



## A Call to Revisit Promising Practices for Staffing Configurations and Cost-Effective Staffing Levels in Child Support Offices

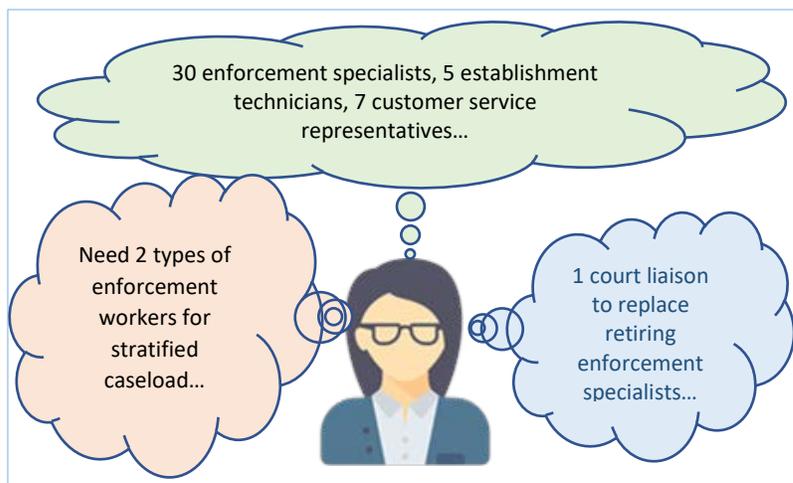
by Jane Venohr, Research Associate/Economist with Center for Policy Research in Denver

Most administrators and managers of child support services spend considerable energy on managing workers. This may include determining the cost-effective staffing levels and configurations needed to provide child support services. Colorado and Virginia have standards for staffing levels dating back to the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, staff may be organized around major child support activities (e.g., establishment, enforcement, and customer service). In another model, staffing may be configured to work cases from cradle to grave (i.e., intake to case closure).

In recent years, various factors have challenged older staffing standards and traditional staffing configurations. The child support community knows more now than before.

For example, using the evaluation findings of

demonstration projects (e.g., early intervention demonstrations<sup>2</sup> and stratified caseload demonstrations<sup>3</sup>) many child support offices have added “early intervention specialists” to their list of job positions or created subcategories of enforcement workers based on their skill set and the skills appropriate to work a particular stratum of enforcement cases (e.g., consistently paying cases, consistently nonpaying cases, or cases in between). Technological changes have reduced the need for some tasks while creating new staffing needs. For example, improved technology has reduced the need for the manual calculation of arrears but increased the need for business analysts. In addition, the recent paradigm shift in child support services focused on interoperability has contributed to changes in staffing needs. Court liaisons and outreach workers were generally unusual positions decades ago, but they are common today.



<sup>1</sup>For example, see Myers, Donald W., Vernon Drew, and Todd W. Areson. (2000). *Virginia Staffing Demonstration: Summary Report*, Division of Child Support Enforcement, Virginia Department of Social Services; and Venohr, Jane, and David Price. (2000). *Updated Colorado Staffing Standards for Child Support Enforcement*, Report to the State of Colorado Division of Child Support Enforcement, Policy Studies Inc., Denver, CO.

<sup>2</sup>For example, see Center for Policy Research. (2009). *Colorado Early Intervention and Simplified Modification Project*. (2009). Report to the Colorado Department of Human Service, Division of Child Support Enforcement. Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement Grant Number 90FD0111.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Policy Studies Inc. (2006). *Findings from the Knox County Stratification Demonstration of Child Support Cases*. Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research. Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement Grant 90FD00120.

The aging workforce exacerbates the need for new information on cost-effective staffing levels and configurations. A seasoned worker's job duties may have evolved over time to better serve parents. Then, say that seasoned worker retires, the job duties of that worker's vacant position will not match what the worker actually did. This can be troublesome if the job position description cannot be easily altered. At the other extreme, if the child support office has some flexibility in job positions but is constrained by budget neutrality, the office may have to wait for attrition of two lower-level staff to create one new, more skilled position (e.g., two administrative assistant positions are replaced by one problem-solving court liaison). In all, precedent, budgets, job descriptions, staffing allocations determined by county commissioners or another governing body, personnel rules, contracts with unions and private vendors, and more constrain staffing levels and configuration.

The bottom line on why the child support community needs to revisit this issue is this: child support administrators and managers need more information about which staffing levels and configurations are the most efficient and effective for achieving the best results. Not only do they need this information for implementation, but also to overcome the barriers to implementing them (e.g., county commissioners who will not allocate more staff to the child support agency without the information). The federal government is mandated to help.

Section 452 of the Social Security Act requires the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a separate organizational unit that, among other things, shall "establish minimum organizational and staffing requirements..." for "State programs for locating noncustodial parents, establishing paternity, and obtaining child support." (See the accompanying textbox for the full excerpt.)

