



**Written Testimony of
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**For the
Subcommittee on Human Resources,
Committee on Ways and Means
U. S. House of Representatives
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Hearing on "Improving Programs Designed to Protect At-Risk Youth"

Chairman Davis and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, we thank you for considering our statement as you prepare to reauthorize the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world, with 145,000 members. NASW works to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain standards for the profession, and to advance sound social policies.

Social work is the largest social service profession in the United States. Social workers help people function better in their environments, improve their relationships with others, and solve personal and family problems through individual, social, and psychological support. The most commonly reported practice areas of licensed social worker members are mental health (37%), child welfare/family (13%) and health (13%). Social workers also work with older adults, adolescents, and with other populations in various settings.

Overview

The social work profession has a long tradition of involvement with the child welfare system and welcomes the opportunity to participate in the process of reauthorizing the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program (PSSF) and the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program. These programs are essential funding sources for an array of services for families with children. According to the federal report, [Child Maltreatment 2009](#), an estimated 3.3 million referrals of possible child abuse and neglect were made to state and child protective service (CPS) agencies in the United States in 2009, of which 61.5% were accepted for investigation, resulting in 702,000 children

found to be victims of abuse and neglect. These programs are also a critical component for reaching the goals of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) that aims to build capacity in states and communities so that services are available for children and families.

Background on the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program

The goals of the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program, as articulated recently by Bryan Samuels, Commissioner, Administration for Children and Families, in his testimony before your Committee on June 16, 2011, are: "(1) protecting and promoting the welfare of children; (2) preventing the neglect, abuse or exploitation of children; (3) supporting at-risk families that allow children, where appropriate, to remain safely with their families or return to their families in a timely manner; (4) promoting safety, permanence, and well-being of children in foster care; and (5) providing training, professional development, and support to ensure a well qualified child welfare workforce. Services are available without regard to income and funds are distributed to states through formula grants. The FY 2011 funding level is \$281,181,000.

Background on the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program

The PSSF program was created in 1993 and originally named the Family Preservation and Support Services Program. At that time, all funding was guaranteed or mandatory. When PSSF was reauthorized in 1997 it was and renamed the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program, with a mix of mandatory and discretionary funding. According to the Administration for Children and Families, the primary goals of this program are to "prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families, improve the quality of care and services to children and their families, and ensure permanency for children by reuniting them with their parents, placing them with an adoptive family or in another permanent living arrangement." States and eligible tribes are to spend most of the funding for four service categories: family support, family preservation, time-limited reunification and adoption promotion and support.

Funding is divided between a total of \$345 million in mandatory funds and an additional \$200 million in discretionary funds. Since the additional discretionary funding was created, Congress has never appropriated more than \$100 million in discretionary dollars. In fact, part of the challenge since discretionary authority was created has been that appropriators have reduced funding in recent years, now at \$62 million.

In addition to formula grants to states and tribes, some of the funds are set aside for evaluation, research, training and technical assistance projects (\$6 million in mandatory funding or 3% of discretionary) and \$40 million in state mandatory funds to improve the quality and quantity of caseworker visits with children in foster care and parental substance abuse programs. NASW advocated for this additional funding source for many years and while we applaud Congress for recognizing this child welfare workforce challenge, additional resources and supports are needed in this area. In addition, NASW fought tirelessly to secure the passage of the PSSF legislation into law in 1993 and its subsequent reauthorization.

NASW Recommendations to Improve the Child Welfare System

It has been widely documented that the child welfare system is over-burdened, understaffed and under-trained and that children are left too long before securing a safe and permanent home. Child welfare positions are particularly demanding and stressful, often involving unreasonable workloads and low pay in comparison to jobs in other sectors that require comparable amounts of education and responsibility. Consequently, it becomes difficult to attract and retain the most qualified employees — those with professional training and experience. We hope to work with Congress to identify solutions to these complex problems and we offer the following recommendations:

Improve Education and Training Opportunities for Frontline Workers

The public has high expectations for the child welfare system, as it should. Every day, these agencies make life and death decisions for children and families with complex needs, striving to meet extensive legal mandates. We know that proper staff training is a critical component of this system¹. A number of studies have documented the critical connections between training, competency, and quality services.

