



# State of New Hampshire

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

129 PLEASANT STREET, CONCORD, NH 03301-3857

603-271-9200 FAX: 603-271-4912 TDD ACCESS: RELAY NH 1-800-735-2964

JEFFREY A. MEYERS  
COMMISSIONER

October 11, 2016

Her Excellency, Governor Margaret Wood Hassan  
State House  
107 North Main Street  
Concord, NH 03301

Dear Governor Hassan:

Enclosed is the Interim Report of the Center for the Support of Families on Assessment Staffing Recommendations for the Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). This interim report was requested by the department prior to the Center's final report to inform the development of the department's Fiscal Year 2018-2019 budget.

The Center for the Support of Families is undertaking a review of child protection activities of DCYF, including its practices, policies and resources, as well as DCYF's capacity to undertake the child protection goals established by the legislature. The Center's work has involved individual case reviews, interviews of DCY staff, families, law enforcement and advocates.

The Department requested this interim report to have available the Center's recommendations regarding child protection assessment staffing levels for budget and planning purposes. The Center's final report will be completed by the end of November.

The Center identifies five principle recommendations in the Interim Report:

1. Hire a sufficient number of assessment social workers to bring the total number of filled positions to 120, with the intent of reducing the current vacancy rate.
2. Hire a sufficient number of assessment supervisors to bring the total number of filled positions to 24, with the intent of reducing the current vacancy rate.
3. Resolve the current backlog of overdue assessments by assessing and closing open assessments that can be safely closed, and opening those where harm or threats of harm exist so that services can be provided through staff other than assessment workers.
4. Enforce the 60-day policy time frame for completing assessments on an ongoing basis so that a new backlog does not accrue; and
5. Make deliberate efforts to provide for assessment staff well-being in order to reduce turnover and absences due to work demands.

In anticipation of this interim report, I have already initiated filling 17 case assessment worker and 5 case assessment supervisor positions from existing vacant positions outside of DCYF. These positions would increase the total authorized caseworker positions to 102, which is still short of the 120 positions recommended by the Center for Support of Families in its Interim Report. The department's List of Prioritized Needs, which accompanies the department's Efficiency Budget, contains a placeholder for additional required positions.

Her Excellency, Governor Margaret Wood Hassan

Page 2

October 11, 2016

These 22 positions are in addition to 21 positions required to implement the interim plan for 24/7 coverage, which the department brought forward earlier this year and is in the process of recruiting for implementation.

The department looks forward to the completion of the Center's full report and to working with all interested parties in addressing the resource and other issues which are critical to child protection in New Hampshire.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Meyers  
Commissioner

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Joseph D. Kenney  
The Honorable Christopher Pappas  
The Honorable Colin Van Ostern  
The Honorable Christopher Sununu  
The Honorable David Wheeler  
The Honorable Shawn Jasper, Speaker, NH House of Representatives  
The Honorable Chuck W. Morse, President, NH State Senate  
The Honorable Neal M. Kurk  
The Honorable Jeanie L. Forrester  
The Honorable David R. Boutin  
The Honorable Lucy M. Weber  
The Honorable Frank R. Kotowski  
The Honorable Andy Sanborn  
The Honorable Jeff Woodburn  
The Honorable Stephen J. Shurtleff  
Lorraine Bartlett, Director, DCYF  
Maureen Ryan, Director, Division of Human Services

**Interim Report to the Office of the Governor  
State of New Hampshire  
Assessment Staffing Analysis and Recommendations**

This is an interim report on one area of analysis by the Center for the Support of Families (CSF) in its assessment of child protection activities carried out by the Division of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) in New Hampshire. This section is intended to represent our preliminary findings and recommendations on *staffing of assessment staff for DCYF*, just one aspect of our broader review. This information will be incorporated into our final report to be delivered by the end of November 2016, which will also address practice-related findings and recommendations and provide a broader context for understanding our concerns about staffing.

