

Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel

The Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel focused on three projects, as well as efforts to learn more about the child welfare system and recruiting new panel members.

The projects for 2017 included:

- The intersection of domestic violence and child welfare
- Workforce retention and secondary trauma (two-year project)
- How and how effectively is kinship care being used in Hennepin County? (two-year project)

In addition to the three research projects, a process was developed for follow-up on past projects that will begin in 2018. The report also included overarching themes and recommendations. While the project topics are different, there are topics, themes, recommendations and ideas that intersect the three projects.

The common themes that emerged across projects and work with the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) include:

- Caseload size
- Clarification of worker roles and functions
- Staff stability
- Recruitment of new Citizen Review Panel members
- Funding.

Caseload size

“As noted in the 2016 report, panel members continue to be concerned about the caseload size of Hennepin County child protection workers. Although Hennepin County has made a major effort to hire more staff and reduce caseload size, the caseloads are still unevenly distributed, and many workers have more cases than they can effectively manage. We strongly support Hennepin County’s decision to hire more staff and hope that the new induction process will help with staff retention.” Note: The Hennepin County response to a study of the child protection system by the Casey Family Foundation was \$13 million in additional funding for staffing. “Staffing increased from 301 in 2013 to 646 in 2017. This additional staffing decreased caseloads per worker to 15 on average. Hennepin staff acknowledge that experienced staff tend to have caseloads that are too high. They hope that as newer workers gain experience caseloads will even out.”

Minnesota Department of Human Services (MN DHS) response: Caseload size

Department staff recognizes that for several years maltreatment reports have increased sharply across the state; many county and tribal agencies have struggled to maintain reasonable caseloads. The Governor’s Task Force on the Protection of Children discussed this issue in depth and developed recommendations. These include:

- No more than 10 child protection case management cases per worker
- Newly hired child protection workers will carry no more than three quarters of a caseload and will not carry high-risk cases until certification through the Child Protection Training Academy
- Review methodologies for establishing caseload/workload standards that considers weighting of cases based on factors such as type of case, case complexity, out-of-home placement, court involvement, etc. Following a review, MN DHS should recommend implementing caseload/workload standards.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services continues to analyze and address these recommendations.

Clarify worker roles and functions

“We remain concerned that too often Hennepin County caseworkers lack awareness of the roles and functions of agencies that they either work with, or should be working with, to help serve child protection clients. Part of this is due to the large caseload size which limits a worker’s ability to seek out and learn about community resources. Training for new staff also may not adequately stress the importance of developing and maintaining community relationships. We would encourage Hennepin County to emphasize the importance of working with community partners during the induction process and also invite staff from outside agencies to present to Hennepin County staff on an ongoing basis.” Note: Hennepin staff are currently addressing this issue in various ways, examples include:

- County staff planned and sponsored the first annual forum with Children and Family Services (CFS) in April to improve relationships among contracted providers and child protection workers.
- County staff also increased the use of improved internal communication to update county caseworkers about the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP), and the resources and supports available from contracted community providers for families referred to PSOP.

MN DHS response: Clarify worker roles and functions

No response

Staff stability

“Hennepin County has done a good job of decreasing staff turnover and should be commended for that. However, staff mobility appears to remain a concern for those working with or trying to connect with Hennepin County staff. Caseworkers frequently change jobs or move to new work areas, making it challenging to develop ongoing working relationships with families and community partners. We do not have a recommendation as to how this could be changed but we thought it should be noted that many of those we interviewed commented on this problem.”

MN DHS response: Staff stability

No response

Recruitment of new Citizen Review Panel members

“The Citizen Review Panel has also struggled throughout its existence with recruiting new members; it has been especially difficult to recruit people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. This year was particularly challenging as the required background checks deterred some prospective applicants, and other applicants dropped out due to the lengthy time it took to process the background checks. Hennepin County did agree to eliminate some of the background check forms and we are hopeful that in the coming year that the process can be expedited. Also, we will be working with someone from the Human Services and Public Health communication department who will be helping the panel with recruitment.”

