

AUDIT QUESTION 3: Does SRS have sufficient numbers of social workers to handle Child-In-Need-Of-Care caseloads?

AUDIT ANSWER and KEY FINDINGS:

- On average, Children and Family Services social workers at SRS were responsible for about 35 open cases per month during the first 10 months of fiscal year 2009.
- The average caseloads Statewide have remained relatively stable over the last three years, but vary quite a bit among some of the regions.
- We couldn't conclude about the appropriateness of these caseloads because available caseload standards don't address how Kansas does business.

Social Worker Specialist Positions and Caseload Information FY 2009 (a)			
SRS Region	Average monthly social worker specialist positions	Average monthly cases	Average monthly caseload
KC Metro	67.1	2,061	30.7
Northeast	50.8	1,679	33.1
South Central	34.7	1,619	46.6
Southeast	31.4	803	25.6
West	32.1	1,202	37.4
Wichita	48.8	1,825	37.4
Statewide	264.9	9,189	34.7

(a) Only includes first 10 months of fiscal year 2009.

- Currently vacant positions cause each social worker to handle an average of about five extra cases per month.
- Statewide, about 27% of social workers responding to our survey indicated they thought their caseload was about right. About 39% said they thought they had many more cases than they could handle effectively.

We Recommended

- To ensure that caseload numbers for the Children and Family Services Program are balanced across the six SRS regions, Department officials should continue to monitor caseloads and adjust the number of social workers assigned to the regions, as needed.

Agency Response: The Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services concurred with the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

DO YOU HAVE AN IDEA FOR IMPROVED GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY OR COST SAVINGS?

If you have an idea to share with us, send it to ideas@lpa.ks.gov, or write to us at the address shown. We will pass along the best ones to the Legislative Post Audit Committee.

Audit Concern

Legislators have concern about whether sufficient numbers of social workers are employed to handle child-in-need-of-care caseloads.

Other Relevant Facts for Question 3

Since the late 1990s, Kansas has contracted out the functions related to family preservation, foster care, and adoption.

As a result, SRS social workers in Kansas are primarily responsible for monitoring families and children SRS has referred to contractors.

Caseload standards that exist generally apply to social workers who provide direct case-management, not monitoring services like the work done by social workers in Kansas.

SRS officials rely on program staff and supervisors to ensure that cases are evenly distributed across the six SRS regions.

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Legislative Post Audit Performance Audit Report Highlights

Children in Need of Care:
Reviewing Selected Issues Related to Handling Their Cases

Highlights

Report Highlights

August 2009 • 09PA02

Audit Concern

In part because of comments by the Secretary of SRS, legislators have concerns whether social workers in Kansas have been unduly influenced by attorneys to distort the facts of child-in-need-of-care cases. If so, they want to know the extent of the problem and what needs to be done to address it.

Other Relevant Facts for Question 1

In March 2008, the Secretary of SRS told a parent advocacy group that "In Sedgwick County oftentimes we end up writing things because it's what our social workers get bullied by the District Attorney's office into writing. So they really have no belief in what it says."

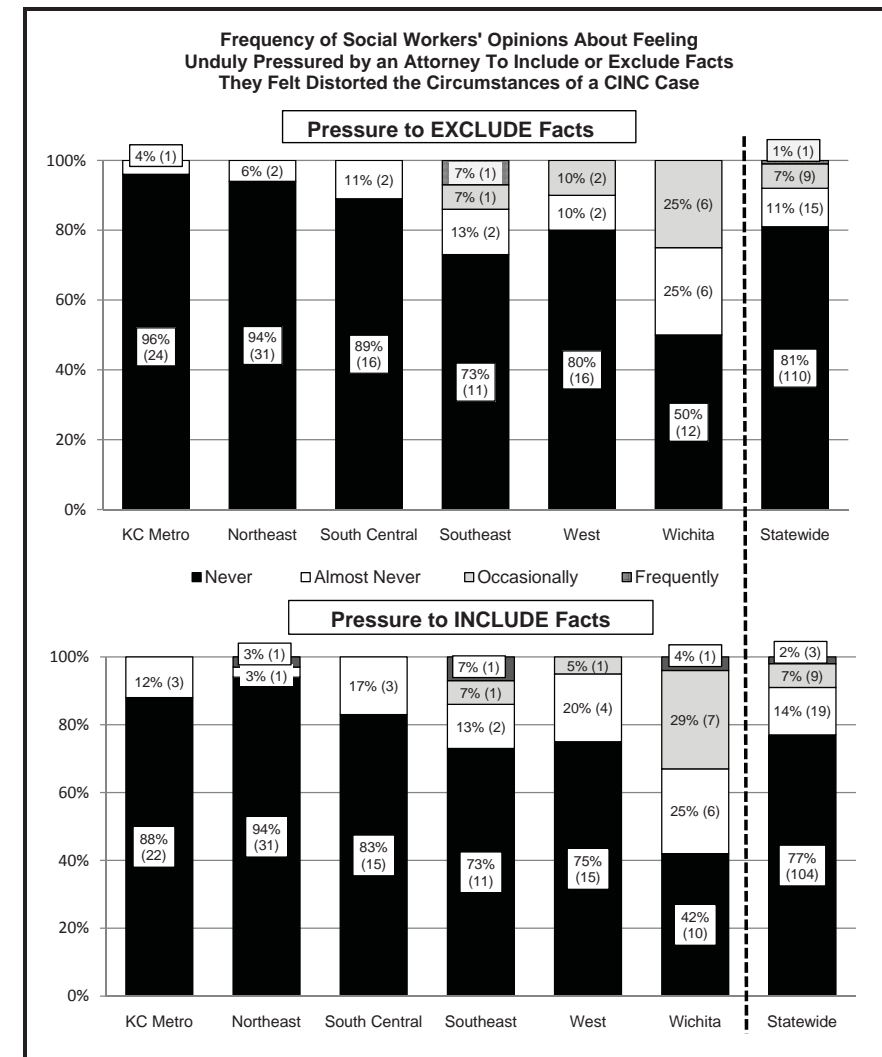
The Secretary later clarified his statement saying he didn't know of, or believe there has been, an instance where a county or district attorney has demanded a social worker commit perjury or misrepresent the facts. Instead, he said that disagreements often occur regarding which facts of a case are relevant.

