

Stabilizing the Child Welfare Workforce through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)

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Child protection caseworkers are the most important element of an effective child protection system. These critical staff are responsible for responding to the almost 4,000,000 calls to child abuse hotlines alleging that a child has been abused, neglected, or abandoned. They also investigate, evaluate, assess, and determine the governmental response—often alone in challenging environments.

The ARPA final rule clarified some of the eligible uses of the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) **for supporting public sector capacity**. Under the SLFRF final rule, funds may be used for payroll and to cover benefits for employees—including those in public safety, public health, health care, human services, and other employees of a recipient government—for the portion of the employee's time that is spent responding to COVID-19. Human services staff include employees providing or administering social services; public benefits; **child welfare services**; and child, elder, or family care, as well as others.

The intensity, intricacy, and interpersonal involvement of the work by child welfare caseworkers, which is further complicated by increasing workload requirements, combine to create turnover. Any turnover, but especially high turnover, causes additional stress and complications to an already challenging work environment.

Three issues must be constantly examined to ensure stability in child protection caseworker management:

Having the Right Staff

- 1. Qualifications.** Many jurisdictions have requirements regarding education and/or previous experience. While educational requirements are important, the hiring process must include evaluation of other factors that account for other personal and personality factors.
- 2. Training.** Given the complex ability and responsibility of caseworkers to provide safety and permanency for children, the initial training has to be thorough and precise to understand the laws, rules, regulations, guidelines, policies, procedures, and practices as well as the computer networking system provided to new case workers.
- 3. Pay Standards.** Starting pay has traditionally been low in many jurisdictions, but the real issue is a gradient pay scale that increases dramatically in the first three to five years. There are ways to accept and demand training, experience, and stability while also recognizing professionalism and rewarding commitment.

Caseloads

- 1. Standards.** In most jurisdictions, there are statutory or administrative caseload requirements to ensure that child protection caseworkers are not overwhelmed with responsibilities and unable to perform their job. Too often, caseworkers have higher caseloads than are recommended, authorized, or statutorily required. Across the U.S., caseloads of up to 50, 80, or 100 have been reported.
- 2. Supervision.** Because of the stress inherent with caseworkers' responsibilities, having experienced, knowledgeable, empathetic, and supportive supervisors is critical not just when new caseworkers start. They also serve as partners and advisors for difficult and life-altering decisions.
- 3. Vacancy.** When caseworkers leave, children and families in the caseload must still be served. Therefore, the preparation and completion of the hiring process becomes critical to maintain consistent service to the child and family to maintain adequate caseload.

Stability

- 1. Training.** Given the changing nature of child protection issues and service delivery, caseworkers need not only initial training, but also ongoing training to be informed of issues such as evidence-based practices, changing philosophies of in-home vs. removal from home, and kinship care.
- 2. Mental Health.** Recent circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, breakdown of the family unit, finances, and other societal issues have affected the mental health of not only children, adults, and families, but also of caseworkers and supervisors themselves.
- 3. Burnout.** A traditional phrase used in child protection services, the tragedies and often-conflicted relationships between parents and children that caseworkers are regularly exposed to can cause physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion.

The final rule allows for an expanded set of eligible uses to restore and support public sector employment. Eligible uses include:

- Hiring up to a pre-pandemic baseline that is adjusted for historic underinvestment in the public sector
- Providing additional funds for employees who experienced pay cuts or were furloughed
- Avoiding layoffs

- Providing worker retention incentives
- Paying for ancillary administrative costs related to hiring

Furthermore, SLFRF may be used to maintain current compensation levels, with adjustments for inflation, in order to prevent layoffs that would otherwise be necessary. Jurisdictions must be able to substantiate that layoffs were likely in the absence of SLFRF funds and would be substantially due to the public health emergency or its negative economic impacts (e.g., fiscal pressures on state and local budgets) and should document their assessment.

SLFRF may also be used to provide worker retention incentives, which are designed to persuade staff to remain with the employer as compared to other employment options. Jurisdictions must be able to substantiate that child welfare workers or other human services staff were likely to leave employment in the absence of the retention incentive and should document their assessment.

This influx of federal funding is a significant opportunity for agencies to address child welfare staffing at this critical time in early 2022 as we are coming out of the pandemic and experiencing the resulting employment shifts.

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