CSF's assessment of the New Hampshire child welfare agency has been limited to reviewing the practices, policies, and resources related to child safety and risk of maltreatment, and does not include a comprehensive review of all facets of DCYF's work with children and families. In addition to evaluating practice through the review of randomly selected cases of children and families served by DCYF, which represents the bulk of our assessment, we proposed to review the capacity of DCYF to carry out its intended goals to protect children who come to its attention. With this in mind, one of the research questions we proposed to address is the following: *Do systemic factors and DCYF's organizational capacity support the achievement of positive safety and risk outcomes for children?*

This interim report addresses a specific sub-question related to the question above, as follows: *Are identified DCYF resources adequate to support child protection work by staff in the field and DCYF's attorneys?* This interim report focuses solely on resources specific to staffing recommendations in the area of assessing incoming reports of suspected child maltreatment.

## Findings

With regard to current staffing levels of assessment social workers, several points are relevant from our evaluation, as follows:

*Assessments often remain open far longer than DCYF's policy permits, creating a large backlog of incomplete assessments for a limited work force to carry.*

During our case review, it became readily apparent that social workers were generally responding to incoming reports of alleged maltreatment timely, but that the assessments were



remaining open without a disposition well past DCYF's 60-day policy time frame for completing assessments. For example, of the 280 assessments we reviewed in the largest of the three population groups in our sample,<sup>1</sup> 268 (95.7%) of the assessments were initiated within the 72-hour policy timeframe. However, of the assessments that were completed by the end of our case review activities, only 20.7% were completed within the 60-day policy timeframe.

Most stakeholders we interviewed referred to the very high caseloads of assessment workers, and to the workers' need to move quickly from one new assessment to another. In addition, approximately half of the interviewed stakeholders directly related the caseload problem to staff turnover. We heard from some social workers that they had caseloads as high as 70 open assessments, and of the 33 social worker survey respondents responsible for assessments, the average current monthly caseload was 53.85 (range 8 to 134). Thirty-six survey respondents responsible for assessments added that the average number of new assessments newly *assigned* to them each month was 15.03 (range 4 to 23).

Social worker survey respondents were asked to identify the top three reasons why assessments are overdue. The overwhelming majority of respondents (39 of 48, 81.3%) identified workload as the leading cause of overdue assessments, with the next most common response being the need for collateral contacts (16 of 48, 33.3%).

Supervisor survey respondents were asked when approving assessments, how important certain factors were in their decision to approve or not approve the assessment. The length of time the assessment had been open was the lowest rated of the 9 factors noted, with no survey respondents indicating it was critical to their approval. Nine of 29 (31.03%) respondents to the question indicated it was an important factor, 11 (37.93%) indicated it was somewhat important, and the remaining 9 (31.03%) indicated it was not important. We do not disagree that length of time an assessment has been open should not be a primary factor in an approval decision, certainly not when considering the thoroughness of the assessment.