SRS hasn't issued any new directives to its social workers to follow in the event they think they are being unduly influenced by attorneys.

AUDIT QUESTION 1: Have social workers been unduly influenced to include information in applications for petition that is contrary to what their investigations showed?

AUDIT ANSWER and KEY FINDINGS:

- Statewide, about 80% of responding social workers said they've never felt unduly pressured by an attorney to include or exclude certain facts in their applications for petition. But at least one social worker from each region of the State said they have felt unduly pressured at some point in their career.
- Responses from social workers in the Wichita region more often indicated they felt unduly pressured.



AUDIT ANSWER and KEY FINDINGS:

(continued)

- Social workers we talked to in Wichita told us that issues they've had with the District Attorney's staff in the past have improved in recent years.
- Statewide, more than half of social workers also reported they have—at least occasionally—strongly disagreed with decisions on the case made by county or district attorneys.
- Based on their survey responses and interviews, social workers in all SRS regions clearly are frustrated that district attorneys don't always respect or follow their recommendations regarding whether to seek removal of a child or whether or not a child should be declared "in need of care."

We Recommended

- The Department develop a policy codifying the specific steps social workers should follow if they think they are being unduly pressured or encounter unethical or inappropriate behavior by someone in a county or district attorney's office, and provide training to all social workers Statewide on the new policy. That training also should address the roles of attorneys and social workers in handling child-in-need-of-care cases.

Agency Response: *The Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services and the Office of the District Attorney in Sedgwick County generally concurred with the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. We made minor changes or clarifications to the draft report as a result of the District Attorney Office's response that didn't affect any of our findings or conclusions.*

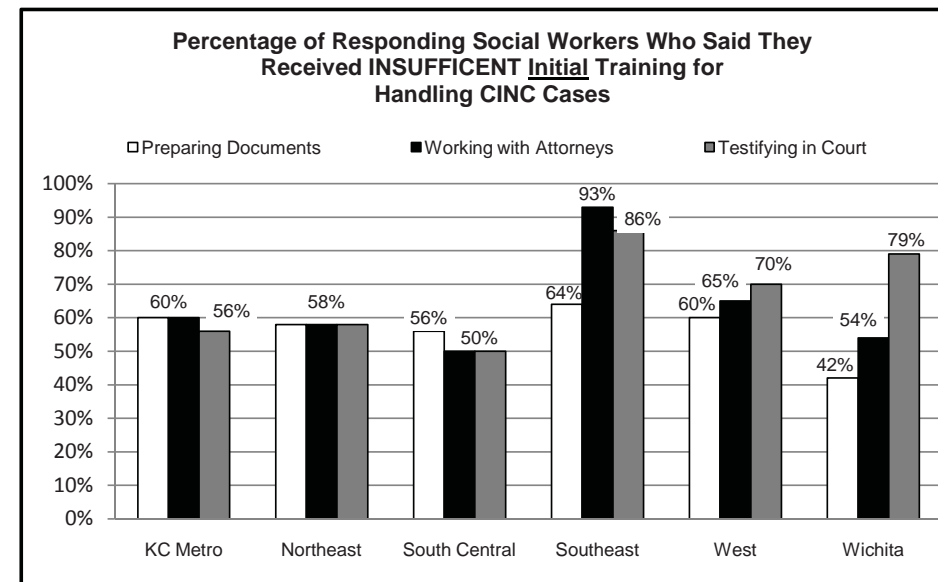
Other Relevant Facts for Question 1 (continued)

Our comparisons of 30 social workers' applications for petition and the corresponding district or county attorney petitions to remove children from their homes in Sedgwick, Johnson, and Wyandotte counties didn't disclose any irregularities.

AUDIT QUESTION 2: *Are social workers who handle Child-In-Need-Of-Care cases qualified, and do they receive sufficient training to work effectively with the attorneys and the courts?*

AUDIT ANSWER and KEY FINDINGS:

- SRS social workers and their supervisors whose personnel files we reviewed all met SRS' required licensing and experience qualifications.
- Social workers generally don't get much training in preparing legal documents and working with attorneys and the courts as part of their degree programs.
- Initial training SRS social workers receive on writing legal documents, working with attorneys, and testifying in court is haphazard and, according to social workers, largely insufficient.



- Social workers also confirmed that ongoing training in these same topic areas is inconsistent across the State.

We Recommended

- We made a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring that all SRS social workers receive proper initial training in a reasonable amount of time, and that they receive sufficient ongoing training on working with attorneys, preparing legal documents, and providing testimony.

Agency Response: *The Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services concurred with the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.*

Audit Concern

Legislators expressed concerns that a lack of qualifications or training could contribute to social workers feeling unable to deal effectively with attorneys and the courts.

Other Relevant Facts for Question 2

Most social work degree programs at Regents' institutions in Kansas don't require specific courses on working with attorneys and the courts.

SRS lacks a good system for ensuring that social workers receive the required initial training. Central SRS staff also don't provide enough guidance on how the training requirements are to be completed.

Judges and attorneys pointed out the need for additional training for social workers on writing legal documents, working with attorneys, and testifying in court.