which staff who have experienced a critical incident could use discretionary leave to recover without using their own personal accrued leave. The Personnel Cabinet created this new type of leave and the process through which it would be verified and approved. This new part of administrative regulation, 101 KAR 2:102, went into effect on September 27, 2022. There is now a process in place through which an employee who experiences a critical incident that threatened the life or physical well-being of the employee can request and receive a reprieve from work while they take steps to recover, either physically or emotionally.

Shift differential

DCBS has established After Hours Response Teams in all nine service regions across the state. These teams are responsible for responding to child or adult protective services reports of abuse, neglect, or dependency or law enforcement assists. They also assist with other activities, including the placement disruptions of children in out-of-home care, acute crisis needs of children, and locating placements for children in need of a foster home or residential placement. These job duties are assigned outside of their normal work schedules and requires them to be available to respond at any time if the need arises. DCBS recently received approval to offer a shift differential to staff in multiple social worker and supervisor job classifications. Due to the current staffing shortages within the service regions, regions have begun adding additional job classifications to

their after-hours response teams to assist frontline social workers and supervisors. Some of these positions specifically assist with transporting children as a result of a removal or placement disruption. The supervisors assist by increasing capacity of the rotations and consultations, which allows the other job classification additional time of not being scheduled. The shift differential is a flat rate of an additional \$5.00 per hour, effective specific days at 4:30pm (or at the conclusion of an employee's regular scheduled workday for those on a flex schedule).

Locality premium

The Jefferson Service Region (Jefferson County) has seen a much higher level of caseload averages and turnover than the rest of the state. In 2021, the regional turnover rate for this region was approximately 43%. The region has interviewed any new, viable applicants on a daily basis, but continues to struggle to find candidates. Without a robust drive to retain the current workforce and hire an additional and sizable workforce, the department was at risk for very negative outcomes for the community, families, and children in the region. In response to the crisis seen in this region, DCBS implemented a locality pay premium for all staff within the region, an amount of an additional \$4.00 per hour. DCBS also projected to be able to support this additional cost within appropriations.

Salary Increases

In December of 2021, Governor Beshear provided pay raises for specific social service worker classifications with very high turnover. In the 2022 Executive Branch Budget, the General Assembly appropriated funds specifically for the hiring of an additional 200 social service workers over the 2022-2024 biennium. The budget also appropriated funds to support the social service worker recruitment initiative, increased the entry rate salary of social worker personnel classifications, provided raises to all state employees, and provided specific additional raises for social service worker classifications. The department is very grateful for the attention this dire need has garnered from the Governor and the General Assembly.

Child Protective Services Initiatives

Alternative Response

Alternative response (AR) will change the way DCBS engages and approaches families that are the subjects of child protective services (CPS) reports and need to be assessed. This model involves responding to a specific subset of reports of abuse or neglect differently than what current policy and practice require. Alternative Response is a more holistic approach to not only assess the children's safety, but to assess the entire household to ensure that they have what they need to be successful. This is accomplished by partnering with the families and community partners and working to facilitate sustainable behavioral changes within a family. Reports that are accepted for the AR

pathway (verses traditional investigations) are the low- to moderate-risk referrals. In these situations, AR would be utilized to assess the child's safety by focusing on the environmental context and broader issues of family well-being, along with the incident of abuse or neglect, through the solution focused, family centered practice supported by AR. This approach provides an alternative way to respond to reports of abuse or neglect by engaging the family in a more flexible manner while still focusing on the safety of children. Pre-implementation sites have been identified. The goal is to have AR implemented in the pre-implementation sites in September of 2023 and the pre-implementation sites are developing new teams designated for AR cases. AR cases fall into the low/moderate maltreatment risk categories; it is understood that these types of cases are historically less intensive and traumatic for all parties involved. AR cases are geared more toward engaging the family rather than approaching the family in what is seen as an incident specific, punitive manner. As such, these elements of AR case work have the potential to reduce worker burnout and turnover thus improving staff retention.

Community Response

One of the most significant population-level predictors of CPS involvement is poverty. This relationship is especially strong for reports of child neglect compared to child abuse. It has often been difficult for child welfare agencies to distinguish between poverty and deliberate child neglect. In practice, this leads to disproportionate reports to CPS and involvement with child welfare services. In the absence of better alternatives, mandated reporters call CPS, either due to a lack of understanding of the capacity of CPS to meet non-protection needs of children or because they believe this is a required part of their role as a mandated reporter. There is evidence that diverting these screened-out calls from CPS towards other more appropriate venues that can provide assistance may simultaneously help resolve the underlying problem and prevent future contact with CPS.

