



## SB 820 - Child Abuse and Neglect - Investigations – Timeliness Support as Amended

HB1248 Child Abuse and Neglect – Investigations – Timeliness is intended to more closely monitor the Department and improve timeliness of case closing.

Child protective services caseworkers are first responders with tremendous responsibility. Equipped with an iPad and a phone, and armed only with a report that a child was maltreated, these committed child welfare professionals meet with families in their homes and in their communities to keep children safe. No surprise, families are typically complicated and messy; oftentimes a report is simply a symptom of serious dysfunction and a desperate plea for help.

We polled some of our child welfare members about the chronically late data entries to close investigations. The number one reason was a sufficient number of *filled* casework and supervisor positions. With vacancy rates as high as 35%, one administrator admitted that the front-end intervention and safety work takes precedence over the back-end case closing documentation and CJAMS data entry. For caseworkers, assuring the child’s safety resonates as the substance of the work and the overwhelming priority.

There are also other bona fide reasons for delayed case closures in CJAMS, including an assessment that the family is not quite ready – an important appointment a few days away, the start of the school year or an upcoming vacation, a significant change in the family, a community incident, and so on. Sometimes the reason is as simple as the supervisor being ill for a few days, which delays the approval necessary to timely closing. Caseworkers, too, have unexpected family or personal emergencies, illnesses, and vacations. Finally, the challenges posed by glitches in the state’s child welfare electronic system can mean entering notes and other information multiple times.

What we also learned is that like in other human services, the pandemic has taken its toll. The result has been mass staff departures like those seen in other human service agencies. Currently there are large local departments with a significant casework and supervisor vacancy rate.

We were pleased to learn that DHS proactively began issuing frequent reports of tardy closings to local departments and discussing explanations. DHS has the capacity to produce an electronic report and the LDSS doesn’t, meaning that HB1248 would require local departments to maintain hand counts. Moreover, requiring that caseworkers drowning in a sea of documentation and mandates complete yet another report as a solution is counterintuitive.

We appreciate Sen. Lam’s willingness to work with us to address some of the initial concerns we had with SB 820. As amended, SB 820 improves tracking of incidents where there are delays in making initial contact with an allegedly abused child. The bill also requires the Department to conduct a workload study.

Rather than putting the onus for collecting data about timely case closings on the local departments, we suggest an amendment that will shift the responsibility to the Department of Human Services for collecting and sharing data at defined intervals. Given that DHS has the capacity to produce that report and has already implemented a tracking system, that strategy simply makes sense. DHS can also provide a report with a compilation of explanations from local departments. We agree with DHS’s amendment to allow the bill to sunset.

Finally, the only way we are ever going to be able to fully address the needs of children in our child welfare system is with a significant increased investment in staffing. Below is a suggested amendment to follow up on 2021 budget language that sought to require DHS to complete a desperately needed workload study. The 2021 budget included a requirement that DHS complete a workload study based on the recommendations of the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). DHS reported back to the committee that they were unable to complete the workload study because CWLA hadn’t yet published workload study standards. This is correct by CWLA recommends that state’s look at “existing examples of states and local agencies that have implemented strategies to reduce caseloads and manage workloads.”<sup>i</sup> Several states have completed high-quality workload studies but Maryland has not. We strongly believe that Maryland should use the examples from other states to develop and complete a child welfare workload study.

Additionally, we would like to make the following workforce suggestions:

1. We need to declare a staffing emergency and bring together a cadre of people who can think ‘outside the box’ and develop a plan to recruit and hire the best trained and educated caseworkers. Although studies show that social workers – licensed BSW and preferably, MSW – are the best prepared to do the work, only two local departments have all MSW workforce.

2. Given the vulnerability of the population and challenges inherent in the work, we ought to want the most highly trained and educated workforce. Standards are hard to maintain, easy to lower, and nearly impossible to raise. We do not recommend repeating the legislators’ mandate at the end of the state’s hiring freeze to hire anybody or that staff will be hired for the local departments.

3. We need to contract with a recruitment specialist to quickly develop a sophisticated recruitment campaign emphasizing use of social media. Looking like a stodgy government bureaucracy isn’t appealing to potential candidates.

4. A hire-on bonus has to be considered. DHS is competing with programs paying as much as \$10,000. A retention bonus can encourage retention by rewarding longevity.

5. The capacity of the Human Resources offices in local departments to respond to the staffing crisis has to be assessed and remedied when additional expertise and/or staff are necessary to process applications and hire quickly.

6. While at one time, local departments could recruit staff and certify their eligibility for the classification, they now are forced to rely solely on lists. Finding some efficiencies to bring qualified staff on quickly is critical, especially for candidates who may be interviewing several places and eager to accept the first offer.

7. Long-term, we need to consider options for tuition assistance opportunities for MSW and BSW students interested in specializing in child welfare, for example by greatly expanding the IV-E child welfare training program.

8. Also more long-term, to encourage the advanced social work licensure required to become a supervisor, like the boost in salary for an MSW who becomes licensed, another step should be developed for those who earn their advanced clinical licensure, the LCSW-C.

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