



Susan Milam

**Sunset Commission Recommendations on
Department of Family and Protective Services**

June 24, 2014

Ms. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Sunset Recommendations for the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS).

My name is Sue Milam. I am a Government Relations Consultant for the National Association of Social Workers/Texas Chapter (NASW/TX). Our organization is comprised of almost 6,000 NASW/Texas members who serve Texas residents across the state. Many of our members are currently employed or have previously been employed at DFPS. As an organization, we are very concerned about the protection of our most vulnerable citizens, primarily children and the elderly.

While we are interested in all of the recommendations regarding DFPS, I would like to focus my remarks on Issue 1: “Efforts to Reduce Turnover of CPS Caseworkers Fail to Address Key Reasons Many Staff Leave.”

Many caseworkers within Child Protective Services and Adult Protective Services are trained as social workers. Therefore, we especially care about how these caseworkers are able to function in the positions they hold. I am here to encourage DFPS and the Sunset Commission to advocate for and recommend the necessary resources to recruit and retain quality staff in order to achieve desirable outcomes with children, the elderly, and their families.

A tremendous amount of resources has already been poured into this agency. The Sunset Commission’s recommendations and that of another recent study point to needed changes in job expectations and performance. We absolutely agree that what caseworkers do and how they do it should be revised and clarified. However, we are disappointed that nothing was said about the low pay for entry-level caseworkers and lack of monetary incentives to perform at a high level. We believe that in addition to the other recommendations, DFPS must raise the base salary of all caseworkers and offer a loan repayment program that rewards staying in the job.

While adequate pay will not solve the total problem, it would, at minimum, remove one of the many stresses that young caseworkers must face. In FY 2014, CPS caseworkers’ starting classification and salary were B15, \$32,329 annually; APS caseworkers: B14, \$30,533. These jobs require a 4-year baccalaureate degree in social work or a related field. Compare that to a Nurse I position within the state that is classified as B17, starting at \$36,251, also requiring a 4-year degree. Or compare to a beginning teacher with a 4-year degree in education who will start out at over \$40,000 in the Austin Independent School District. Caseworkers are earning significantly less money, for extremely demanding, stressful work and life-and-death decision making.

Worsening the low pay problem for caseworkers just starting out is student loan debt. The average 4-year graduate in Texas leaves school with more than \$20,000 in student loans. Once again, the caseworker is not only stressed by a low salary, but also by the realization that a significant amount of his/her meager take-home pay will go to paying off the debt. We recommend a program that would pay \$5,000 of a caseworker's student loan for each year that the caseworker served at DFPS (in good standing).

NASW/Texas would like to advocate for the following as a way of reducing turnover within DFPS and achieving improved outcomes for children and the elderly:

1. Paying caseworkers and front-line supervisors a reasonable wage for very difficult jobs.
2. Providing loan repayment to workers in good standing who stay.
3. Realistically analyzing the caseworker positions and making job expectations something that is actually doable.
4. Investing in training for front-line supervisors and mid-level managers to better support the caseworkers.
5. Reducing caseloads to a reasonable, doable level.
6. Rewarding the workers who do excellent work.
7. Considering an organizational structure that ensures accountability and effective transfer of information.

You have seen the turnover statistics which are abysmal. But if you look more closely, the turnover is worse in actuality. The turnover statistics you see only show the people who actually leave the agency. It does not show that number that move to a supervisory position or transfer to other parts of the agency. Every caseworker who leaves their casework position creates instability for the agency and more importantly, for the children in their care.

You and the Department must work together to find the resources to stop the knowledge, skills and talent that walk out the door every day. Social workers come out of college wanting to do these jobs. We must find a way to tap their dedication and enthusiasm rather than beating them down with low pay, stifling student debt, impossible jobs, dangerous environments, and daily doses of human suffering. I ask you to invest in the most vulnerable Texas by investing in the people who are charged to protect them.

Sincerely,



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