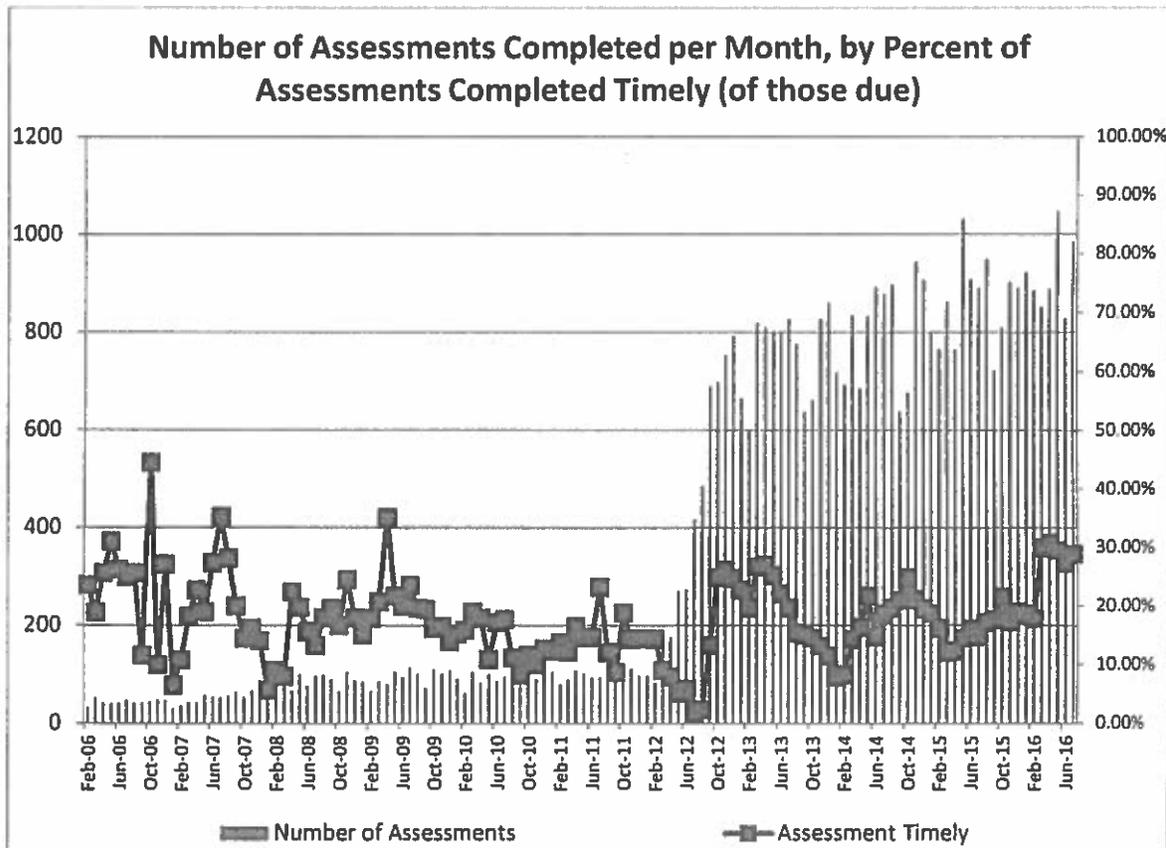
The failure to routinely complete assessments timely is a historical issue, and is not just reflective of the recent dramatic increase in the number of assessments each month, as illustrated in **Figure 1** below. We reviewed aggregate data on all assessments completed each month dating from February 2006 through July 2016. While the number of assessments completed each

---

<sup>1</sup> We reviewed cases in three population groups: children not in custody of the Division who were the subjects of reports of maltreatment made to DCYF during a defined "sampling period," children in open cases served by DCYF who were the subject of reports of maltreatment made to DCYF during the same sampling period, and children in open cases served by DCYF for whom DCYF did not receive reports of maltreatment during the sampling period. The numbers cited here refer to the first and largest population group noted above.

month increased dramatically beginning in June 2012,<sup>2</sup> the percent of assessments completed timely has remained the same, around 15-30%.

**Figure 1**  
**Number of Assessments Completed Timely per Month**



Having assessments remain open for extended periods of time without a disposition is a problem for several reasons:

- It is a liability for the agency, suggesting that active work is being done on assessments, when in fact data show weeks and months go by with little or no activity.
- If subsequent reports come in during an open assessment, which did occur frequently in our case review, the lack of a proper disposition on the prior report may affect the priority

<sup>2</sup> We are unsure of the cause of the increase, although we believe this corresponds roughly with the implementation of the New Hampshire Integrated Assessment (NHIA) process and Solution Based Casework (SBC).

designation of the new report. For example, if there is not a prior founded report the new incoming report may receive a lower priority rating for response.