MN DHS response: Recruitment

No response

Funding

“Finally, during times of diminished resources (i.e., budget cuts and recession), staffing for child protection services should not be cut. These challenging budget periods are often accompanied by increases in the need for child protection due to increased incidences of child abuse, neglect and domestic violence. For children in need of protection, this is dangerous and neglectful on the part of the system. When it is necessary to reduce county budgets, staff retention in child protection services should be considered non-negotiable due to the extreme and long-lasting consequences of cuts.

MN DHS response: Funding

No response

The Intersection of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Project

The project team interviewed a wide variety of professionals with some contact with domestic violence and reviewed multiple research studies. They identified some opportunities for improvement. While the various professions agreed to the characteristics of the victim and perpetrator, and the vulnerability of children living in families involving domestic violence, there was widespread conflict regarding professional roles, limitations and timelines for decision making.”

Recommendation 1

“First and foremost, we recommend that Child Protection Services bring in representatives from law enforcement and domestic violence to provide cross-training on their issues and requirements in their specialty areas and the impact on children. This training should be cross functional so that the information goes both ways to bring about an understanding of the restrictions and operating procedures of both groups, and to seek ways to improve relationships and cooperation among them. This type of training and cross-functional partnership should be done on a regular and timely basis.”

MN DHS Response

MN DHS supports this recommendation. If Hennepin County is interested, MN DHS offers a Child Safety and Permanency staff who can provide this type of training.

Recommendation 2

“Currently, questions about domestic violence are included in the initial assessment of child abuse and neglect as part of the child protection services protocols, but not the converse; i.e. when domestic violence is the presenting issue, there is no immediate recognition of it as a form of child abuse.”

MN DHS response

No response

Recommendation 3

“Evidence of domestic violence should be presented at all court hearings on child protection cases, including evidence of police actions and past court appearances having to do with domestic violence. Part of this evidence should also include mental health assessments on the children with specific attention to the impact of domestic violence on witnesses, even when there is no evidence of abuse or imminent danger.”

MNDHS Response

MN DHS is working to determine a statistically reliable tool or protocol that screens for trauma in all children involved in child protection. A positive screening triggers a referral for an assessment. When this process is finalized it will be available to county staff. Child protection workers have access to children’s mental health screening tools, which are effective in identifying children in need of further mental health assessment.

Recommendation 4

In recent years, there has been a shift to more specialty courts such as drug court or infant court. Hennepin County should consider establishing a court that specializes in domestic violence. This would allow for focused training and a deeper understanding of the myriad issues that impact these families, issues that include historical trauma and cultural differences.

MN DHS response

No response

Recommendation 5

As our language often directs our attitudes and behavior, we need to reframe how we think about the offender and the custodial non-offender. Instead of saying, “Mom can't say no to him,” to enforce a restraining order or restriction in their presence in the home, change the language to “He can't hear no.” This places less blame on the victim and more accountability on the perpetrator. Recognize that words matter.”

MN DHS Response

MN DHS supports this recommendation. Language can have an impact on changing traditional ways of viewing domestic violence, which in itself can encourage progress. This can be further supported by ensuring that a perpetrator of violence is the identified alleged offender in reports of child maltreatment, rather than the parent victim.

Workforce Retention and Secondary Trauma Project

“The goal of this project was to review and comment on the induction process for newly hired child protection social workers; it also includes how Hennepin County addresses the risk of worker’s secondary trauma. The overarching goal of the project was to maximize staff retention and in turn provide improved services to families and children involved with child protection.”

The project team accessed multiple sources, both qualitative and quantitative. They interviewed a variety of individuals, most were employed by Hennepin County as social workers, or were experts in their field from the University of Minnesota.

