

# The 2024 – 2025 Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury

## Children and Family Services: Challenges in Recruiting and Retaining Social Workers


Report 2506  
May 16, 2025

Approved by the Grand Jury

  
Peter Appert  
GRAND JURY FOREPERSON

  
Date

Accepted for Filing

  
Hon. Terri Mockler  
JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

  
Date



## SUMMARY

The Children and Family Services (CFS) Bureau, a division of the Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) of Contra Costa County, is charged with protecting and supporting children and their families. Social workers strive to ensure children's safety from abuse or neglect. They investigate reports of abuse, neglect, and exploitation and intervene when necessary, making decisions designed to serve the best interests of children. CFS does impactful and important work, and the Grand Jury commends the staff for its dedication.

Social workers can experience stress when performing their jobs. They meet with families and investigate under difficult circumstances. Parents and guardians can be wary of the inquiry, and angry at the possibility that a social worker might remove a child from the home. Those engaging in illegal activities fear the potential for discovery and arrest. When warranted, social workers recommend to the court to remove children from their families and place them with relatives, adoptive parents, or in a foster home (now referred to as a resource family). These decisions can lead to disputes with family members and other interested parties regarding the best course of action for the child.

Reflecting the difficulty of the position, CFS experiences challenges in recruiting and retaining social workers, with a current vacancy rate of 19% (31 of 167 authorized positions unoccupied), compared to an overall County average of 13%. The Grand Jury determined that CFS faces an ongoing shortage of social workers. The Jury also confirmed that understaffing increases the workload of existing staff, resulting in a negative impact on services provided to children and families, including a longer time to close cases.

This report examines the shortage of social workers at CFS. The Grand Jury identifies findings related to the understaffing of social workers, and the impact of staff shortages on children, families, and the employees themselves. The Grand Jury makes recommendations to improve the recruiting, hiring, and retention of staff to better serve children and families, and reduce the workload and stress on the existing staff.

## BACKGROUND

Social workers in the Children and Family Services Bureau (CFS) of Contra Costa County have important and demanding jobs. According to the County's job description, those employed as a social worker:

“...are responsible for dealing with an individual's or family's problems which involve abuse or neglect, with the aim of preserving adequate functioning, or improving or restoring individual or family functioning, and may include preparing and submitting written court reports and recommendations and may carry out the orders of the court. Incumbents are assigned complex and specialized caseloads which require professional skill gained through graduate studies or extensive on-the-job training. Incumbents carry cases in which the agency is under court direction or is legally responsible for the person.”

In 2023, CFS received on average 1,737 reports of suspected child abuse per month. Reports of suspected abuse are processed by staff in the Emergency Response Program. Social workers and supervisors in the Program provide initial intake services and crisis intervention to children reported endangered by abuse, neglect, or exploitation. In the most serious cases, the emergency response social worker must respond within 24 hours. Intake staff refer reports of suspected child abuse to social workers for initial assessment, and those conducting the initial assessments distribute reports deemed credible to other social workers for investigation.

Social workers strive to protect at-risk children. They frequently work with families experiencing significant challenges. They provide support to parents and family members with the goal of creating a healthier environment in which the children can thrive. They keep the best interest of the child in the forefront of their actions. Occasionally, social workers investigate situations so serious they must request court approval to remove a child from the home. Social workers then identify the appropriate placement, including with a relative, or another placement such as a foster home or a group home. Social workers monitor the progress of the children and the families on their caseloads. While the desired outcome is family reunification, at times the situation calls for permanent placement outside the home.

Given the gravity of the importance of the role of social workers in protecting children, and in light of local media reports of the deaths of children in Contra Costa and other Bay Area counties, the Grand Jury chose to review CFS to ensure the protection of children in the child welfare system in Contra Costa County.