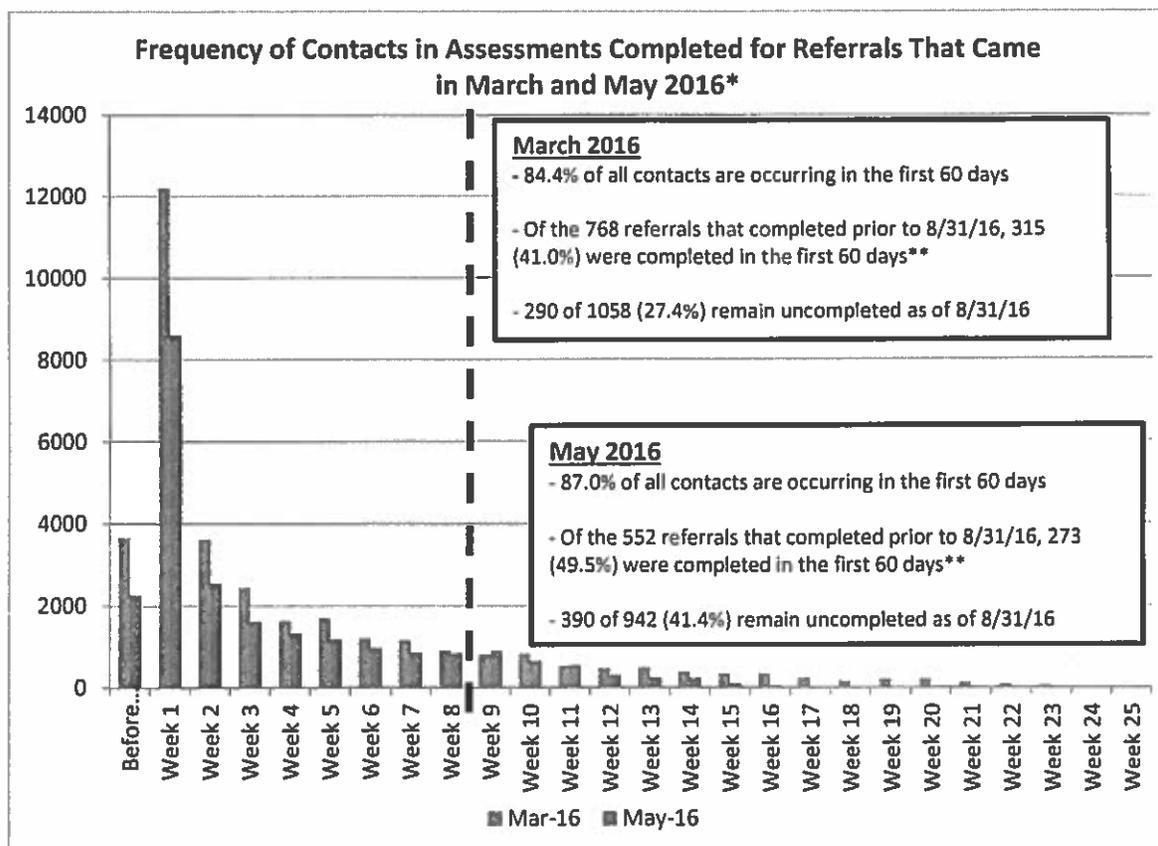
- The lack of a timely disposition may delay the families understanding of the need to obtain services to prevent re-occurrence or their accessibility to services if the agency is responsible for making referrals upon disposition.

*In the absence of a strong voluntary services program, whereby children and families at risk may receive voluntary services short of removing the children from the home, there is some belief that social workers keep assessments open in order to monitor risk of harm to children.*

We heard from some stakeholders that social workers may leave assessments open because of concerns about harm or risk of harm to children and, in the absence of a voluntary services program in the State, workers may use an extended assessment period to check on the children's safety. However, while that intent may be there, the lack of activity in the cases after the initial assessment contacts did not indicate ongoing work with the family after initial assessment activities, as noted in the chart below. We believe that a more plausible explanation for the extended assessment periods is that social workers must attend to so many incoming reports that they simply do not have the time to complete all the processes needed to make a disposition and close the assessments timely.