Key Findings and Themes

- a. “Most workers indicated a preference for more experiential, hands on learning to be acquired by shadowing an experienced co-worker, or working on a limited number of cases under close supervision. This suggestion has been acted upon by course designers. They cut the time in the classroom and increased the time working on a caseload.
- b. The Induction process does not have a fixed space or spaces. This makes it difficult to coordinate training with all the presenters and participants.
- c. Both Hennepin County and the MN Department of Human Services require participation in new employee training. The state training has been running with a significant lag due to increased training needs around the state. This has resulted in newly placed Hennepin workers needing to leave their sites after the Hennepin training for nine full days of training over several weeks. This has proved to be stressful for new workers with new clients. See MN DHS response to related recommendation 3 on page 8.
- d. A concern that many [workers] expressed was the lack of other colleagues to consult with due to the flexible workspace model. This is also compounded by the volume of turnover among staff, meaning workers do not get to know those around them to foster relationships and develop support. In addition, 22 percent reported the current office set-up of cubicles is not private enough and is distracting when they overhear phone calls and conversations of colleagues.
- e. Responses also indicate that caseload size, lack of consistency and direction within the department, and constant staffing and supervisory changes are the most difficult and discouraging aspect of the job, not the stress of working with clients. The Hennepin County training includes sections on secondary trauma and burnout. While staff now have clerical help to download and enter documents in the electronic file, the negative change is the decrease in the number of case aides who are assigned to transporting clients. This means that caseworkers now have the added responsibility of transporting clients to events and appointments.

- f. Retention and staff consistency are reported as a significant issue within the department. Several issues are noted as contributing to this, [including] higher pay for new employees which leaves longer-term employees discouraged, caseload size and perceived lack of respect from supervisors, and lack of ability to build relationships with co-workers due to lack of structured office space.”

Recommendations from the Citizen Review Panel Regarding the Workforce Retention and Secondary Trauma Project for Hennepin County

1. Recommendations re: Induction:

- a. “Induction training is a vital part of getting new staff ready for difficult work. Training must be a priority and providing a dedicated space for this to happen is important. Other groups sometimes take priority over induction training scheduling and the result is training is forced to [be] rescheduled and [to] cancel sessions regularly. This sends a message that the training is not vital to the organization.
- b. Continue to assign new staff members one or two cases during induction training to allow them to apply the skills they are learning. This will also allow an opportunity for supervisory staff to observe and provide feedback. (The last session of induction training included this and plans are to continue doing so.)
- c. Continue to provide opportunities for shadowing veteran workers during the induction process. (The last session of induction training has included this and plans are to continue doing so.)
- d. Provide social workers with increased in-service trainings on community resources for clients.
- e. Training on the file review protocol prior to having cases assigned could enhance new worker’s induction experience. This would give them a detailed picture of what [is] required for compliance with all case management expectations and requirements.”

2. Recommendations re: Retention:

- a. “It is understandable that newly hired employees who feel ill-prepared for their tasks and responsibilities results in high turnover rates. This emphasizes the need for a more rigorous induction process. New staff need to have a support system within the agency. Open office space does not encourage or enable new staff to find support. Some units meet regularly to develop a strong team, others do not.
- b. Time and time again we heard it takes three to five years to become skilled in this work. Assigning mentors to all new employees for a period of several years would provide support from a skilled worker that is not the person’s supervisor. This would encourage more frank discussions, allowing new staff to ask questions and share concerns with a more skilled worker.
- c. Feedback that new employees provide should be valued and respected with serious consideration given to changes they recommend.”

3. Recommendation from the Citizen Review Panel Regarding the Workforce Retention and Secondary Trauma Project for MN DHS:

“We recommend that MN DHS eliminate its backlog of training so that new employees complete the majority of the state mandated training during the induction period rather than when they are assigned to their jobs and have a full caseload. This should enhance their feelings of preparedness for the job at hand.”

MN DHS Response to Workforce Retention and Secondary Trauma Project

MN DHS is statutorily required to develop and provide competency-based training to child protection staff, including Foundation training for local child protection workers within the first six months of employment. Minn. Stat. [626.5591, subd. 2](#). The quality of training for child protection workers, supervisors and managers is a critical factor in supporting a high performing child protection system.

MN DHS staff recognizes that for several years maltreatment reports have increased sharply across the state with many county and tribal agencies struggling to add and train new workers to accommodate this increase. As a result, waitlists for Foundation training increased precipitously. MN DHS staff addressed this issue by hiring new trainers, scheduling extra sessions and redesigning the curriculum to require less time out of the office for training. This was accomplished by using a blended learning model with 11 online learning modules to be completed prior to classroom training, and nine days of classroom training. This decreased time away from work sites by six days. The trainings are offered as three-day classes one week per month for three months to allow study time, as well as time in the office each training week.

