



## Workload Is Key To CPS Performance

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By Jess McDonald

The key to ensuring that children who are reported to Arizona's child protection system are safe is adequate staff to do the work. Lack of timely response to reports of abuse and neglect put children at risk. Inability to visit children as required delays permanency; costing children, families and Arizona taxpayers unnecessary emotional and financial costs.

Both the Arizona auditor general and Department of Economic Security agree: The work is not getting done as it should.

Failure to invest in required resources in safety and permanency will only cost taxpayers more in the long run. Other systems such as Illinois have invested in lower caseloads meeting national standards, and as a result have improved safety and permanency outcomes and prevented the unnecessary removal of children from their homes.

The reduced workload enabled investigators to provide a longer, more thorough, service-oriented response to abuse and neglect reports. In addition to the obvious benefits related to safety and well-being of children, this approach resulted in substantial savings by reducing the costs associated with maintaining children in substitute care. In addition, reports of subsequent abuse in previously reported families have decreased by 55 per cent, which is largely the result of the reduced workload for investigators.

A study completed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services found that all statutory and policy requirements for foster care cases could be completed for only 15 children in a given month. This was to accomplish only the minimum requirements, not accounting for emergency hospitalizations, placement disruptions, crisis intervention or family engagement. The investment in low caseloads was more than offset by the reduced child removal, reductions in residential placements, and shorter lengths of stay in foster care. As a result, the cost of a child welfare case to Illinois taxpayers is less today than ten years ago.

Although the recent report on the auditor general's findings on Child Protective Service (CPS) caseloads highlighted the findings that staff are unable to fulfill the minimum casework requirements and were plagued by high turnover, it failed to emphasize the importance of manageable workloads. A report released by the U.S. General Accounting Office in March 2003 cited high turnover rates and staffing shortages in child welfare as leaving remaining staff with insufficient time to establish relationships with children and families and make the necessary decisions to ensure safe and stable permanent placements.

The CPS worker is expected to make perfect decisions: to make sure that children are safe when a report of abuse or neglect is made, and to ensure that the child finds a permanent home. Let's not tie their hands behind their backs. Adequate resources to support this vital public mission will protect children and save taxpayers resources.

*Jess McDonald is former director of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and co-director of Fostering Results, the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Fostering Results is a public education and outreach campaign building support for improved systems and practices for the nation's child welfare systems, with particular attention to the structure and flexibility of financing and juvenile court practices. The project is supported through a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to the Children and Family Research Center at the School of Social Work, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.*