Our analysis of the case review findings confirmed that most of the case activity occurred in the early stages of the assessment, typically within the first 30 or 60 days, and that few contacts with the families occurred in the remaining months that the assessments were open. This point is illustrated in **Figure 2** below, which addresses reports accepted for an assessment in two separate months (March and May 2016) and have since been completed. As noted in the chart, most of the contacts occurred during the first eight weeks, with relatively few contacts thereafter even though the assessments remained open on the Division's caseloads. More than 80% of contacts for both the March and May assessments occurred within the first eight weeks, and two-third to three-fourths of the contacts occurred within the first four weeks.

**Figure 2**  
**Frequency of Contacts in Completed Assessments from March and May 2016**

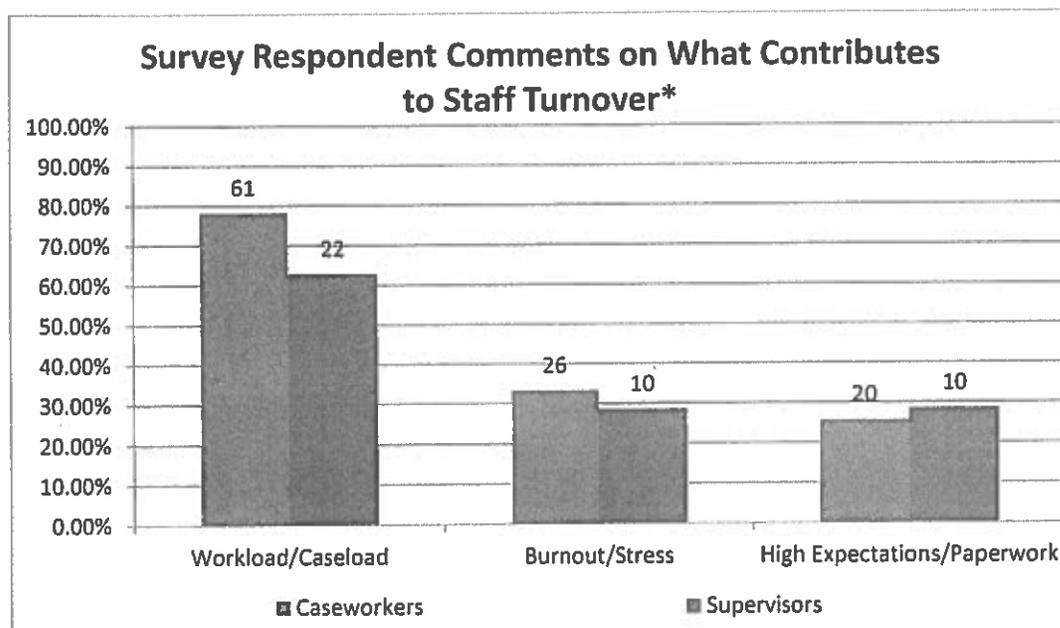


\*Note: most assessments had multiple contacts in a given week, and the graph represents all of them  
 \*\*Note: While this analysis only looked at completed assessments, 60 days has since passed so all of the assessments that were not completed were not timely as well, which will decrease the percentage of timely completions for these two months of referrals.

***Frequent staff turnover among assessment social workers contributes to the problem of maintaining an adequate assessment work force.***

Caseworker and supervisor survey respondents were asked to identify the factors that contribute the most to staff turnover. For survey respondents, workload and caseload issues represented the overwhelming majority of reasons cited for staff turnover, followed by burnout and stress and high expectations/paperwork. **Figure 3** below illustrates these responses:

**Figure 3**  
**Survey Responses Regarding Staff Turnover**



\*Note: the 78 caseworker and 35 supervisor respondents to this question were allowed to identify as many reasons as they saw fit, so the counts are duplicative

***Regardless of the backlog of incomplete assessments and other reasons for staffing concerns, DCYF does not have enough staff hired, trained, and deployed on-the-ground to keep up with the inflow of reports of child maltreatment.***

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), a long-time nationally recognized organization representing both public and private child welfare agencies in the country, provides recommended caseload staffing standards in child welfare. Many public and private agencies around the country rely upon CWLA standards as the primary set of expectations for staffing child welfare programs and, indeed, some settlement agreements resulting from class action lawsuits brought against many public child welfare systems refer to CWLA standards as remedies in the agreements.

