

Families in child welfare system struggle to meet basic needs

These are highlights from the most comprehensive survey to date of parents with children in Washington State's child welfare system.* The data were collected as part of an independent evaluation DSHS asked Partners for Our Children to undertake to determine if the state's new child welfare casework practice model — Solution Based Casework — improves outcomes for children and their families. The purpose of this casework practice model is to better engage parents in the process of helping them become better parents. Of the parents surveyed, 43% had all children in-home and 57% had at least one child in out-of-home care. These are some highlights of the baseline survey of parents and social workers.

Families need the basics – Food, clothing and housing: The survey found that the majority of parents with children in Washington State's child welfare system struggle to meet their most basic needs such as food, clothing or housing.

In the last 12 months, 45% had been evicted, had to move in with family or friends, or had been homeless. Nearly 60% weren't able to buy enough food to feed their family, or had gone to a food pantry or community meal program. Over 70% were unable to pay the rent or mortgage, buy needed clothing or pay an important bill in the past 12 months.

Nearly half of the parents said they had a household income of less than \$10,000 per year.

Other risk factors: Over half suffered sexual abuse as a minor, and over a third had experienced domestic violence in the last year. Almost half have had a major depressive disorder in their lifetime. Almost 30% said they had either alcohol or drug abuse/dependence in the last year.

Where social workers, parents agree on some needs, differ on others: The survey found that parents and social workers agree on what parents need when it comes to most psychological/emotional needs, such as parenting skills, child behavior management, mental health services, family counseling, etc. They differed when it came to ranking concrete and basic needs, like housing, clothing and food — parents ranked those needs higher than social workers did.

Reason for differences: Here are some of the possible reasons their answers differed:

- Social workers and parents were asked slightly different questions: the parents were asked what services they need, while workers were asked what services parents need to be *reunited with their children*.
- The focus of the child welfare system — and therefore the social workers' focus — is to keep children safe, and either reunify them with their birth families or find permanent homes. Workers may not see basic needs as an appropriate focus of their helping efforts to the extent that basic needs aren't always related to parents' abilities to safely parent.
- Social workers often don't have access to resources to provide basic, concrete services.

Questions for policy makers: This survey raises important policy issues for state decision makers, such as:

- What role if any should child welfare services have in providing basic concrete needs?
- How can government, communities and service organizations better meet basic needs of families in extreme poverty?

What's next: Our ongoing evaluation will look at the relationship between family needs and outcomes for children and families — such as placements of children in out-of-home care, re-abuse and re-entry into care.

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Partners for Our Children is committed to improving the lives of Washington state foster children through rigorous research, analysis and evidence-based innovation. The organization, founded in 2007, is a collaborative effort of the University of Washington School of Social Work, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services and private funders.

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*82% response rate of 809 parents with a newly opened case in the past 60 to 180 days. Baseline data will be compared with results from a follow-up survey scheduled for early 2010. Complete reports are available at www.partnersforourchildren.org.

Families in state's child welfare system

Parents told us

Typical parent in Washington State's child welfare system lives in poverty:

- 92% are female with an average age of 32; 62% are white; 68% are single parents.
- Nearly half (47%) have an annual income of less than \$10,000.
- 67% were unemployed.
- 30% have no high school degree; 28% finished high school.

In the last year:

- 45% had been evicted, had to move in with family or friends, or had been homeless.
- 58% were unable to buy enough food to feed their family, or had gone to a food pantry or community meal program.
- 73% were unable to pay the rent or mortgage, buy needed clothing or pay an important bill.

Risk factors:

- 55% suffered sexual abuse as a minor.
- 45% have had major depression within lifetime.
- 35% had experienced domestic violence in the last 12 months.
- 29% reported alcohol or drug use or dependence within the last year.

Top 10 needs: Comparison of parent, social worker surveys

Parents and social workers agreed most of the time on parents' top needs (these are highlighted below.) They differed when it came to basic, concrete needs versus services for substance abuse, domestic violence and anger management.

What parents told us	What social workers told us
Getting food (68%)	Social/emotional support (66%)
Basic parenting (66%)	Family counseling (63%)
Child behavior management (63%)	Mental health services (63%)
Transportation (63%)	Basic parenting (63%)
Clothing (62%)	Substance abuse services (48%)
Mental health services (59%)	Child behavior management (43%)
Family counseling (58%)	Transportation (34%)
Social/emotional support (58%)	Domestic violence (32%)
Applying for financial assistance (50%)	Anger management (27%)
Finding a place to live (47%)	Help w/employment (26%)