



**Child Protective Services  
Dallas County Management Review**

**May 2016**



## **Introduction**

Following complaints about Child Protective Services (CPS) managers in Dallas County, Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Leadership requested a management review of the operation that would be used to make improvements. The Center for Policy, Innovation, and Program Coordination was chosen to lead this effort.

During the initial meeting with CPS leadership on January 19, 2016, the CPS Assistant Commissioner and the CPS Director of Field provided some historical information regarding known problems in Dallas County dating back to 2011. The program administrator (PA) position that oversees two important programs in Dallas County (Investigations and the Family-Based Safety Services) has experienced instability over the past several years. When the PA over Dallas County retired in late 2011, the position remained vacant until February 2012. It was filled by an employee who began to make headway in identifying problems and improving the culture, but unfortunately, that employee died in October 2013, leaving the position vacant once again. At this time, the eight program directors (PDs) under the vacant PA position were assigned to one of five different PAs for approximately six months. The position was filled again in the Spring of 2014 by an employee who was a poor fit and unable to improve the performance or culture of the program. Several months later, in November 2014, CPS leadership conducted an internal review to better understand the chronic problems. Two CPS regional directors from other regions and a director from CPS state office in Austin conducted the internal review. The findings from the internal review centered on lack of teamwork, lack of trust, and poor communication.

After the poor performing PA retired in lieu of termination in November 2014, the position remained vacant until a new PA was hired in March 2015. CPS leadership indicated that this PA had strong leadership skills and took immediate steps to improve performance.

## **Methodology**

### **Management Review Team**

The Center Director appointed a team to conduct the management review. The team was composed of six Program Coordination Specialists and the Program Coordination Manager. The DFPS Director of Workforce Development, who is charged with establishing a process for investigating employee complaints, was invited to participate in the review to gain an understanding of the process.

### **Management Review Process**

The team reviewed the complaints to identify themes and areas of concern that would inform the review process. To prepare for the review, the team also analyzed complaints substantiated by the DFPS Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA), DFPS Data Warehouse reports on caseload and recidivism, as well as Workforce Management data on turnover and corrective actions.

In addition to the sources identified above, the team also reviewed the 2014 Texas Sunset Advisory Commission's report of its review of DFPS and the internal review of Dallas County conducted by CPS leadership in 2014.

Initially, the team identified 161 employees to be interviewed. After the Regional Director informed employees about the review, employees who no longer worked in Dallas County and former employees reached out and asked to be included. In all, 175 employees were interviewed, including the CPS Director of Field and the CPS Deputy Director of Field. The team also interviewed one stakeholder from the Dallas Children's Advocacy Center.

The team developed a plan for the site visit. The plan involved assembling employee data for interviews, designing interview tools, and arranging logistics for the site visit which took place over a two-week period in February.

## **Overall Findings**

This review was conducted to look into management practices in Dallas County. The findings indicate Dallas County is facing serious problems. However, it is important to emphasize that the issues in Dallas County are not new as upper management (regional and state office) has known about these issues since at least 2011, possibly longer. Major themes that stood out were culture, accountability, and leadership.

### **Culture**

A punitive culture breeds crisis; however, much of the crisis facing Dallas County is self-inflicted. The issues in Dallas County today are consistent with the findings of the internal review done in 2014: lack of trust, lack of teamwork, and poor communication. CPS deployed additional personnel and other assistance to Dallas in August 2015 because of the crisis Dallas was facing. It is now nine months later and there has not been much progress. For employees who did not comply with policy and who did not meet performance expectations, more should have been done sooner.

The Sunset Advisory Commission stated in its review of DFPS that the agency had not done enough to shape a work environment that supports and develops caseworkers who want to stay with the agency. Sunset also said that DFPS needed a "timeout" to breathe, and a chance to regroup after being in almost constant turmoil for so long. Yet two years later CPS is in the same situation. The work that CPS employees do is painstaking and difficult, but it can be rewarding if they are supported and developed. The culture needs to be transformed if CPS is to be transformed. By ensuring consistent and transparent management practices, DFPS can reduce the causes of employee turnover that are within its direct control.

### **Accountability**

Many of the challenges that Dallas and Region 3 (the 18-county area that includes the Metroplex) are facing are not new. When these problems first came to light, the most recent CPS Assistant Commissioner was the Regional Director in Region 3; the current

Regional Director was the Deputy Regional Director in Region 3; and the current Deputy Regional Director was a Program Administrator in Region 3. This history suggests that employees in upper management positions knew about the problems that were steadily mounting in Dallas County during several years, but it is unclear why they were not addressed.