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SEC. 452. [42 U.S.C. 652] (a) The Secretary shall establish, within the Department of Health and Human Services a separate organizational unit, under the direction of a designee of the Secretary, who shall report directly to the Secretary and who shall—

(1) establish such standards for State programs for locating noncustodial parents, establishing paternity, and obtaining child support and support for the spouse (or former spouse) with whom the noncustodial parent's child is living as he determines to be necessary to assure that such programs will be effective;

(2) establish minimum organizational and staffing requirements for State units engaged in carrying out such programs under plans approved under this part;

(3) review and approve State plans for such programs;

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In the early 2000s, I worked on two projects involving staffing standards for child

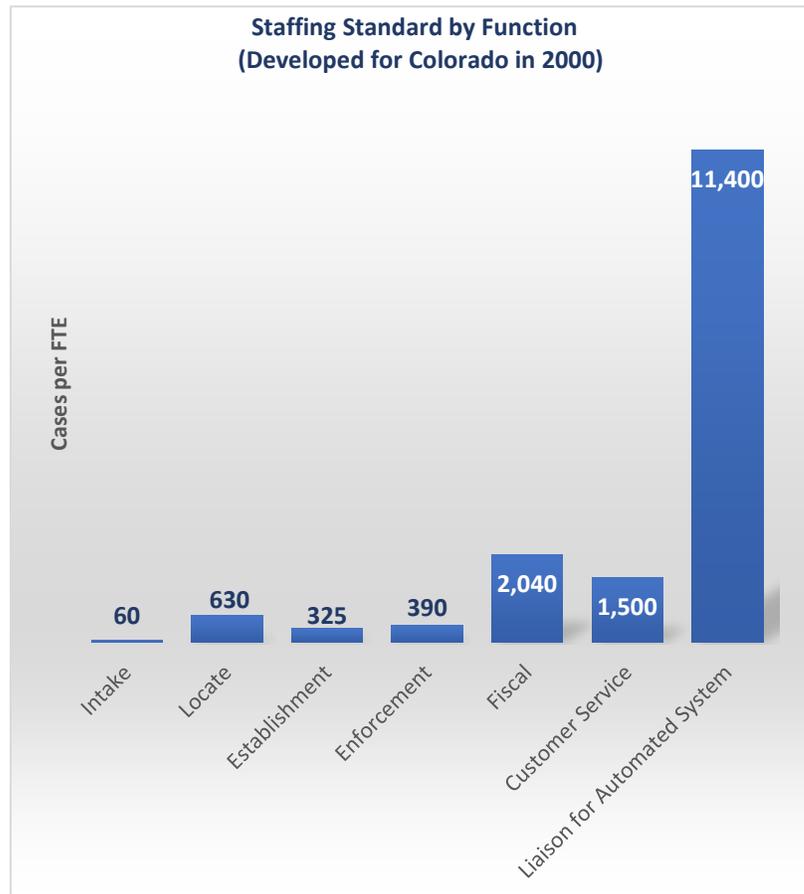
support offices. For the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in 2001, the project developed a preliminary assessment and inventory of state staffing patterns.

The major 2001 findings were as follows:

- Eleven states had staffing tools.

- The most common was a caseload standard of about 400–500 cases per frontline worker.
- Standards were used less frequently than in the past due to the unique caseload characteristics (e.g., the proportion of clients needing paternity services) and the increasing complexity of child support work.
- Child support performance and staffing levels are highly and positively correlated.
- Discussions about staffing levels are limited by how tribunals count and measure staff (e.g., counts of frontline and non-frontline staff, staff employed by the tribunal and those that are contracted, including whether the contracted staff can be converted to a full-time equivalent or is paid by a flat rate for service, such as process servers).

For Colorado, where services are delivered at a county level, I was part of a team that developed the formula for county-level staffing that is summarized in the chart to the right.<sup>4</sup> The chart not only shows the caseload standard per FTE (e.g., 390 cases per enforcement worker) but also how most Colorado child support offices were configured at the time; that is, they had separate units for intake, locate, establishment, enforcement, fiscal, and customer service. As a comparison to caseload sizes today, I have asked child support administrators at conferences what their typical caseload per frontline worker is. The answers among state administrators range from a few hundred to a few thousand cases per frontline FTE. The answer from a



private contractor was approximately 350 to 400 cases, with variations due to the level of automation, efficiency of procedure, and the existence of a statewide call center. I calculated the 2016 caseload per FTE for each state using all FTE (i.e., all staff in state and local IV-D offices, not just frontline staff; staff that are under contract, interagency or cooperative agreement; and, staff in privatized IV-D offices as compiled in the Federal

<sup>4</sup> Venohr and Price (2000), *supra* note 1, p. 50.

Office of Child Support Enforcement's annual report.<sup>5</sup> The results were an average caseload per FTE of 309, a median caseload per FTE of 259, and a range of 113 to 888 cases per FTE among states and territories.

To be clear, I am not suggesting a one-size-fits-all staffing standard or staffing configuration. I am proposing a documentation of current staffing levels and configurations, and identification of the factors that cause differences among offices or needs (e.g., urban or suburban and composition of caseload, including the proportion of arrears only cases). In turn, this information can be used to identify the best practices to deal with the array of these factors and improve child support programs.

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<sup>5</sup>Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE). (2017). *Report to Congress: Preliminary 2016*, Washington, D.C. Tables P-52 and P-81. Retrieved from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/2016\\_preliminary\\_report.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/2016_preliminary_report.pdf).