NEW MEXICO
LEGISLATIVE
FINANCE
COMMITTEE

BRIEF: CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE
Prepared by LFC staff for the Senate Memorial 5 Task Force

In 2022, the New Mexico Social Work Task Force recommended:

- The state pay for social work internships and practicum experiences
- Provide scholarships for MSW students
- Increase pay for state social workers
- Monitor the $50M in social work endowments to ensure the investment is resulting in more graduates who stay in NM

New Mexico School of Social Work Enrollment and Graduates
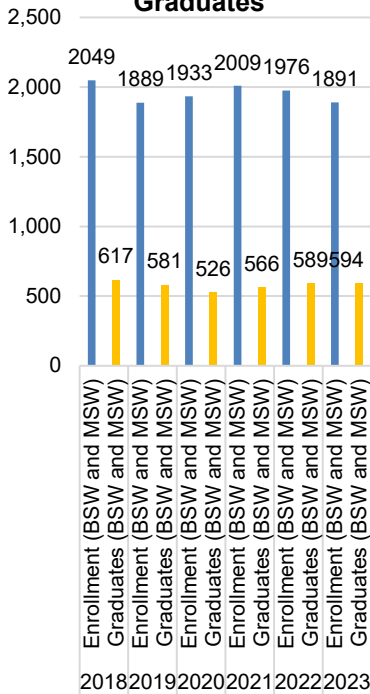

Source: LFC Files

Background

A stable, professional workforce is essential for a successful child welfare system. Yet New Mexico, like many other states, faces significant child welfare workforce challenges, including insufficient numbers of licensed social workers and high caseworker turnover, resulting in high caseloads and potential missed opportunities to prevent child maltreatment or reach permanency decisions for youth in custody quickly. According to the child-focused Annie E. Casey Foundation, while recruitment and retention in child welfare is a decades-long issue, workforce challenges have become more urgent following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recruiting a Child Welfare Workforce

According to the Child Welfare League of America, social work degrees are the most appropriate degrees for the child welfare field of practice and are linked with better outcomes for children and families and retention of child welfare staff[1]. However, New Mexico faces significant shortages in licensed social workers statewide. This shortage impacts the state's child welfare agency. CYFD has not focused Protective Services recruitment on licensed social workers and has reduced education requirements for Protective Services caseworkers over time, citing social worker shortages. Current caseworker job postings require a bachelor's degree in social work, education, counseling psychology, sociology, criminal justice, and any combination of education and experience may be substituted for the required education and experience. For example, a high school diploma and four years of experience qualify individuals for a caseworker position.

Applications and enrollment have fallen among the state's schools of social work; enrollment in bachelor's level social work programs was up 2.9 percent between 2022 and 2023 but down 15 percent over the past five years. Higher education institutions' enrollment in master-level social work programs fell 8.4 percent from 2022 to 2023 but experienced a net increase of 1.1 percent over the past five years. In SY23, a total of 1,891 students were enrolled in bachelor of social work (BSW) or master of social work (MSW) programs in New Mexico, and 594 students graduated with a bachelor's or master's degrees.

Investments to Increase Social Worker Graduates.
To address social worker shortages across New Mexico, the state has increased spending on social work programs by 29 percent between FY19 and FY23. Over the past three years, the Legislature has appropriated $80 million for social work endowments for faculty and financial aid. At a relatively conservative assumption of a 4 percent return, the endowments would provide $3.2 million annually for social work programs, equivalent to a 44 percent increase on the combined total $7.2 million in social work programs spending in FY23. These investments should position social work programs to increase faculty by about 50 percent and increase enrollment. However, initial funding distributions were delayed, and it is currently unclear how the funds have been distributed and unknown how funding increases will translate into additional faculty and graduates. In 2022, the Legislature also made an appropriation of $10 million to the University of New Mexico to support

In June 2024, CYFD reported to LFC roughly 7 percent of front-line case workers in Protective Services were licensed social workers.

Nationally, estimates of the share of licensed social worker workforce among front-line caseworkers is roughly 40 to 50 percent, according to the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.

Stipend programs are funded by federal Title IV-E training program funds, which allows states to reimburse up to 75 percent of eligible training costs, multiplied by the state's Title IV-E foster care penetration rate (0.49). A state's Title IV-E foster care penetration rate is the percentage of children in foster care placement who are eligible for Title IV-E program reimbursement.

