

REPORT: CHILD WELFARE CRISIS COMPENSATION AND CLASSIFICATION STUDY

BASIS FOR COMPENSATION SURVEY AND STUDY

In the fall of 2003, there were a series of articles from two North Carolina news publications outlining the difficulties local departments of social services have to deal with in investigating and managing child protective service cases. As a result of these difficulties, children most vulnerable to abuse and neglect are at risk to fall through the cracks in the child welfare system that can lead to serious consequences including death. Programmatically, local departments of social services are responsible for investigating all reports of alleged child abuse and neglect. The newspaper articles identified many issues that create barriers to effectively track and manage child abuse and neglect cases. This report focuses on the human resources issues raised in the series of articles. The articles pointed out that a high level of turnover of social workers that perform child protective services functions could disrupt the constant monitoring and tracking of child protective services cases. In addition, extreme difficulties in the recruitment of qualified applicants to replace workers who have left only compound the problems associated with adequately staffing child abuse and neglect cases.

Since the articles appeared, the NC Office of State Personnel began to receive anecdotal information from directors of local departments of social services regarding high turnover and recruitment difficulties for Child Welfare Workers across the state. A letter was then sent from NC Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Secretary Carmen Hooker Odom to Governor Easley asking for his assistance and support in developing solutions to the problems. Since all local departments of social services employees are covered under State Personnel Act, the Office of State Personnel (OSP) has direct oversight for the classification of child welfare positions at the local level and some degree of oversight for salary ranges of these positions. Under the State Personnel Act, county governments have the authority to administer salary and pay policies independently once they have filed them with OSP. In concert with the Division of Social Services in the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services, OSP conducted a survey of certain human resources practices and issues affecting local child welfare positions. This survey was completed in order to obtain employment data related to the recruitment and retention of workers in these positions.

In addition, from the state classification perspective it appears that the child welfare workers engaged in the protective service functions needed to be reviewed for proper allocation in the classification system. There is evidence that increased state and federal mandates have added a level complexity to the technical knowledge required of social workers in order to perform the work successfully. Child welfare social workers are required to complete 72 hours of pre-service training prior to being assigned a caseload. This is highlighted by the Child Welfare Collaborative effort where certain universities with accredited schools of social work have begun incorporating this pre-service training requirement into their curriculum. OSP conducted a factor analysis study to determine the appropriate classification level for positions that perform investigations and case management for at-risk children. The results of this factor analysis are discussed later in this report.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study employed the following course of action:

Compensation Survey of all 100 local DSS agencies

Factor Analysis Review of Child Welfare roles

Discussions with NC DHHS Division of Social Services Managers

Discussions with local DSS Directors

Classification comparisons of three counties that have established a specific social work classification that recognizes the investigation and case management role.

SUMMARY OF OSP FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Child Welfare Services Survey- 2003: Summary of Findings as of January 2, 2004

The survey questions were developed jointly between the OSP, the NC DHHS Division of Social Services (DSS) and the NC Association of County Director of Social Services (NCACDSS). The survey was administered and compiled by OSP and reviewed by the above parties. The compensation survey was focused on pay rates, turnover, recruitment and related pay benefits.

At the time of writing this report, there have been approximately 75 survey respondents out of a potential 100. From a statistical standpoint, the level of participation in the survey well exceeded expectations and increases that reliance of the data as a source by which to draw conclusions and recommendations. OSP continues to receive completed surveys at the time of publication of this report. While these surveys may not be in the data set, the responses are consistent with other responses and, therefore, will not alter the results as stated in any significant way.

The findings listed below confirm the anecdotal information with regard to significant difficulties on the recruitment and retention of qualified social worker into child welfare positions at the local level. Turnover in these positions is of major concern. The data suggests that the overall experience level of the work force in the child welfare program area is low, with 73 percent of the employees with less than five years of experience. This is in contrast to the classification and recruitment standards utilized for these positions at Social Worker III, which is considered to be the highest classification level for frontline social workers based years of experience and expertise. Therefore, one would expect to find the most seasoned social workers in this class performing these most difficult and complex cases. The data from the survey is in stark contrast to reality, where the level of experience is much less than what would be expected for child welfare investigative/assessments workers and case managers. Furthermore, high turnover leads to a vicious cycle where the most experienced workers suffer from burnout due to high caseloads and leave while being replaced with relatively inexperienced social workers.