Kentucky has both a relatively high poverty rate and a high rate of child maltreatment cases involving child neglect compared to other states. Research suggests that fewer of these families would become involved with CPS if they received services to address poverty. In partnership with other agencies, DCBS has designed a Community Response pilot to determine whether some screened-out families can be effectively served by referrals to alternative service providers.

This voluntary intervention known as Helping Others Promoting Empowerment (HOPE) involves a partnership between DCBS and school-based Family Resource Youth Services Centers (FRYSCs) in two counties (Barren and Perry) and DCBS and Gateway Children's Services locations in two other counties (Clark and Montgomery). FRYSCs are staffed by helping professionals called "coordinators" who serve the division's stated mission to "remove non-academic barriers to learning to enhance student academic success." Gateway Children's Services is a not-for-profit organization in Kentucky that provides services to children and families involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

In these four counties, screened-out reports will be referred to participate in the pilot program, and will be referred to a FRYSC or a Gateway location. Once referred, these families will be assessed to determine which benefits and services would be most beneficial. Once these needs have been identified, the FRYSC coordinators and Gateway staff will assist families to access services and benefits.

A formal evaluation will be conducted over the two years of this pilot, which began in May of 2022. The evaluation team will measure trends including subsequent DCBS reports, investigations, and substantiations. Other states that have implemented this Community Response approach as a secondary prevention intervention in child welfare have seen a decrease in reports, investigations, substantiations, and removals of children into out-of-home care. The overall goal is to strengthen families, prevent child abuse and neglect, and reduce future reports to DCBS – this will also serve to reduce the burden on protection and permanency staff and allow them to focus on the children and families with the most critical safety issues.

Recommendations

House Bill 1, Section G8(20), stated that the intent of an alternative work program would be to provide social service personnel who have completed a minimum of four years of services a period of respite from their regular duties while remaining state employees. Again, this consideration is appreciated; however, 28% of current social service workers have less than two years of experience (17% have less than one year of experience). Many reach the point of burnout far before reaching four years of service. DCBS believes action must be taken before that point, but at this time, with the severe loss of staff over the last two years and high caseload crisis, letting staff work elsewhere when they are so desperately needed at this time is not recommended.

DCBS believes the many initiatives implemented relating to recruitment, retention, staff supports, and revolutionizing CPS processes have and will continue to decrease the staff exodus from the department, decrease caseloads and better serve families, and keep staff in this meaningful job they love.

The department does not wish to lose any staff through an alternative work program; therefore, it is the desire of the department to provide staff a break from frontline duties while maintaining employment in DCBS. The department recommends supporting staff differently and this could be accomplished through a variety of ways, including the following:

- Allowing staff to alternate weeks of working frontline in the field with weeks of administrative duties in the office or teleworking from home – this would give staff relief from working in the field, but allow them to maintain the cases they are working on and take care of necessary paperwork.
- Providing alternative duties in a different area of DCBS one day per week or one week out of each month. Social workers could work with Adult Protective Services,

the recruitment and certification of foster parents, or public assistance programs, just to name a few options. This would give a social worker a small reprieve from their regular stressful duties, allow them to have a greater understanding of the work their colleagues do, and potentially help with workforce issues in other areas of the department.

- Staff could have the opportunity to participate in staff recruitment activities, such as attending job fairs on behalf of the department or reaching out to prospective applicants who have expressed interest.
- For a limited amount of time, staff could work on special department projects or workgroups or focus on a singular effort in the department, such as community engagement.
- Staff who need a break from regular duties, but still want to have a direct impact on children in the custody of the cabinet, could travel throughout the state visiting children in various placements. The department is required to meet federal visitation standards and visiting with children could provide the inspiration to keep workers going when they are beginning to feel burnout.

In conclusion, DCBS makes the following recommendations for the alternative work program:

DCBS social service workers should be eligible for an alternative work program after eighteen months of frontline employment experience. This may help prevent the burnout that many staff feel around their 2-year employment mark. This would be a purely voluntary program.

DCBS believes it would be best for the department and the children and families served by the department that social service workers who choose to participate in this program not completely leave their active caseloads. Leaving caseloads would cause delays that keep child protective services cases open and cause delays to permanency for children. For this reason, the department recommends that the alternative duties be available on a limited basis, such as one day per week or one week per month. The department believes maintaining caseloads and resuming regular duties would be easier if the alternative work duties also remain within the department, but a different part of the department than social service workers typically experience.