The CWLA standards, which we believe to be reasonable, recommend no more than 12 active assessments per social worker at any time. Further, the standards recommend no more than 5



social workers be assigned to a single supervisor.<sup>3</sup> We are relying upon these standards in evaluating the New Hampshire system and in making our recommendations.

We had access to staffing numbers for the eight-month period of December 2015 to July 2016 showing 84-85 assessment worker positions allocated. However, on average for the eight-month period, almost 28 of those positions monthly were either vacant or staff occupying the positions were not available to conduct assessments due to being in training or on leave. That means that, on average, DCYF has a vacancy rate of about one-third of its assessment social workers, and that somewhere between 54 and 59 social workers are covering the work of 84-85 positions monthly and, as noted below, 84-85 filled/on the ground positions is insufficient to cover the amount of incoming assessments.

For the one year period of July 2015 to June 2016, the number of incoming assessments requiring an assessment averaged over 873 reports per month. For an average of about 56 available social workers to conduct these assessments, that means each worker is responsible for an average of between 15 and 16 new incoming reports monthly<sup>4</sup>. The previously noted CWLA recommended standard for assessment workers is 12 *open assessments* at any point in time. With such a high number of new assignments each month and a 60-day policy window to complete them, it is not difficult to see how the backlog of incomplete assessments has accumulated. This leads us to the following conclusions:

- **Ninety assessment social workers trained and deployed on the ground each month are needed to keep up with the volume of incoming child maltreatment reports.**

We used DCYF's data to compute what we believe to be an appropriate number of assessment social workers needed to maintain the standard and carry out assessment activities within DCYF's policy time frame of 60 days. We used the average number of incoming assessments monthly for the 12 month period noted above (874.33, with a standard deviation of 87.3912). We also used the average length of time that social workers were able to complete an assessment *if they completed it within the 60-day policy time frame* (36.74 days, with a standard deviation of 7.1196 days). We did not use the actual time to complete assessments for obvious reasons, since so many of them exceed the 60-day time frame, often by several months and our desire is to recommend what is needed to conduct thorough assessments within DCYF's prescribed time frames.

---

<sup>3</sup> Child Welfare League of America. *CWLA Standards of Excellence for Services to Abused or Neglected Children and their Families, Revised 1999*. Accessed at: <http://66.227.70.18/newsevents/news030304cwlacacasead.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Geographic distribution may vary on this number.

When we applied these numbers to a maximum case load of 12 open assessments, we determined that 90 is the minimum number of assessment social workers needed. This number assumes that there will always be a minimum of 90 social workers and 18 supervisors deployed on the ground and conducting assessments every month. However, simply allocating that number of social workers will not ensure availability of all the staff given DCYF's high vacancy rate among assessment workers.

- **The agency's persistent vacancy rate among assessment social workers greatly affects the number of staff needed to ensure the deployment of 90 on-the-ground workers monthly.**

The agency's vacancy rate among assessment social workers must be factored into our recommendations of the numbers of staff needed. As noted, New Hampshire has a vacancy rate of approximately 33% each month among assessment social workers. We find this percentage to be exceedingly high. For example, the University of Southern Maine reported that some vacancy rates for public child welfare workers were significantly higher than 9%, as compared to those of other state and local government workers (1.5%).<sup>5</sup> The Child Welfare League of America reported that child welfare position vacancy rates often surpass 12%.<sup>6</sup> A 2001 survey of 43 state and 48 county child welfare agencies reported an average annual worker turnover rate of 22% and a vacancy rate of 7%.<sup>7</sup> We did find a 2007 study citing child welfare vacancy rates nearly as high as New Hampshire, while calling for improvements in this area. The study cited the statewide child welfare vacancy rate at 31% with turnover rates highest in case management and investigations.<sup>8</sup>

The vacancy rate includes the following on average for the eight month period of staffing data provided:

- Of vacant positions, almost half were due to workers being off the job and in training which may possibly be attributed to a high turnover among assessment social

---

<sup>5</sup> University of Southern Maine. *Recruitment and Retention of a Qualified Workforce: The Foundation of Success (webinar)*, 2008. Accessed at: [http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/tele\\_pastdetail.htm#april29](http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/tele_pastdetail.htm#april29)

<sup>6</sup> Child Welfare League of America. *Child Welfare Workforce*. Research Roundup. September 2002. Accessed at: <http://66.227.70.18/programs/r2p/rtnnews0209.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> American Humane Association. *The Study of Workload in Child Protective and Child Welfare Services*. Protecting Children. Vol. 23, No. 3, 2008. Accessed at: [http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_pdf/workforce-estimation.pdf](http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdf/workforce-estimation.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Children's Resource Program. *Child Welfare Worker Retention*. Children's Service Practice Notes, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 2007. Accessed at: [http://www.practicenotes.org/vol12\\_no1/cspnv12n1.pdf](http://www.practicenotes.org/vol12_no1/cspnv12n1.pdf)

workers. Although we cannot substantiate that as the reason, the American Humane Society cites 4.2 hours away from the job for training as a monthly average<sup>9</sup>;

- Of vacant positions, over a fourth were due to workers being on leave which, may be attributed at least in part to the demands of the job, but which likely also includes other forms of leave, including maternity leave; and
- Of vacant positions, nearly a fourth was due to positions being unfilled.

When we factor in a 33% average monthly vacancy rate, the number of assessment social workers needed to ensure that 90 workers are deployed on the ground and conducting assessments in any month is adjusted to 134 social workers<sup>10</sup> and 27 supervisors (134 workers/5 workers per supervisor) if the current vacancy rate holds. This number is more than twice the current number of social work staff available for conducting assessments monthly.

- **The vacancy rate may be mitigated by hiring and supporting additional assessment social workers.**

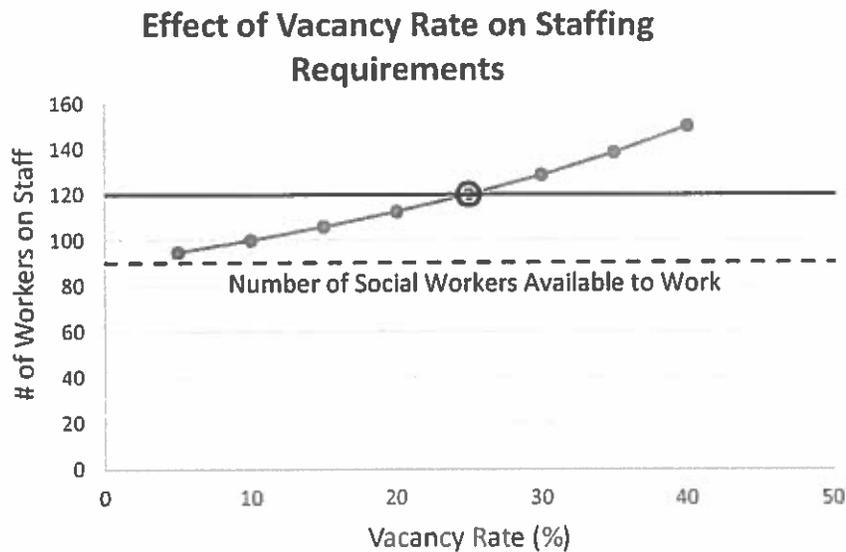
As noted above, we believe the current vacancy rate among assessment social workers is unusually high. Since comments from many people that we interviewed indicate that absences are due in large part to (a) high staff turnover resulting in new workers continually being in training and not on the job, and (b) medical leave that many believe is attributable to the demands of the job, we believe that New Hampshire has an opportunity to decrease the vacancy rate by adding a sufficient number of staff to reduce the demands of the job and keep more staff from turning over and/or being absent due to possible work-related stress. If New Hampshire can reduce the average monthly vacancy rate to at least 25%, and we believe that is possible, especially since nearly a fourth of the vacancy rate is due to unfilled positions, that would mean that 120 social workers and 24 supervisors would be needed to ensure the deployment of 90 on-the-ground assessment workers monthly. If further reductions in the vacancy rate can be achieved, fewer workers will be needed, as illustrated in Figure 4 below:

---

<sup>9</sup>American Humane Association, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The formula we used to compute this is: 90 minimum workers is equal to 67% on-the-ground staff averaged monthly (100% less the 33% vacancy rate) multiplied by  $n$ . ( $90 = .67 \times N$ ,  $N = 90/.67$ ,  $N = 134$ )

**Figure 4**  
**Effect of Vacancy Rate on Staffing Requirements**



## Recommendations

Our recommendations, based on the foregoing, are focused on the need for DCYF to obtain an adequately staffed and trained assessment work force because that step is foundational to DCYF being able to protect children who come to its attention. While our final report will recommend additional improvements in the quality of the assessment process, we believe that it will be necessary to have an adequate work force in place before assessment staff can devote attention to making needed improvements. Our recommendations are as follows:

***Hire a sufficient number of assessment social workers to bring the total number of filled positions to 120, with the intent of reducing the current vacancy rate to at least 25%.*** Without a commitment to address and reduce the current very high vacancy rate, 120 workers will be insufficient to cover the incoming monthly workload. We do not recommend hiring up to 134 workers based on the current vacancy rate, since we believe the vacancy rate can be reduced with the recommended additional hires and the implementation of our recommendations noted below.

***Hire a sufficient number of assessment supervisors to bring the total number of filled positions to 24, with the intent of reducing the current vacancy rate.*** Although not discussed in this interim report, we will include in our final report concerns about using supervisors as

trainers, in the absence of dedicated trainers for Division staff. With this in mind, if DCYF continues to use supervisors as Division trainers, there may be a need to add additional supervisors so that there is assurance that there will always be one supervisor available to provide supervision and guidance for every five assessment workers.

***Resolve the current backlog of overdue assessments by assessing and closing open assessments that can be safely closed, and opening those where harm or threats of harm exist so that services can be provided through staff other than assessment workers.*** If newly hired staff begin the rotation of receiving new incoming reports with the current backlog in place, 90 on-the-ground workers will not be able to meet policy time frames for a very long time, i.e., years. Therefore, our recommendation is for DCYF to develop a strategy to safely resolve the current backlog of incomplete assessments as an initial step. There are various ways to do this, for example, new staff could be assigned to resolve the backlog before receiving new reports, or a special effort using other staff could be deployed. If currently backlogged assessments need ongoing work and/or services to ensure child safety/manage risk, the dispositions and follow-up actions should reflect that.<sup>11</sup> The goal is to get to a situation as quickly and safely as possible where the assessment work force is carrying no more than 12 open assessments and to maintain that level of work.

***Enforce the 60-day policy time frame for completing assessments on an ongoing basis so that a new backlog does not accrue.*** Unless there are extenuating circumstances, where more than 60 days is needed to complete the assessment in a high quality manner, supervisors and managers should begin to monitor and enforce the 60-day completion time frame.

***Make deliberate efforts to provide for assessment staff well-being in order to reduce turnover and absences due to work demands.*** The addition of a substantial number of staff, the elimination of the current backlog, and a policy-compliant flow of assessments through the process have the potential to contribute to measurable improvements in staff well-being and the resulting vacancy rate. However, DCYF should consider additional methods to ensure that employee well-being is ensured, such as ensuring that assessment staff are fully supported and have the time needed to do their jobs well, have access to skilled supervision, and have access to resources to help them deal with the very difficult situations in children's lives that they must confront daily. Assessment staff are among the most critical in the State for ensuring the health and safety of New Hampshire's most vulnerable children, and they cannot carry out that mission if their own needs for well-being are unmet.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is a more complex issue than we are describing in this interim report, but we will elaborate in the final report.