Below is the number of new workers who completed the new worker Foundation training provided by MN DHS in Calendar Years (CY) 2014 – 2017.

CY 2014

- 39 classroom trainings
- 290 participants

CY 2015

- 50 classroom trainings
- 973 participants

CY 2016

- 36 classroom trainings
- 883 participants

CY 2017

- 46 classroom trainings
- 964 participants

This data does not include the Masters of Social Work students who completed the Foundation training while enrolled as students. This enabled them to join a county or tribal agency when they completed their degree.

Maltreatment reports began to stabilize in 2016 -2017, and new worker training waiting lists for Foundation training have diminished considerably. MN DHS staff has worked to deliver Foundation training to new child protection workers within the first six months of employment, as required. Scheduling training for an individual worker is complicated by their availability. Also, Hennepin County staff calls to schedule workers for Foundation training after induction training provided by the county is completed, which may or may not delay scheduling Foundation training. Ongoing Foundation trainings are scheduled around the metro area and workers can choose to attend the training that best serves their needs as to location and dates. Wait time for Foundation training currently ranges from two to four months in the metro area. Occasionally, it can be up to six months if the worker is unable to schedule due to limitations in their schedule.

Citizen Review Panel Summary of Workforce Retention and Secondary Trauma Project

“Working in child protection is a challenging, difficult and sometimes dangerous job. We were therefore shocked and dismayed at the response to the question “What is the most difficult part of your job?” Only one response named the actual work with clients as the most difficult. The rest of the responses stated caseload size, lack of consistency and lack of direction within the department, and constant staffing and supervisory changes are the most difficult and discouraging aspect of the job. These are things that the county has the ability to change.”

How Effectively is Kinship Care Being Used in Hennepin County Project?

Overview

Panel members are in the process of conducting a two-year project — to be completed at the end of 2018 — examining kinship care. “The specific focus of our project is: Exploring how and how effectively Hennepin County is using kinship care to achieve the goals of safety, permanency, placement stability, reduced disproportionality and racial disparities, and well-being for children in out-of-home placement. We’re also providing insights and ideas from research and best practices from other states to help Hennepin County and Minnesota continue to improve.”

This project closely examines research regarding the goals of out-of-home placement. This information can then compare kin vs non-kin placements and how well they respectively meet identified goals. Areas of comparison include relative safety, placement stability, permanency,

well-being and caregiver challenges. Federal and state laws strongly support placement with kin.

In the first [year] of two year's work on this project, the project team focused on reviewing research and policies, interviews with individuals involved with kinship/relative care placements, and data collection regarding the out-of-home placement of children in Hennepin County. Based on the information, a number of areas of concern were identified. These include licensing requirements, difficulty in recruiting relatives, complexity of the process, linking families to services, system barriers, the disproportionate number of children of color in out-of-home placement, etc.

The project team will do a full analysis of the data in 2018 and include it in the project report.

“In consideration of this state’s ongoing fight for racial equity, the project will continue to examine key questions such as: Are we doing all that we can to ensure that members of 16 marginalized communities are afforded the same opportunity to care for their kin as their Caucasian counterparts? This project will explore the county’s and state’s kinship search, licensing, placement policies and procedures, and their practicality in relation to children of color, who make up the majority of children in out-of-home placement. This project will work to identify ways in which the system intentionally reduces/eliminates barriers to kin placement for all children, regardless of race.”

MN DHS Preliminary Response

While there are no recommendations for this topic because it is a two-year project, MN DHS staff encourages readers to pay special attention to the entire update on this project included in the Hennepin County CRP report. It provides a clear summary of the issue and plans for future work.

MN DHS staff extend thanks to panel members and Hennepin County staff for their work on these projects, and the deep analysis of the results and subsequent recommendations in this report. Panel members have contributed many hours of their time to interview community members, Hennepin County staff, and community professionals regarding the above projects. They have attended trainings and conferences and researched their topics in depth. They have been invited by the county and other organizations to participate in various advisory capacities. Members have also discussed and engaged in various ways to try to recruit a diverse membership on the panel. They have created a rich community resource for Hennepin County that adds value to the county, state, and the child protection system.