

# Long hours, low pay and constant turnover: Social services agencies in Virginia struggle to keep staff

By

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(Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)

It takes two years to train a social worker at one of Virginia's local social services departments so they can confidently help families, handle an interview with a recently traumatized child or recognize red flags that could suggest abuse or neglect.

But Virginia's child welfare workers — those whose duties range from meeting with foster children to investigating claims of child abuse — are leaving after an average of 18 to 24 months on the job, according to Carl Ayers, director of family services with the state Department of Social Services.

The repercussions for children and families can be far-reaching. A child might just begin to develop trust and a rapport with a social worker before he or she leaves. A complicated case might be assigned to someone fresh out of college with no on-the-job experience.

“When you talk to families, you’ll hear: ‘I had three different social workers over the life of the case and the third social worker had no idea about the needs of my child,’” said Valerie L’Herrou, staff attorney with the Center for Family Advocacy, which is part of the Virginia Poverty Law Center. “I think it’s affecting the quality of foster care services and reunification services.”



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIAL SERVICES

For years, Virginia’s Department of Social Services has grappled with recruiting and retaining the staff needed to serve some of the state’s most vulnerable residents.

It’s been a challenge that has persisted, Ayers estimates, for nearly 20 years.

During a recent Board of Social Services meeting, Ayers said that the turnover rate for a newly hired family service specialist is 60 percent in the first year. As long as that is not addressed, he told the board, there will be cases when a child or family is not visited when they should be or work is not documented appropriately.

Of the 1,146 family-services specialist positions in the state, which provide child and adult protective services to clients, 230 are currently vacant, according to the Virginia League of Social Services Executives.

And of those who local departments of social services in Virginia can hire, few last long. Two-thirds of separating family services specialists — who primarily do child welfare work — leave within five years.

“Whenever you can’t keep staff and you can’t get staff in to fill those positions, it’s really challenging to meet the needs of families, and we’ve identified that as a key area that we need to address as a system in order to improve our overall services to children and families,” Ayers said.

The state has made some efforts to rectify the problem, such as installing new technology to make transcribing notes easier so social workers can spend less time in front of a computer and creating incentives to help cover student debt to entice graduating students to work for the state.

But that doesn’t get to what state workers and advocates agree is the root of the problem: that an already highly stressful job, in which staff must work with traumatized children every day, is made more difficult by poor compensation.

The minimum starting salary required by the state for a family services specialist is just \$29,930 a year. That makes finding qualified workers difficult and keeping them even more so. Often, new graduates will start with a local social services agency, stay for a few years to gain some experience, and then transfer to another job — sometimes with a private agency or maybe a competing local department in another part of the state.

Though the state sets the salary guidelines, the local Departments of Social Services can pay higher if their locality decides to, which typically improves recruitment and retention.

“I’ve got 120 local departments representing 133 jurisdictions, so each of these jurisdictions have a different ability to pay and for some of them the idea of increasing starting salary by \$5,000 is just a really challenging fiscal decision,” Ayers said.

The Department of Social Services requested a 10 percent increase to the minimum salary ranges last year but the proposal never made it to the governor’s desk.

During a recent Board of Social Services meeting, Commissioner Duke Storen said the department is working on a compensation study to determine how much workers should be paid, and a workload measure study to figure out how many workers a local department needs.

“Those are two data points you need to appropriately advocate for more resources from the General Assembly,” he said.

The problem feeds on itself, explained Andrew Crawford, president of the Virginia League of Social Services Executives. If the department isn’t fully staffed, more work falls on the shoulders of the employees who are there, making an already stressful job even more difficult.

Crawford is also the director of the Bedford County Department of Social Services, and he said his staff struggles to take their compensatory time after they’ve already worked more than 40 hours in a week. They have to work

when families can see them, he said, so a social worker might work until 10 p.m. on one night and still have to be up at 8:30 the next morning for a court hearing.

There are also requirements related responding to new cases within 24 hours, so if a call comes in on Saturday morning, that client needs to be seen by Sunday.

“One of the struggles we have had is, how do we structure staff days so they can meet the timeline and be successful and not burn out?” he said. “The amount of work they have, the magnitude of the problems they see — you need at least two years of training to be at base, and you often can’t even make it that two years.”

And losing staff before they’ve even hit the two-year mark is especially alarming because of the nature of the job, he said.

“When you’re dealing with people, whatever issues, as you go from one house to the next, they’re not the same,” he said. “When the complexities of the human condition are so diverse and so complicated, you really need to have a pretty wide skill level, a broader skill level, to be able to really be effective.”