

**CHILDREN'S  
ADMINISTRATION  
SOCIAL WORKER  
QUALIFICATIONS**

**PROPOSED FINAL REPORT**

**JANUARY 9, 2008**



STATE OF WASHINGTON

JOINT LEGISLATIVE AUDIT AND  
REVIEW COMMITTEE

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# Report Summary

## Children's Administration Social Worker Qualifications Study Mandate

The Legislature directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to conduct an analysis of the qualifications required to become a Social Worker within the Department of Social and Health Services' (DSHS) Children's Administration, and to compare these qualifications to the qualifications used by other states for equivalent categories of social workers.

Legislators also expressed an interest in research related to child welfare worker job qualifications and asked for information about the education and experience of current Social Workers in the Children's Administration.

## Social Worker Job Classifications and Qualifications

DSHS has four Social Worker classifications. Within the Children's Administration, the Social Worker 1 and 2 classifications are largely unused, the Social Worker 3s are 76 percent of all the Social Workers, and 14 percent are in the supervisory Social Worker 4 classification.

A Master's in Social Work (MSW) or an allied field is desired at each level, but is not required. A Bachelor's degree in a social or human services field is the minimum requirement. The amount of experience depends on the classification level, but case-carrying social workers are required to have at least two years of experience, one of which consists of full-time paid experience assessing risk and safety to children and providing direct family-centered practice services.

## Current Children's Administration's Social Workers

Based on data supplied by DSHS, of the Social Workers 1, 2, and 3s in the Children Administration:

- 30 percent have been hired in the past two years, and half have less than five years experience in the Children's Administration;
- 42 percent have some education beyond a Bachelor's degree;
- 15 percent have Master's degrees in social work or allied fields.

Of the supervisory level Social Worker 4s in the Children's Administration:

- 84 percent have been at the Children's Administration for more than five years, but half have less than two years of supervisory experience within the Children's Administration;
- 59 percent have some education beyond a Bachelor's degree; and
- 42 percent have a Master's degree in social work or an allied human services field.

## **Comparing Washington's Job Qualifications with Other States and National Standards**

JLARC compared Washington's Social Worker job qualifications against those in other states and against national standards. We found that Washington is one of 21 states requiring a Bachelor's degree in social work or a related field. Most of the remaining states accept Bachelor's degrees in any field. Only the District of Columbia and two other states require an MSW for their supervisory level staff.

In 2001, the Legislature directed the Children's Administration to seek accreditation. DSHS is using the Council on Accreditation, as are other states seeking accreditation, as the accrediting body. Forty of the Children's Administration field offices have met a sufficient portion of the Council's standards to be confirmed as meeting the standards. However, preliminary results show that 15 of these field offices did not fully meet the specific standards focused on educational attainment. In particular, many Social Worker 4s do not have the required MSW or comparable degree.

## **Conclusions**

In our analysis of the Children's Administration Social Worker positions and similar positions in other states, and in a review of child welfare literature, we found:

- Very little research addressing child welfare worker job qualifications and no research showing a clear, direct connection between child welfare worker qualifications and child outcomes. We did find studies indicating that degrees in social work can help with staff retention which might improve child outcomes. However, the design and/or rigor of these studies are not sufficient to draw solid conclusions that a social work degree should be a job requirement.
- There is little in the literature about what constitutes a good balance of education and experience in job qualifications. Further, there is great variation in approaches states have taken.
- Washington State's Social Worker job qualifications are similar or more stringent than the child welfare worker job qualifications required in most other states.
- Washington State's Social Worker job qualifications have not been revised in 17 years, but based on data reported to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services there has been improvement in child outcomes over this time period. Experts believe that policy decisions regarding caseload and frequency of child visitations are more significant for child outcomes.
- The educational attainment of Children's Administration Social Workers, primarily for the Social Worker 3s, has been steadily increasing in recent years which may be attributable to the Child Welfare Training and Advancement Program and recruitment efforts.

## **Finding 1**

The Council on Accreditation's human resources standard for supervisors requires a Master's in Social Work or comparable field. While this standard exceeds the current DSHS job qualifications for a Social Worker 4, the Legislature has mandated that the Children's Administration become accredited. Based on DSHS supplied data, only about 42 percent of the supervisory Social Worker 4s meet the Council's standard.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Department of Social and Health Services Children's Administration should develop a plan and a timeline for ensuring that they continue to make progress on the standards established by the Council on Accreditation concerning the required qualifications for Social Worker job classifications with supervisory duties.

## **Finding 2**

In conducting this study, we encountered problems with the accuracy of human resources data, specifically in the area of Social Worker 4 educational attainment. The data had not been kept current and the Children's Administration conducted a manual update of the Social Worker 4 educational attainment. Accurate data regarding the educational attainment of Social Workers within the Children's Administration is important management information to help meet accreditation standards and target advanced educational opportunities.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Department of Social and Health Services should improve and maintain the accuracy of the Children's Administration human resources data for Social Workers, especially in the area of educational attainment.