Another issue to note is the variation in base pay from county to county. It appears that those counties that have pay rates above the statewide average tend to have fewer turnovers where the opposite is true for those counties that pay below the statewide average. Since under the statutes counties can manage salary ranges and pay policies at the local level, local policy makers should be attentive to where they are paying Child Welfare Workers in relation to their comparison counties. There may be some correlation between pay and length of time to fill a position with a fully qualified social worker. What tends to happen in low paying counties is that local DSS agencies are forced to fill child welfare positions with staff that do not meet the minimum experience requirements of the Social Worker III classification and train them until they

become fully qualified. This process for training fully qualified social workers can potentially take up to three years. Once they are fully trained, they leave to perform the same work in other counties with higher pay. Thus, some counties feel that they are simply the training ground for Child Welfare Workers.

Presented below is a summation of the data that was submitted through the compensation survey.

Turnover

- Statewide Vacancy Rate: 31 percent
- Turnover rates are the highest in Case Management and Investigations

Average Length of Time to Fill SW III Positions

<u><i>Average Days</i></u>	<u><i>Local DSS Agency</i></u>
21-30	9
31-40	9
41-50	7
51-60	16
61-70	5
71-80	5
81-90	7
91 or more	10

Based on the number of agencies responding to the survey, 36 percent of the agencies reported that it takes at least 71 days or more to fill a SW III position. In addition, once employees are hired into child welfare services positions, they then need to complete a 72- hour pre-services training in child welfare services training before they are allowed to assume a caseload. Many of the positions are not filled with fully qualified Social Workers III, but trainees or work against. A Social Work Trainee is an applicant with only a four-year college degree and no experience. A work against is an applicant who qualifies as a Social Worker I or II, but not a Social Worker III so the employee works against the Social Worker III until they meet the prerequisite years of needed experience to fully qualify.

Years of Service Totals

Social Worker IIIs

More than 25 years of service	22
21-25 years of service	17
16-20 years of service	38
11-15 years of service	86
6-10 years of services	210
2-5 years of service	512
1-2 years of service	211
0-1 year of service	277

Of the total length of service reported, 73 percent of this population of the child welfare services workforce has less than 5 years of experience.

Exit Interviews

63 of the 75 respondents reported that they conducted exit interviews.

Reasons Given for Leaving/Resigning/Dismissal (ranked order high to low)

Better Paying Job	48
Work Stress	44
Changing Occupations	40
Self/Spouse Moving	36
Personal Reasons	33
Family Reasons	29
Dismissed	27
Continuing Education	22
Working Conditions	22
Pregnancy	14
Retirement	12
Other	11
Health	10
Military Service	3
Workers' Compensation	1
Disability	1

Average Salaries Paid to Child Welfare Social Worker IIIs

<u>High:</u>	New Hanover	\$47,489
<u>Low:</u>	Graham	\$27,000
<u>Statewide Aggregate Average:</u>		*\$33,924

*Aggregate average is a combination of all Child Welfare Social Worker IIIs.

Additional Support to Child Welfare Social Workers

<u>Item</u>	<u>Number of Counties</u>
Supplemental Health Insurance	25
County Car	46
Cell Phone	62
Pager	46
Lap Top	33
Support Staff	54

Selected Suggested Incentives and Proposals by Respondents

- 1.) Better Pay
- 2.) Higher classification level
- 3.) Statewide equalization of salaries
- 4.) State administered bonus program

- 5.) Lower caseload standards
- 6.) Increase staff
- 7.) Incentive pay

Difficulty in finding qualified candidates?

57 out of 75 respondents reported they have difficulty in recruiting highly qualified candidates.

Recommendations:

- 1.) For local DSS agencies with significant turnover rates that result in an agency exceeding investigative/assessment and case staffing ratios, review salary ranges and actual pay compared to statewide aggregate average. Range revisions and salary adjustments are recommended to reduce turnover rates and improve recruitment.
- 2.) Counties should consider a retention bonus program for Child Welfare Workers in order to retain expertise and increase longevity in investigative/assessment and case management roles.
- 3.) Counties should consider additional support staff and/or equipment to increase effectiveness.
- 4.) In lieu of pay increases or retention bonuses, counties should consider a pay differential for Child Welfare Workers that can be funded out of lapsed salaries and is not tied into base salary. A pay differential can range anywhere from 10 to 15 percent depending of the severity of turnover rates.
- 5.) Higher classification level for Child Welfare Workers (See next section).
- 6.) Expand Child Welfare Collaborative.