Protective Services Personnel Appropriations and Filled FTE

*As of June 1, 2024
Source: CYFD OpBud and SPO Tool

the creation of a social work program through the school of public health. To date, it is unclear what progress has been made to establish the school. Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) has expanded it's school of social work and will have a first cohort of MSW students beginning in 2024.

The Title IV-E of the Social Security act, commonly called Title IV-E, allows states to claim federal reimbursement for costs associated with providing foster care and adoption assistance to children who meet federal eligibility criteria. Title IV-E education programs, commonly referenced as "stipend programs" are delivered through partnerships between social work programs at institutions of higher education and state child welfare agencies. Title IV-E training programs provide stipends or tuition reimbursement for undergraduate and graduate social work education. The Title IV-E stipend program is the primary source of federal funding available to support the improvement of the child welfare workforce. Research suggests Title IV-E stipend programs successfully prepare licensed social workers to work in public child welfare, and participants have longer tenures in child welfare than nonparticipants[ii]. Title IV-E grants flow through CYFD, and federal data suggests federal Title IV-E grant expenditures for training have declined since 2020. In FFY20 CYFD reported $3.2 million in federal Title IV-E training expenditures. CYFD is projecting $2 million in FY24.

In New Mexico, Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU), New Mexico State University (NMSU), and Western New Mexico University (WNMU) operate Title IV-E stipend programs that provide students with a stipend in exchange for up to five years of service at CYFD after graduation. If students do not complete their terms of service at CYFD, they must repay stipend awards. Currently, the schools of social work fund the match portion to draw down Title IV-E funds, and stipend amounts vary by school. For example, master's students at WNMU can receive up to $9 thousand, while master's students at NMSU can earn up to $24 thousand. The length of service commitment at CYFD depends on the student stipend award. The state may be underleveraging theTitle IV-E program and could redesign the program and partnerships to train frontline caseworkers and increase the number of licensed social workers in Protective Services. CYFD reported to LFC in June 2024 a total of 33 stipend students worked at CYFD during the prior academic year.

Protective Services Workforce.
In recent years, the Legislature has increased appropriations for Protective Services staffing. During the 2023 legislative session, appropriators worked to address workforce challenges by including funding for salary adjustments. In 2023, the Legislature also added funding to fill at least 60 full-time positions in Protective Services for FY24, which was the estimated level of funding needed to meet caseload benchmark targets at the time. In 2023 and 2024, the department took several actions to address workforce shortages, such as increasing salaries for certain hard-to-fill front-line positions. In addition, the department held rapid-hire events to recruit staff and fill vacant positions. The vacancy rate in Protective Services improved but remains roughly 21 percent as of June 2024. CYFD's FY25 budget provides $180.9 million for personnel, which should fund a total of roughly 1,691 positions at an average cost of $107 thousand per position, including salary and benefits. The Protective Services personnel budget of $92.5 million for FY25 should fund roughly 962 employees at an average cost of $98 thousand per employee. As of June 2024, Protective Services had a headcount of 919.

Turnover Rate for Protective Service Workers

Source: CYFD
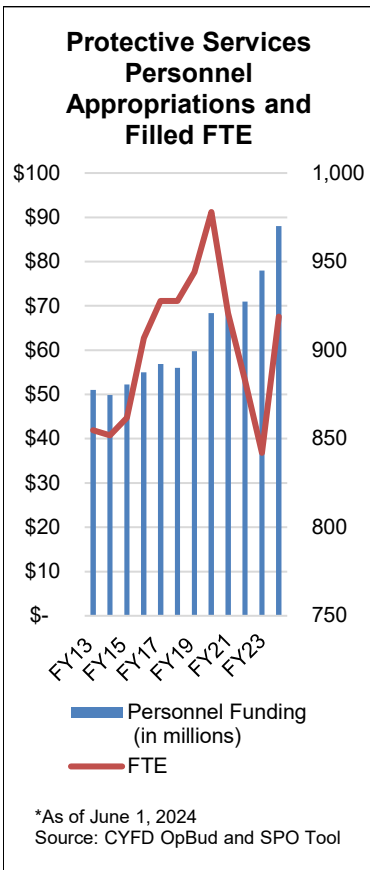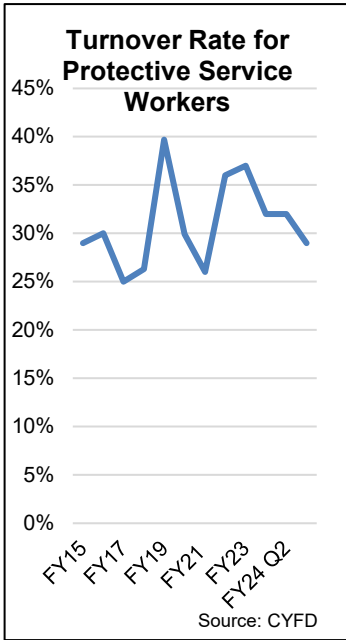
Protective Services Caseworker Compensation.
In 2023, a legislative compensation study found that average caseworker salaries in New Mexico tend to exceed average salaries in benchmark states. In addition, on average salaries in investigation caseworker roles at CYFD tend to exceed those of planned permanency workers. CYFD has implemented a framework to reset investigation salaries but has not yet done the same for planned permanency workers. At the same time, licensed social workers may have opportunities for greater compensation outside of child welfare. To address recruitment and retention challenges, the state might further incentivize certain hard-to-fill caseworker roles, both within the department and to compete with other states and industries seeking social workers.

