

Short-staffed Child Protective Services lags on investigations

Meaghan M. McDermott, @meagmc Published 12:43 p.m. ET March 31, 2017 | Updated 4:32 p.m. ET March 31, 2017



(Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ, @cfortiz_dandc/staff photographer)

Two years ago, Monroe County cut its in-house child abuse hotline, transferring responsibility to a state service in the interest of efficiency and savings.

But child advocates say that move has exacerbated staffing problems and is reflected by damning numbers found in a recent state report obtained by the Monroe County Federation of Social Workers.

For the county's part, officials say it's been such a struggle to find job candidates that they've had to hire a new employment coordinator to step up recruiting efforts.

The state report, three pages of statistics from the state Office of Family and Child Services' Data Warehouse, ranks Monroe County as the 54th worst out of 64 counties when it comes to overdue investigations, and 40th worst when it comes to both percentage of workers with more than 15 Child Protective Services investigations and percentage of timely safety assessments.

John Rabish, spokesman for the Federation of Social Workers, said those numbers clearly show there's a problem within CPS. And with the state's child abuse hotline doing less front-end work to discriminate between possibly authentic abuse reports and more spurious claims, workers are being inundated with an ever-growing caseload.

"Anybody who's a working person understands if you get more work than you can possibly, realistically do, it's going to affect how you do it," he said.

At stake is the safety of children under the auspices of the county's Child Protective Services division, an issue getting heightened local attention in the aftermath of the November 2016 death of 3-year-old Brook Stagles of Rochester. ([/story/news/2016/12/12/prosecutor-brook-stagles-death-bruised-head-toe-michael-stagels-bail/95331140/](http://story/news/2016/12/12/prosecutor-brook-stagles-death-bruised-head-toe-michael-stagels-bail/95331140/)) Brook died of blunt force trauma, allegedly at the hands of her father's girlfriend Erica Bell. Brook's father, Michael Stagles, and Bell have been criminally charged in that case.

Their trials are scheduled to begin in May.

Prosecutor: Brook Stagles was 'bruised from head to toe'

(<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2016/12/12/prosecutor-brook-stagles-death-bruised-head-toe-michael-stagels-bail/95331140/>)

As for the abuse hotline, Rabish said the county's cut of the local hotline caused a significant uptick in the number of cases being referred to CPS.

"The local hotline was more selective. People would spend more time with the person calling the report in" and do an initial assessment of the report's veracity, he said.

"In the first 12 months after the local hotline was down, there were an additional 1,057 cases and there was no significant increase in staff to handle those cases," he said. "It seemed the county felt workers could magically absorb those cases, but that's when things went bad and it's just gone downhill ever since.

"I think they were trying to save money by not hiring people to handle the additional workload, but I think they understand now this is not something that is going to go away."

Heavy caseloads

While the Child Welfare League of America recommends no more than 12 active investigations

(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/workforce/compendium/aboutcomp/cwla/>) per month per child protective worker, and New York benchmarks at 15 cases per worker, Monroe County frequently exceeds that goal. Indeed, data from OFCS shows nearly a third of Monroe County's workers had more than 15 investigations on their caseload during the last half of 2015, the most recent information available.

However, Rabish said those numbers don't paint a full picture and that some caseworkers in the county have had workloads of 30, 40 and even sometimes more than 60 cases per month. He said that leads to delays in investigations and safety assessments — putting children at risk — and contributes to employee burnout.



Child maltreatment investigations, Monroe County

Source, Monroe County Budgets. * = estimates



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Any time a report of abuse comes in to Child Protective Services, investigators must embark on a process that includes a 27-point checklist of action items that include interviewing and observing all children in the household, interviewing all subjects of the report, attempting to locate missing or evasive people with relationships to the subjects of the investigation as well as locating and interviewing all other parents of children in the household.

"Even if you have 15 cases, that case doesn't just mean one child," said Rabish. "You have a responsibility for every child in the household and families can have many more than one child. Having 15 cases might mean having 50 children you're responsible for. For example, if fathers are out of the home, you have to do an extensive search for every father in the household. ... It can be overwhelming."

► [Monroe County reports spike in child neglect \(/story/news/2016/12/07/monroe-county-child-abuse-dinolfo-rochester/95094362/\)](https://www.wjla.com/story/news/2016/12/07/monroe-county-child-abuse-dinolfo-rochester/95094362/)

Data culled from Monroe County budgets show the Department of Human Services' overall caseworker staffing, including supervisors and adult protective workers, has been reduced from 361 full-time positions in 2010 to 332 in 2017. At the same time, the number of reports of maltreatment investigated have grown from 7,400 in 2010 to an estimated 9,500 this year.

County spokesman Brett Walsh said there are 209 caseworkers assigned to Child Protective Services and 14 current vacancies.