For example, the Region 3 Regional Director and Deputy Regional Director presented the "State of the Region" report to the DFPS Commissioner and other DFPS executives in July 2015. The region identified the Leadership Team as one of the region's strengths as it, "...has been through tremendous changes in the last two years and has managed to not only 'hold' the region together but also thrive and improve." Yet the following month in August 2015, CPS requested approval from the DFPS Commissioner to send additional employees from other areas of the state to Dallas "due to the current crisis in Dallas County CPS Investigations due to supervisor vacancies." CPS deployed eight Master Investigators, four Master Investigator supervisors, and a Master Investigator Program Director to Dallas County. At the time of this review, the Master Investigators and the Master Investigator Program Director were still in Dallas.

## **Leadership**

There is a clear dividing line in Dallas County between perceptions of "upper management" and "management." When employees in upper management positions reported that "management" was to blame for the problems, it was initially not clear to the team who was meant by "management." It soon became apparent that "management" means program directors and supervisors. However, it is not apparent what role and responsibility that upper management has in developing and supporting their PDs and supervisors and sharing responsibility for solving problems. It is also not clear that upper management is showing leadership in modeling the behavior that CPS and DFPS expects of managers.

There has been a downward spiral in Dallas County of negative culture, employee flight, increased workload, increased stress, and negativity - all with no apparent urgency on the part of upper management. The tipping point has already passed where, according to many interviews the team conducted, the majority of employees who remain are either attempting to leave or strongly considering leaving.

In closing, it is concerning that upper management is not taking ownership of the situation in Dallas County. There is a sense of displaced ownership and, instead, the conflict or crisis is projected onto middle management. This culture has created a work environment that compromises child safety when there are not enough qualified employees to carry out the work.

## Conclusions

This review was requested due to the current crisis in Dallas County. However this “crisis” has been ongoing since at least 2011, remaining steadily problematic until 2014, until it eventually resulted in yet another internal review. CPS will never become an organization capable of growth and stability if changes are not made to address the issues at hand.

A theme heard throughout this review was the focus on meeting quantitative measures that took the place of solid child welfare case work. Employees reported feeling pressured to close and submit cases within 45 days, to submit cases daily, and to document their work timely. However, these requirements restrict our caseworkers' time to ensure children in Dallas County are safe because they must spend more time on administrative tasks than with families in the community. While employees acknowledged the importance of seeing children and spending time with families, they also feared disciplinary action if timeliness performance measures were not met.

DFPS and CPS must make an investment in their employees. Employees in CPS have a hard job - what has often been described as the hardest job in state government. It is expected that employees will make mistakes. The work is challenging but can also be highly rewarding. Many employees expressed commitment and passion for the work they do despite the unrelenting stress and negative pressure (internal and external) facing them each day. Employees must frequently use judgment to make critical decisions, often with little to no information. When mistakes are made, employees should be coached, developed, and given the time they need to become successful.

While this review is about Dallas County, the findings bore a strong resemblance to the DFPS 2014 Sunset review findings completed by the Sunset Advisory Commission. These Sunset issues were:

- Issue 1: Efforts to Reduce Turnover of CPS Caseworkers Fail to Address Key Reasons Many Staff Leave.
- Issue 2: A Crisis Culture Affects CPS' Ability to Focus on Day-to-Day Management Activities Needed to Successfully Perform Its Difficult Work.

The Sunset review found the following work environment factors contributed to CPS turnover:

- Unsupportive and punitive culture;
- Caseworkers do not feel valued by the agency;
- Staff does not feel safe to raise concerns or make complaints, fearing retaliation or punishment;
- Perception of favoritism; and
- Use of disciplinary levels or threats of levels in place of employee development.

Any one of these factors can be found in various work environments. However, this review found that all of these negative work environment factors exist in Dallas County. This was a consistent theme from all employees.

The Sunset review made clear that turnover, specifically caseworker turnover, led directly to the following negative outcomes: delayed investigations; lack of continuity in providing services to families and children; lack of consistent, timely visits to children in state custody; added workload for remaining workers causing further turnover and significant costs to the State in recruitment and training costs; and lost productivity. It is clear that the turnover in Dallas County, including tenured employees at all levels, increases the potential of negative outcomes facing the children and families of Dallas County. Moving away from an unsupportive and punitive culture to a developmental and learning culture can slow turnover and create a ripple effect to foster employee self-worth, freedom to express concerns, and eliminate fear-based discipline. This approach should be Dallas County's utmost priority, not only to stabilize the workforce, but also to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children and families served by Dallas County.