CYFD Caseworker Compensation

CYFD Role	CYFD Avg. Salary (in thousands)	Market Comparison Base Salary 50th Percentile	NM Variance to Market 50th Percentile
CPS Investigation Case Worker	$61.4	$40.9	50%
CPS Placement Specialist	$71.7	$47.2	52%
CPS Placement Sr Wkr	$64.7	$56.8	14%
CPS Placement Supv	$72.1	$65.3	10%
CPS County Office Manager	$91.4	$98.8	-7%
CPS Perm Plg Case Wkr	$52.5	$41.4	27%
CPS Perm Plg Sr Wkr	$62.7	$49.9	26%

Source: 2023 Compensation Benchmarking Study

Protective Services Caseworker Benchmarks

Investigations	12 active cases
Permancy Planning	15 children
Placement	25 licensed families
In-Home Services	8 active families

Source: CYFD Workforce Plan

Caseloads.
According to the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), unmanageable caseloads and workloads impact workers' ability to achieve positive outcomes for the children and families and contribute to case worker turnover. CWLA sets caseload standards that reflect the maximum number of cases for which a worker should be responsible. As part of the *Kevin S.* foster care lawsuit settlement agreement, the state committed to reducing child welfare caseloads. Specifically, CYFD committed no caseloads would exceed 200 percent of the caseload standards by December 2023. In January 2024, the co-neutral *Kevin S.* settlement monitors assessed 19 percent of caseworkers had caseloads that exceeded these standards. While in the aggregate, caseload data appears close to benchmarks, caseloads may vary widely by county. CYFD provided LFC with data in June 2024 that indicates 17 counties, including Bernalillo, Dona Ana, San Juan, McKinley, and Santa Fe, had caseloads that far exceed benchmarks. Permanency placement worker cases exceeded benchmark standards in 13 counties, including Bernalillo, Dona Ana, and San Miguel. In June 2024, CYFD reported the agency needs to hire roughly 100 more full-time staff to meet caseload standards.

National Best Practices and Examples in Other States:

- Erie County, New York, partnered with the University at Buffalo to add 18 new MSWs to their workforce using stipends from a five-year grant with the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.

According to a systematic literature review conducted by the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research and the University of Maryland, professional commitment and level of education are the most consistent personal factors and supervisory support and workload are the most consistent organizational factors related to retention within child welfare.

2023 CYFD Exit Survey Results: Most Frequently Reported Reasons for Leaving

Lack of support from leadership	19%
Overworked/ workload	8%
New Opportunity	8%
Too many cases/backlog	7%
Mental health	7%
Personal reasons	5%
Burn out	4%
Underpaid	4%
Not feeling valued	4%
Environment/ structure of the dept.	4%

Source: 2023 CYFD Exit Survey Report

- The Oklahoma Department of Human Services implemented a competency-based personnel selection process in 2020. The model includes an in-depth job analysis to define optimal performance and the necessary characteristics of a strong applicant.

Retaining the Child Welfare Workforce

Nationally, average turnover rate estimates for child welfare workers range between 20 and 30 percent, which both impacts the ability of child welfare organizations to operate effectively and is costly. Nationally, on average, child welfare case workers remain on the job for 1.8 years.[iii] The Annie E. Casey Foundation reports high turnover directly impacts children and families served by child welfare agencies and is associated with more placement disruptions, time in foster care, incidents of child maltreatment, and reentries to foster care. Annual turnover rates at or below 12 percent are considered optimal in health care and human services.

