Workshop II Analysis Summary

DHS Case and workload study

## Introduction

Three workshops were held in June 2021 with Child Welfare Services caseworkers, supervisors and managers to learn about the factors that most impact caseworker workload intensity. A set of 64 variables were offered to participants as those that most contribute to caseload intensity; some were related to a case and/or it’s phase, others were related to worker or agency characteristics. Attendees were also asked to describe characteristics of their lead agency that uniquely impact their workload. The following summary describes the key themes across the workshops.

## Participation demographics

84 total lead agency staff participated in the workshops. **Most participants were from rural agencies (69%), and over half (58%) were case managers.** Participants were fairly evenly spread across the different amount of time they had been in their current position (see chart).

## Summary

### What variables to measure to understand workload intensity

Across all three workshops, when asked which variables had the highest impact on a “high intensity” case, the following had the highest number of votes (20-30 votes):

1. Court involvement
2. Number/severity of family needs
3. Barriers to engaging with child/family[[1]](#footnote-1)
4. Type of case
5. ICWA involvement[[2]](#footnote-2)
6. CP worker experience/skillset
7. Level of child need

When given the top 15 voted variables to weight, the priority (e.g. number of votes per variable) changed slightly:

1. Court involvement
2. Type of case
3. ICWA involvement
4. Number/severity of family needs
5. Barriers to engaging with child/family
6. CP worker experience/skillset
7. Level of child need

These seven variables are likely candidates for measuring workload across the state.

### How workload intensity variables are defined

The following table provides definitions for each of the prioritized variables that create a more highly intense workload. By describing what the variable looks like at “high intensity” as well as what it looks like at “low intensity,” the research team can look for related or available quantitative data points (in SSIS) that can be measured per case (or worker). If they do not exist in SSIS, they can be translated into a tool for measurement.

These definitions further provide guidance to assist with a future monitoring system. If any additional data will need to be collected to show intensity of caseloads/workloads, these definitions are rooted in caseworker experience and can be referenced as criteria for whether, or to what extent, the variable exists.

| Variable/Factor | High intensity | Low intensity |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Court involvement | Higher number of parties and processes involved. | Parents cooperate with services |
| Type of case | Sexual abuse, neglect, and overall abuse of child. | Marijuana usage, and inadequate supervision |
| ICWA involvement | Child meets ICWA criteria | Child does not identify as Native American |
| Number/severity of family needs | Multiple parents and larger family size. Mental health and trauma affecting the family | Smaller family, parents are a couple, they cooperate with services |
| Barriers to engaging with child/family | Parents unwilling/unable to communicate and cooperate with services or case worker due to lack of resources or personal choice. | Parents willing to cooperate and communicate with county and services. |
| CP worker experience/skillset | Less experienced CP worker (typically under 1 year) being assigned overwhelming and complex cases they may not fully be able to handle yet. | Being able to adjust to new laws/policy. |
| Level of child need | Mental health issues that put the child at risk of self-harm or harming others. Overall bad mental health state that was left untreated. Overall high medical needs of children and parents. | Child is able to understand and participate in the process. The child has healthy and appropriate development for their age. |

### Additional layers or calculations to better understand workload intensity[[3]](#footnote-3)

Participants described that switching quickly between types of cases is difficult due to the different knowledge required of each type and the rapport-building needed for sexual abuse cases particularly. Similarly, they recognized that a “type” of case may overlap with other challenging factors, such as chemical dependency relapse (and managing those needs) or other significant mental health issues in parents.

Another salient theme underpinning responses was the responsibility caseworkers hold; ultimately, any challenge to the “system” (e.g. uncooperative parent, court delays, foster parent not providing transportation, etc.) falls on the caseworker to manage. The presence of any “high intensity” variable further has ripple effects to other work, creating a cascading waterfall of work.

### Variables and systems to minimize workload burden**[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Participants consistently reflected that having enough staff was the obvious choice for minimizing workload burden. Other agency-specific variables included:

* Appropriate supervisor to staff ratio, related as well to the supervisor having in-depth knowledge of caseworker caseload
* Resources are readily available and competent to meet family needs
* Experienced staff surround the case
* Team-based approach to the work (e.g. relationships between colleagues are supportive and effective)
* Specialized staff, existence of case aids
* Flexible schedules to account for higher workload times of the year

Additional ideas participants had for minimizing workload, and have the potential to be measured in understanding workload are:

* Using virtual technology with clients, courts, and accessing training
* Easing the documentation requirements, and/or loosening time reporting requirements

1. Barriers to engaging was only voted upon in two workshops due to the fact that they were added after Workshop 2A. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ICWA involvement was only voted upon in two workshops due to the fact that they were added after Workshop 2A. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Some small groups were asked: “How does the interaction between workload variables impact your workload?”* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Some small groups were asked: “Describe what helps to minimize your workload burden,” or “Imagine your group is now in charge of your agency’s budget. Given what you know about workloads, what would you do to minimize workload?” and “What’s worked well that could reduce your workload burden? What are some easy wins when it comes to reducing workload?”* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)