## Recommendations

The Center offers the following recommendations to improve the culture, accountability, and leadership in Dallas County. The recommendations are grouped into Regional Management, CPS State Office Management, and DFPS Management.

### Regional Management

***Region 3 should establish an effective Regional Director (RD) and Deputy Regional Director (DRD) team capable of proactively managing the largest region in the State (by intakes) and fixing long-standing workplace culture issues.*** The crisis in Dallas County has existed for years. Regional leadership should train PAs, PDs, and supervisors to model behavior that DFPS expects of all employees.

***CPS Management Response: There was a new Regional Director for Region 3 effective May 1, 2016. The Director of Field will work closely with George Cannata, the new RD, on a plan to develop and sustain a supportive, positive and mission-focused work culture in Region 3 CPS through modeling, training and support. The Assistant Commissioner, Director and Deputy Director of Field will also work with regional management to facilitate the development of a high-performing team and instill accountability for performance expectations. This will include regular attendance at Region 3 management team meetings and quarterly regional performance reviews. Plan to be implemented by June 15, 2016.***

***The RD and the DRD should work with PAs to establish a plan to ensure all PDs have a consistent understanding of policy.*** Employees are still experiencing different interpretations of policy that leads to a sense of frustration at best, and to a sense of fear at worst, that they are being set up to fail.

***CPS Management Response: The CPS Director of Field and Deputy Director of Field have participated in weekly meetings with the Dallas County Program Directors and have appointed an Acting PA. Also, there will be a request for caseworkers who want to actively participate in a Dallas County worker advisory group to address the specifics of policy confusion and other critical topics. As a new PA is selected, the RD will continue to follow the plan that is being developed with CPS state office to provide better support for managers so that Program Directors become policy experts and a resource to workers and supervisors. Also as noted above, regular face-to-face contact between state office leadership and the regional management team will facilitate communication and clear understanding of expectations that will support improved performance.***

***Mr. Cannata will hold at least 3 Town Hall meetings with Dallas County employees over the next year to get feedback on policy implementation and consistency. Town Hall meetings allow employees of all levels to meet the RD and management team and ask questions freely.***

Statewide, CPS Field is working on improvement to the current "Meeting in a Box" (MIAB) system that was implemented as part of CPS Transformation. This system utilizes a monthly release of all pertinent new or revised policy. Prior to this, policy was released individually but employees had trouble absorbing changes. However, the use of MIAB has also been problematic as supervisors report being overwhelmed with the amount of material provided. CPS Field will relook at MIAB and will provide clearer direction, with a requirement for tracking at the regional level that major policy changes are trained and appropriately implemented. The CPS supervisor and program director advisory groups and Program Administrators are being asked to help CPS Field provide clearer guidance so that Program Directors become experts in policy interpretation for their employees. **Issuing new policy through an improved format will occur with the July 1, 2016 MIAB.**

**The RD and DRD must evaluate the impact of the North/South split for case assignments.** This can serve as an opportunity to bring employees together to exert some level of control over their work environment.

**CPS Management Response:** Dallas County in March 2016 implemented a new routing system to assign investigators to new reports of possible abuse/neglect based on geographic assignments and equity. Program areas are placed in designated county quadrants and are assigned cases from that area. Case assignments are tracked electronically in real time and viewable by each program director. Case assignment data is evaluated monthly to ensure that assignments are equitable and to determine if changes need to be made in the geographical alignment. **New system implemented and ongoing evaluation.**

Statewide, the need for geographic assignment for investigations is a constant issue in large metropolitan areas. Harris County implemented a quadrant system over a year ago, but is making revisions to better reflect the actual flow of intakes. Bexar County is also looking at the best way to handle.

## **CPS State Office Management**

**CPS SO must establish clear performance standards as to the frequency with which regional management teams will meet (RD with PAs, PAs with PDs, etc.).** Given that RDs report to the Director of Field, state office should set expectations for consistent management practices across the state.