Protective Services Turnover Trends.
CYFD has experienced high rates of Protective Services caseworker turnover, though the rate improved in 2024 and now hovers around 29 percent. The workforce plan developed in response to the *Kevin S.* settlement aimed to address factors contributing to high vacancies and turnover, including secondary trauma and burnout experienced by caseworkers, the need for trauma-informed training and development, and the need for other recruitment and retention strategies. The Legislature appropriated $3 million to support CYFD's implementation of a workforce plan in response to the *Kevin S.* settlement that has largely remained unspent to date.

CYFD exit survey data collected in 2023 highlighted factors related to lack of support from leadership and feelings of being overwhelmed and overworked as some of the main reasons for leaving the organization.

Retention Investments.
The CYFD Worker Repayment Program receives $432 thousand annually through the Higher Education Department for CYFD employee student loan repayment. In FY24, 150 CYFD staff applied for and 133 received awards. CYFD considers and made awards to staff in frontline positions with Protective Services, Juvenile Justice, and Behavioral Health. According to the Higher Education Department, the purpose of the program is to increase the number of public service workers in "critical need positions" at CYFD. CYFD staff must have completed two years of service with the agency to be eligible for the program.

In addition, the Legislature has authorized the following special appropriations related to the child welfare workforce:
- In 2023 the Legislature included a $3 million nonrecurring special appropriation to support the department's workforce development plan, to improve supports for front-line workers who experience secondary trauma, expand training and professional development, increase in and out of state recruitment campaigns, provide recruitment incentives for licensed social work graduates, and improve mentorship and leadership development within the department. As of the end of FY24 the

appropriation had been largely unused and was reauthorized for FY25, though the Governor vetoed references to licensed social workers.

- In 2024 the Legislature appropriated $1.7 million for a three-year pilot to incentivize attainment of masters-level social work licensure to develop and retain caseworkers and directed CYFD to report to the Legislature about the number of licensed social workers in caseworker positions.

National Examples of Retention Strategies.
- Jefferson County, Colorado, Division of Children, Youth, and Families began conducting annual job satisfaction surveys in 2014 and a dedicated committee structure that reviews the survey data and implements efforts to change workplace culture.
- The New York City Administration for Children's Services offers a mentoring program for case-carrying staff. The program pays a stipend to more experienced child protection staff to serve as mentors. Similarly, the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute recommends child welfare agencies consider developing peer support, coaching, and mentoring programs.

Previous LFC Recommendations

LFC evaluations and reports have made a variety of workforce-related recommendations, including suggesting CYFD:
- Implement research-based hiring practices, such as realistic job previews and uniform rating systems. Realistic job previews allow applicants to gather an authentic understanding of the commitment and stress associated with the position, which can lead to better hiring decisions and improve new hire retention:
- Collect, analyze, and leverage exit survey data to inform strategies to support workforce retention;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of core onboarding training;
- Encourage strong collaboration with public universities to train social workers for caseworker roles and ensure candidates are prepared for the challenges of working in Protective Services;
- Improve data collection to track students receiving Title IV-E stipends to study the effects on workforce recruitment, preparation, and retention
- Pilot incentives for caseworkers to obtain master's level social work licensure;
- Identify opportunities to streamline data collection in the agency's case management system.

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[i] DePanfilis, D., & Zlotnik, J. L. (2008). Retention of front-line staff in child welfare: A systematic review of research. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*(9), 995-1008.
[ii] Benton, A. D. (2016). Understanding the diverging paths of stayers and leavers: An examination of factors predicting worker retention. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *65*, 70-77.
[iii] Edwards, F., & Wildeman, C. (2018). Characteristics of the front-line child welfare workforce. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *89*, 13-26.

Sidebar:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation recommends five core workforce development strategies for child welfare agencies:

- Understanding workforce needs
- Creating manageable, family wage jobs
- Hiring and onboarding strong applicants
- Building and maintaining a healthy, equitable climate and culture
- Offering training, development, and advancement opportunities.

The comprehensive child welfare information system (CCWIS) replacement project—now known as New Mexico Impact Project---should replace the old FACTS system.

A 2011 LFC program evaluation found CYFD caseworkers spent 22 percent of work time completing data entry.The new system includes functions for data collection, case management, compliance, and reporting and provide web-based access for caseworkers in the field, improving their experience.

The CCWIS project was initiated in 2017 and experienced several delays. The new system is projected to be functional in 2025, and the project will be fully complete in 2027. The current project budget is $82 million.