The connection of workforce quality to family outcomes was further documented in a March 2003 report, one of the earliest ones of its type, which states, "A stable and highly skilled child welfare workforce is necessary to effectively provide child welfare services that meet federal goals. [However,] large caseloads and worker turnover delay the timeliness of investigation and limit the frequency of worker visits with children, hampering agencies' attainment of some key federal safety and permanency outcomes".² The issue of high caseloads will be addressed later in this document.

A later study also found a link between agency performance and workforce capacity³. The average annual staff turnover rate of 12 California county child welfare agencies was used to rank them into low (8%), moderate (13%), and high (23%) turnover groups. Families served by counties with low turnover had significantly lower maltreatment recurrence rates and were more likely to have approved current case plans and up to-date child medical exams. In addition, a study of private foster care agencies in Milwaukee found that high case manager turnover for a family (e.g., multiple workers serving the family's case within the last two years) increased the time required to achieve permanency for children⁴.

It has been shown that a well prepared staff is more likely to remain in the field of child welfare, thus reducing worker turnover and increasing continuity of services with the family.⁵ Some social workers are able to take advantage of federal assistance through the Title IV-E and Title IV-B programs of the Social Security Act. These funds are used to upgrade the skills and qualifications of child welfare workers through their participation in training programs specifically focused on child welfare practice. While these programs serve a useful purpose and must be preserved, we know that these two programs alone cannot support the entire field of child welfare workers.

A national study entitled "Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce: A National Study of Licensed Social Workers,"⁶ shines a bright light on issues related to workforce retention. The study warns of an impending shortage of social workers that threatens future services for all Americans, especially the most vulnerable among us, children and older adults. Key findings include:

- The supply of licensed social workers is insufficient to meet the needs of organizations serving children and families;
- Workload expansion plus fewer resources impedes social worker retention; and
- Agencies struggle to fill social work vacancies.

Recommendation: Congress should provide the 3.3% in discretionary funds to allow for research, training, and evaluation of services in the child welfare system. Also, greater investments are needed to provide child welfare workers with professional development preparation and ongoing training opportunities, particularly in the area of cultural competence. We believe that valuable employment incentives, including pay increases, benefits, student loan forgiveness, and promotional opportunities are essential for the development of a highly skilled human services workforce.

Establish a National Caseload Size

Child and family service administrators constantly strive to attain an optimal mix of financial and human resources and appropriate case load sizes for their workers. This process is complicated by a constrained economy in which many human service agencies are facing state and federal budget cuts, prompting agencies to make difficult choices that may result in increased caseloads and workloads for front-line and supervisory staff⁷.

The Child Welfare League of America recommends a caseload ratio of 12 to 15 children per caseworker, and the Council on Accreditation recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 children per caseworker. However, a national survey found that caseloads for individual child welfare social workers range from 10 to 110, with workers handling on average 24 to 31 children, each double the recommended number⁸. As was noted, high caseloads lead to increased worker turnover and reduced service capacity.

Recommendation: We ask Congress to consider ways to establish a national caseload size. Federal policy incentives that encourage states and counties to improve their human services workforce by building a comprehensive and integrated continuum of services, fostering innovation in program design, and developing consistent leadership, are desperately needed. Federal statutes, policies, and funding streams can help make important and lasting improvements in the ability of social workers to meet the needs of the consumer.

Conclusion

Social workers are an integral part of the child welfare system as is the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program. For the system to be improved, adequate funding and supports for the program need to be made, and the program must be fully funded to its authorized level of \$505 million. Also, social workers who care for children and families must receive adequate salaries, appropriate training, and manageable caseloads if the system is to be truly reformed. We look forward to partnering with you on this important legislative initiative.

References

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