CLASSIFICATION

The recommendation to establish a new social work classification is premised on the severe recruitment and retention issues that have plagued child welfare services for years. As documented in the study, the turnover and retention problems have become so acute as to seriously compromise the safety and well being of the most vulnerable children. In addition, a factor analysis was completed that supports that the child welfare roles of investigation/assessment and treatment are the most complex and difficult in the social work classification series at the local level.

The Compensation Survey results confirm labor market difficulties in the recruitment and retention of employees in these roles. While not all local DSS departments reported such difficulties, the overwhelming majority have significant recruitment and retention difficulties that support a higher level classification as one remedy. Guilford, Orange and Wake counties have established classification concepts that recognize the social work functions in question as the most complex.

<u>County</u>	<u>Classification Title</u>	<u>Salary Range</u>
<i>Orange</i>	<i>Child Protective Services Social Worker</i>	<i>\$40,082- 64,077</i>
<i>Guilford</i>	<i>Social Worker- Protective Services</i>	<i>\$37,444- 63,655</i>
<i>Wake</i>	<i>Human Services Sr. Practitioner</i>	<i>\$33,321- 55,427</i>
<i>NC State Government</i>	<i>Social Worker III</i>	<i>\$29,354 - 45,515</i>

Recommendation:

Establish a new classification concept (Attachment I) Social Worker-Investigative/Assessment and Treatment at salary grade 70.

In addition, the minimum standard of supervisory ratio for the Social Work Supervisor III classification is 1 supervisor for every 5 social workers. Therefore, the medium to small counties are

disadvantaged because the DSS Director or DSS Program Administrator must take on the supervisory lead and back-up functions for child welfare services in a county. The Director and/or DSS Program Administrators already have a full time role in addition to the child welfare functions and must also have completed the 72-hour pre-service training. The consensus among DSS and County DSS Directors is that the ratio should be 1 to 3 for the first three social workers supervised then go to 1 to 5 for the remainder of staff. The increased level of supervision will assist greatly in the management of a generally inexperienced workforce and decrease the risk of serious child neglect or abuse situations across the state. In addition, it will allow a greater opportunity for career progression for child welfare investigators and case managers.

NC OFFICE OF STATE PERSONNEL ON-GOING ASSISTANCE

There is delineation in the delivery of human resources services to local DSS agencies between the state and counties with regards to classification of positions and pay administration. The classification of positions is inherently the responsibility of the OSP and the administration of local pay policies rests with county management. Since several recommendations that are discussed in this report deal with other pay options such as retention bonuses and differential pay, the OSP is available and committed to provide assistance to any county in the development of pay enhancement policies and procedures. While the implementation of pay enhancement policies are at the discretion of local Boards of County Commissioners, the OSP encourages counties with recruitment and retention difficulties for Child Welfare Social Workers to consider contemporary human resources pay alternatives as possible solutions. Since pay differentials and retention bonuses can generally be funded through lapsed salaries, this could be a viable means of funding and not expand the overall salary line items in a county budget.

POTENTIAL FOLLOW-UP ACTION

The Child Welfare Compensation and Classification Study provided good and relevant information regarding the general employment situation of Social Worker IIIs in the Child Welfare programs across the state. The meaningful information has allowed the OSP to take some positive steps in assisting with resolution of the very difficult recruitment and retention problems that currently exists in the employment of qualified Child Welfare Social Workers at the local level. However, the survey data suggests that there are underlying employment issues that need further study and analysis. For instance, the reasons employees provided for leaving child welfare positions suggests a high level of job burnout and stress. Certainly, there are underlying and root causes that could be further studied. An employee survey could be conducted to assess the attitudes, concerns and perceptions of the current child welfare workforce to understand what are triggers that cause turnover. Perhaps, the employee survey could also consider what employment factors could increase retention rates in these positions. Any comprehensive follow up to the initial survey data that has been gathered will require a strong commitment to time, collaboration and resources (financial and personnel) to fully understand the total employment picture of local child welfare social workers in North Carolina.