

## Backlog reduction: Effective strategies for managing the crisis

### What are effective backlog reduction strategies and why are they important?

A child welfare agency with a backlog is a vulnerable agency because a child could be seriously harmed, traumatized, or even die before an investigator arrives to assess the situation and intervene. Backlogs also reflect other organizational issues that impact children and families:<sup>1</sup>

- **Consequences to children and families.** Excessive caseloads prevent caseworkers from performing their duties effectively, leading to mistakes that harm children.
- **Consequences to caseworkers.** High caseloads are frequently cited as one of the reasons why caseworkers leave their jobs. Excessive workload among child welfare staff has been correlated with higher levels of stress, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and turnover.<sup>2</sup>
- **Consequences to the agency.** A number of agencies have been faced with class-action lawsuits, which often identify inadequate staffing as a major cause of harm to children.<sup>3</sup> Federal, state, and other funding sources can also be at risk when service standards are not met due to excessive workload.<sup>4</sup> And when caseworkers leave, costs to agencies are estimated to be 30-200% of their annual salary (including the costs of separation, recruitment, and training).<sup>5</sup>

Successful backlog management requires a coordinated and comprehensive approach, involving everyone and every level of the organization. Leaders play a particularly important role in focusing the agency's attention and efforts, developing a comprehensive plan, allocating sufficient resources, and constantly monitoring the situation on the ground.

According to experts who have successfully reduced case backlogs, effective strategies can be grouped in three broad categories:<sup>6</sup>

- Identifying the root cause of the backlog
- Addressing the crisis at hand
- Preventing future backlogs

### Identifying the root cause of the backlog

Identifying the root cause(s) of the backlog is the first step a jurisdiction must take. Is the backlog the result of a resource issue, a policy issue, a personnel issue, or a culture issue? Is it some combination of all of these issues? Has there been a sharp increase in case volume? Where does the backlog exist — is it statewide, in one county, one office? Tracking down this information depends upon good data systems and capacity to understand the data. It is

particularly important to understand if the backlog is the result of a short-term phenomenon, or if it is related to how the agency is structured, staffed, or funded.

### **Addressing the crisis at hand**

Correcting the imbalances of a backlog requires matching case demand with sufficient *workforce supply*, while adding process *efficiencies* that don't compromise child safety — all organized and mobilized by *leadership and infrastructure*. Leadership must continually demonstrate that backlog reduction is a priority, and accountability structures must be established to monitor performance at all levels of the organization.

Specific leadership strategies include:

- Clear leadership ownership and personal investment in reducing the backlog
- Messaging to create unity and clarity of message toward shared goals
- “All hands on deck” efforts to generate commitment and energy throughout every level and unit of the organization

Strategies to increase workforce supply include:

- New staff positions
- Targeted staff redeployments
- Paid overtime
- Expedited hiring and on-boarding processes
- Contracting with private providers
- Use of temporary staff

Strategies to develop more efficient infrastructure and streamlined operations include:

- Policy changes such as paperwork reduction
- Accountability infrastructure to hold staff and leaders accountable to commitments
- Improvements to practice such as more consistent supervision

### **Preventing future backlogs**

Reducing a current backlog is essential, as is preventing future backlogs. Maintaining manageable caseload sizes, regardless of fluctuations in call volumes over time, is a critical strategy. This means that agencies must plan staffing according to their highest volume day or month, not their lowest volume.

The ability of leadership to constantly monitor case volume changes, and reacting quickly to prevent a backlog is a key strategy. In addition, backlogs can be prevented by policies and practices that intervene preventively in the lives of children and families, and match them with needed services and supports in the community, reducing the need for long-term agency involvement.

## Jurisdictions that have recently tackled the issue

These strategies reflect the experiences of several states that have successfully reduced large backlogs, including Alaska, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, and Oklahoma. Highlights from these jurisdictional examples include:

- In 2014, Georgia was caught off guard by a backlog that quickly grew above 7,000 cases, which was about 48 percent of the state's caseload at the time. Georgia leaders rapidly developed a set of strategies that reduced the backlog to zero within one year.
- Arizona found itself with a significant backlog that had accumulated over time, and peaked at more than 16,000 cases at the beginning of 2015. Two years later, a sharp focus on the backlog reduced it to under 1,500 cases.

---

<sup>1</sup> Social Work Policy Institute. (2010). *High caseloads: How do they impact delivery of health and human services?* Available from: <http://www.socialworkpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/r2p-cw-caseload-swpi-1-10.pdf>

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2011). *Caseload/Workload*. Available from: [https://ncwwi.org/files/Caseload-Workload\\_1pager2.pdf](https://ncwwi.org/files/Caseload-Workload_1pager2.pdf)

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2016). *Why the workforce matters*. Available from: [https://ncwwi.org/files/Why\\_the\\_Workforce\\_Matters.pdf](https://ncwwi.org/files/Why_the_Workforce_Matters.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Kim, H. & Kao, D. (2014). A meta-analysis of turnover intention predictors among US child welfare workers. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 47, 214-223.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see:

*Dwayne B. v. Granholm*, No. 2: 06-CV-13548 (E.D. Mich. 2006). For more information, see: <http://www.childrensrights.org/pdfs/2006.08.08%20Michigan%20Complaint.pdf>

*Olivia Y. v. Barbour*, No. 04-CV-251 (S.D. Miss. 2004). For more information, see: <http://www.childrensrights.org/pdfs/MissMotion.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Yamatani, H., Engel, R. & Spjeldnes, S. (2009). "Child Welfare Worker Caseload: What's Just Right?" *Social Work* 14 (4): 361-368. Available at:

[http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Solveig\\_Spjeldnes/publication/26837348\\_Child\\_welfare\\_worker\\_case\\_load\\_what's\\_just\\_right/links/0deec52025d7f54387000000.pdf](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Solveig_Spjeldnes/publication/26837348_Child_welfare_worker_case_load_what's_just_right/links/0deec52025d7f54387000000.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See [http://ncwwi.org/files/Retention/Calculating\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_Employee\\_Turnover.pdf](http://ncwwi.org/files/Retention/Calculating_the_cost_of_Employee_Turnover.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Casey Family Programs (2014). *Case backlog reduction strategies in child welfare*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

Personal communication, Kathleen Noonan of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, November 8, 2016.

Personal communication, Christine Norbut of Casey Family Programs, October 28, 2016.

Personal communication, Jeff Lukich and Lon Roberts of Georgia DFCS, October 25, 2016.

Personal communication, Patricia Medlock of Florida DCF, November 8, 2016.