**CPS Management Response:** CPS agrees and will direct all Regional Directors to institute a formal practice for meeting expectations. Currently most RDs have monthly meetings with PAs, PDs have monthly meetings with supervisors and supervisors have monthly unit meetings. CPS believes meetings are important, but they should be

*purposeful and informative about relevant issues and allow for information sharing. Managers will be required to hold 10 meetings in a 12-month period. Regional Directors will be expected to set up a tracking system and this information will be utilized in evaluating manager performance. Meetings may be held via telephone, but the expectation is that face to face is preferred except in emergency situations (i.e. weather, travel cost cutbacks, urgent issues etc.). **Message was sent to Regional Directors on May 1, 2016.***

**CPS SO must establish a clear process for SO and Regions to monitor workforce turnover and trends.** CPS must be able to detect when regions are nearing a crisis. CPS must develop a process with clear triggers for specific interventions that includes when to progress to the next level of needed intervention.

**CPS Management Response:** *CPS agrees and, with the assistance of the System Improvement Director area, the work on regional "hot spots" and other analyses will provide a clearer picture for regional managers and state office. Once the clear process is developed in conjunction with the Workforce Division, CPS state office will provide training and clear expectations on what to do and when to do it. **Plan completion - June 1, 2016***

## **DFPS Management**

**RDs should have a role in retaining their employees.** Because the RD is responsible for setting the tone of organizational culture in their region, the retention of employees needs to be incorporated into the RD's performance plan.

**CPS Management Response:** *The new performance plan for the Regional Director includes this section:*

### **Task 3. Retention**

A stable, tenured workforce is a significant factor toward achieving the agency mission. Developing a supportive work environment and support systems for staff that promote retention is the responsibility of the CPS Regional Director. Each Director is expected to create, maintain and document ongoing retention efforts and results.

Regional retention efforts will be discussed quarterly on Regional Director calls with the Director of Field. The discussion will include any training/coaching that may need to be implemented either regionally or statewide as the results of the quarterly Caseworker Retention report completed by the Regional Director. Quarterly reports are rolled up and documented as an annual performance evaluation measure (Workforce Management).

The Caseworker Retention report is to include:

- Report on regional retention results compared to targets;

- Identify units/PD/PA areas that do not meet targets and discuss what led to the turnover and how they are addressing it;
- Report on tenure of caseworkers;
- Report on retention activities to include:
  - Special recognition/retention activities,
  - e-rewards provided,
  - Information learned on retention calls, etc.
- Recognition of managers who are doing well on retention and how those lessons are being shared with others.

***New performance plans for Regional Directors are now complete and will be utilized.***

***CPS should include data on complaints substantiated by the Office of Consumer Affairs in its performance plans for regional management.*** While this data source is outside of the program, CPS can challenge any substantiated finding. So for substantiated complaints that are upheld, these should be seen as indicators for the quality of the casework taking place in a given area (unit, PD, PA, or region).

**CPS Management Response:** *CPS understands the value and importance of OCA data. The new RD performance plan includes this:*

*“Provides regionally based management training activities that include the use of data reports, case reading analysis, RSI developed information, **OCA substantiated reports**, and other locally developed reports;” **Completed and will be utilized going forward.***

***The DFPS Commissioner should reprioritize the schedule for the time studies.*** Time studies are being conducted in response to Sunset recommendation #1.8. CPS Investigations should be made a priority, and management should have a clear understanding about what constitutes realistic time frames in CPS investigations.

Once CPS has updated INV time study data, CPS SO should review its INV performance plans to ensure they fairly measure the essential requirements of the investigative process, with the right balance between timeliness and quality measures.

**DFPS Management Response:** *The DFPS Commissioner will again consider the agency's priorities with regard to work measurement and time studies.*

***CPS should request an outside entity to review its use of regional Human Resources committees to decide disciplinary action.*** While the committee membership is diverse to ensure consistency, it may actually lead to inconsistency due to regional variations.

**CPS Management Response:** *HHSC has reviewed the current CPS HR processes and has made recommendations to the Assistant Commissioner for CPS. Changes to processes for handling disciplinary actions are forthcoming.*

***The DFPS Commissioner should have an exceptional item requesting to upgrade all CPS PAs to Manager V (B26) from their current level of Manager IV (B25).*** PAs should be recognized for the key leadership positions they hold in the regional management structure. At the same time, when a PA is not contributing to the work environment in a positive way, regional leadership should have the means to correct the situation without unnecessary administrative delays.

**DFPS Management Response:** *The DFPS Commissioner and CPS Assistant Commissioner will carefully consider structural changes that best support the field's ability to do their work.*