

Chairs Nosse and Beyer, members of the committee,

For the record my name is Kelly Paluso, and I am an SEIU 503 member. I am a Child Welfare Permanency case worker in Portland at the Midtown Branch. I have been doing this work for 12 years. I continue to work in child welfare because I love the children and families I work with and appreciate being able to help them at one of the most difficult times in their lives. I enjoy the ongoing challenges this kind of work brings as I feel like I am able to learn something new on a regular basis. I also have a true love and appreciation for my coworkers and supportive supervisor. Without them, I would not have survived this long.

It is hard to describe a typical day in child welfare. You may go to work with a plan of home visits, court hearings, meetings and desk time to get all our paperwork done. But you always have to be prepared for the fact that any given day may not turn out how you planned. Emergencies happen regularly in this work, and most emergencies take days if not weeks to get to a manageable place. The hardest part about dealing with the day-to-day tasks at work and emergencies is the lack of time to get it all done. In my 12 years at child welfare I have never checked everything off my to-do list. I have gotten close before, but there is always something to be done. Some to-do's are more important than others, so you learn to prioritize.

Currently my to-do list is the longest it has ever been. I am a part-time employee and have 14 children on my caseload from 11 cases right now. That is equivalent to 28 children or 22 cases if I was full-time. Current staffing models suggest 11.5 cases for permanency workers, and mine is nearly double that. I continue to prioritize as much as possible, but, with caseloads this high, things are going to get missed and deadlines are not going to be met. Currently, I have concerns about paperwork delays and about a lack of available service referrals. I even have concerns about the month of February in general, because it is a week shorter than the other months and doesn't provide enough time for me to see all the children on my caseload without working extra hours and sacrificing time with my own family. Today, I have concerns that my own child is home sick with the flu and I had to cancel 3 home visits and a meeting to be home with her, and I have no idea how or when to see those kids before the 28th with the demands from managing the rest of my caseload this month.

On a regular basis I see caseworkers sacrifice vacations, time with their families, lunch breaks and so many other things in their lives for the sake of the children and families on their caseloads. How can you not? These children and their families need our help so desperately, but it comes at a cost and that is why DHS is struggling to retain and hire workers.

DHS also struggles to retain workers because they implement new systems without considering the already high caseloads of child welfare workers. For example, mandatory trainings have quadrupled since when I started 12 years ago. There are so many trainings, and often we are only given a month or two to complete them.

Another cumbersome new system is the new HR system Workday. While implementing this new program seems like a good idea, did you know we now have 3 systems to enter our time every

month? I can only enter time-off requests in Workday, so when I need sick leave or vacation I make the request in Workday and then finalize it in ePayroll later. However, if I need unscheduled straight time or overtime that is requested in Outlook and then finalized in ePayroll. So many things could be simpler to allow us more time to do our core work, but they're often clunky and end up taking more of our time than they should for basic administrative functions.

DHS is also still requiring workload surveys. They have been going on for months and come up multiple times in one week, so with everything else, we have to find the time to complete surveys for DHS to understand how swamped we are.

If child welfare had enough funding it would mean so much more than appropriate workloads for workers. It would also mean children that we can assure the safety of on a regular basis. It would mean more access to services for the clients and children we serve. It would mean that I would have the time to appropriately work the Oregon Safety Model. It would mean I would have the time to research services for clients or meet with them more to ensure I am meeting their appropriate needs. It would mean that there would be more social service assistants available to cover the multiple visits a week that should be provided to clients, but that are also often being court ordered. It would mean that I would be able to take a sick day with my own child and know that there is a team of skilled people at the office able to cover for my absence without it causing a hardship for my clients or any worry about what my absence is doing to my already stressed and overworked co-workers. It would mean that I could attend not only mandatory trainings, but trainings that will expand my own professional development and knowledge about how to best help my clients. It would mean that when a week-long trial is scheduled it doesn't feel like a major challenge to cover (because how can I possibly be away from my regular duties and other clients for a whole week?). It would mean retaining skilled employees and being able to recruit a top-notch workforce, because while people know that the work they are stepping into is hard, they will also know they it will be manageable and they will be supported. Finally, it would demonstrate that the State of Oregon values the work that child welfare workers do, and that we value the children we serve and the families who need our help during one of the hardest times in their lives.

In the 12 years I have been doing this job, right now is one of the worst times I have experienced in terms of high caseloads, unrealistic expectations of the work given our limited capacity and resources, and the sheer difficulty of the work itself. What caseworkers do is a critical part of Oregon's promise to protect children and give families the services they need to stay together. I am asking you to staff the agency in order to achieve the recommended workload model and also to assure that the workload model takes into account the increasing complexity of this job.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to this issue.

Kelly Paluso, MPA
Social Service Specialist
Portland