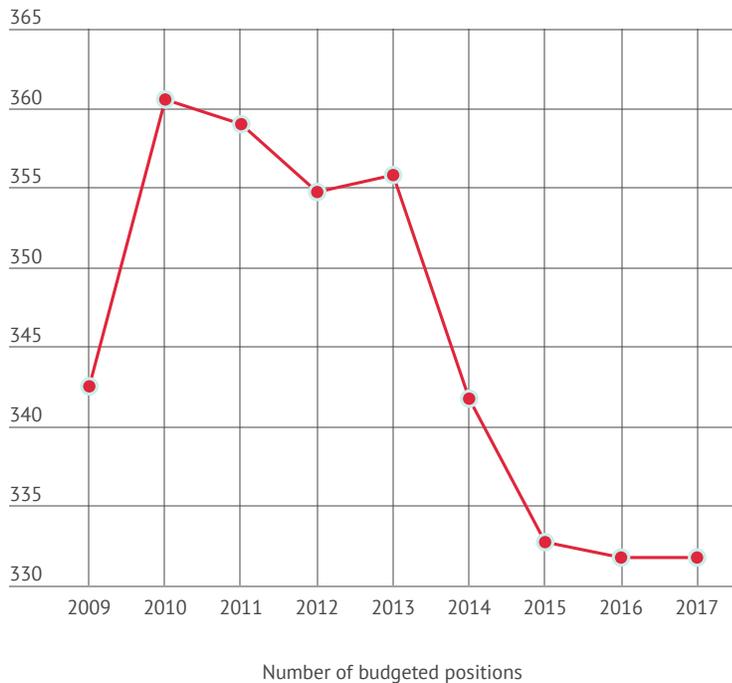
Rabish said the county had a training class of 21 caseworker candidates begin last fall in an effort to fill open positions. Three people dropped out, he said, leaving the county with 18 new workers who were put on investigative teams this past month.

"But there's been no real commitment on their part to say we're going to hire as many people as needed to lower our caseload down to 12, which the Child Welfare League says it should be, or even to 15, which the state says is appropriate," he said.

Monroe County Legislator Justin Wilcox, D-Brighton, put forth a proposal March 30 to cap cases at 15. The full Legislature has yet to consider that measure.

"I am very concerned that excessive caseloads are contributing to the inability of Monroe County to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect in a timely manner," he said. "Through the Legislature's inaction, we are inviting additional tragedies."

Caseworker staffing in Monroe County, including all classifications



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Recruitment efforts

In an emailed statement, Monroe County Human Services Commissioner Corrinna Crossdale said the county authorized hiring more caseworkers than available positions in both 2016 and 2017. It also added per diem caseworkers and increased the number of caseworker recruitment classes.

"Attracting caseworkers for the field of child protective services is a challenge in many counties across New York state, and to address this challenge, we have hired an employment coordinator and we are currently at work to redesign our recruitment efforts," she said. "Moreover, we encourage eligible candidates to join us by taking the exam and joining an extraordinary team of devoted caseworkers."

Rabish said filling the ranks may be a tough task for the county, especially in a field plagued by high turnover fed by overwork, dangerous working conditions, emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue. Nationally, the average length of employment for child welfare caseworkers is less than two years (<http://www.albany.edu/swec/assets/Causes-and-Effects-of-Child-Welfare-Workforce-Turnover-2005.pdf>).

Compounding the problem in Monroe County is the relatively low starting wage for child welfare caseworkers, compared even with nearby counties. Following a seven-year stretch where workers here did not have a contract, the local pay scale fell behind. Rabish said starting salaries are lower here — \$34,500 per year — than they are in Erie, Onondaga and Ontario counties. For example, he said the beginning wage in Ontario County is \$46,000.

"Filling these jobs will be a formidable task," he said. "There's the low starting salary and a reputation of overworking their caseworkers. I can't imagine people jumping over themselves to take these jobs."

Legislation pending

Last year, the state Legislature passed bills that would have capped active child welfare cases at 15 per month per full-time child protective services worker. But Gov. Andrew Cuomo vetoed the initiative on Dec. 31.

In January, the state Senate passed a similar effort (<https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2017/S3146>) sponsored by Sen. Martin J. Golden, R-Brooklyn, in the immediate aftermath of the death of 5-year-old Michael Guzman of Queens, whose family had been previously investigated 13 times by New York City's Administration for Children's Services. ACS substantiated abuse or neglect in eight of those instances, but never removed Michael or his five siblings from the home.

"The recent death of Michael Guzman of Queens further highlights the need to place a limit on the number of cases assigned to a child protective service investigator," Golden said in January statement. "These caseworkers are charged with protecting our children and when they are overburdened, they cannot be as successful as we need them to be. Without a doubt, this legislation will keep our children safer and save lives."

That bill is still pending in the Assembly Ways and Means Committee.

Brook Stagles' death, like the death of any child involved with the Child Protective system in the state, has sparked an investigation by the Office of Family and Child Services. That report has not been made available, and the *Democrat and Chronicle* was told it would take more than two years to fulfill a Freedom of Information request made to that agency for child fatality reports generated from 2012 through 2016. Typically, most child fatalities reviewed by OFCS involve unsafe sleep practices or medically fragile infants.

John Geer of Irondequoit, Brook Stagles' paternal grandfather, has said Brook was part of an active Child Protective Services investigation. The agency has declined to comment, citing privacy concerns. Geer has said the agency was too slow in its response and failed to adequately protect Brook.

Geer, owner of a home improvement company, has sunk hundreds of thousands of dollars since his granddaughter's death into print advertisements and billboards both locally and across the country trying to get President Donald J. Trump to turn his attention to the plight of overworked CPS workers. The ads have appeared in the *Democrat and Chronicle*, *USA TODAY* and the *Palm Beach Post*, near President Trump's Mar-a-Lago golf club. Geer's website, trumpforchildren.com (<https://trumpforchildren.com/>) highlights Brook's death, as well as the deaths of other children from around the country who were killed while under investigation by child protective agencies.

"This is my life now," said Geer. "My main thing is to try to save the kids."

Geer, who also supports Wilcox's effort, said a state law should be common sense.

"I don't know why the governor vetoed that, I'm sure he had his reasons, but shame on him for doing that," he said.

MCDERMOT@Gannett.com