## METHODOLOGY

In conducting its investigation, the Grand Jury researched information from a variety of sources, including:

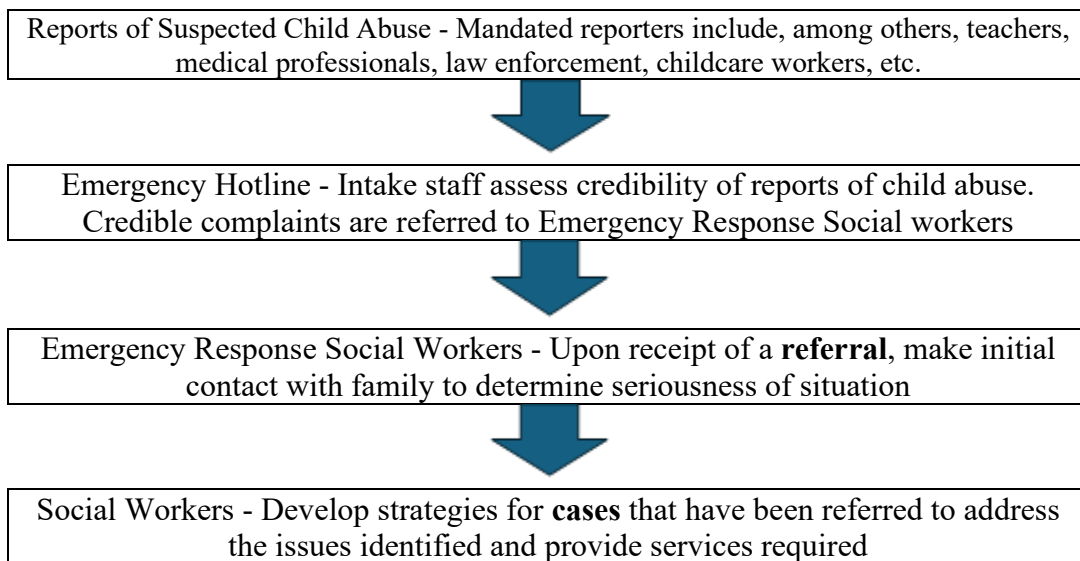
- Interviews with staff and subject matter experts with knowledge of the issues addressed in this report
- Policy and procedure documents from CFS, EHSD, and the Human Resources (HR) Department
- Websites of CFS, EHSD, and HR and other local counties
- Previous grand jury reports on the topic for background
- Websites with recommendations on national standards for social workers
- Articles in national publications on the topics related to the child welfare system
- Data related to college attendance rates for those entering the field of social work, workplace staffing needs, and future projections of employment

## DISCUSSION

CFS, a division of EHSD, serves the approximately 1.16 million residents of Contra Costa County. Nearly 39% of County residents speak a language other than English at home. Children aged 0-17 years comprise more than 250,000 County residents. Approximately 26,000 children live in a home with income below the poverty level. This socio-economic diversity increases the complexity of providing services to residents.

CFS social workers and supervisors staff an emergency response hotline 24 hours per day, seven days per week. In 2024, the hotline received more than 16,000 calls. Intake staff refer reports of suspected child abuse to social workers for initial assessment. These reports come from mandated reporters as well as anyone else who suspects child abuse. Mandated reporters include, among others, teachers, medical professionals, law enforcement, childcare workers, etc. In the most serious cases, the emergency response social worker must respond within 24 hours. CFS staff members call the initial assessments **referrals**. Approximately 41% of the reports received become referrals. When social workers assess the referrals and deem them credible, supervisors distribute them to different social workers for further investigation and resolution. At this point, they call the referrals distributed for investigation **cases**. Approximately 39% of the referrals become cases. The chart below shows the workflow:

### CFS Workflow



Caseloads normally average 12-13 per social worker at any given time; this is within the guidelines for social workers recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (a coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies supporting children and families since 1920). However, social workers in the Emergency Response Unit can at times manage 30 or more referrals per social worker. The high number of referrals can contribute to job stress and potential delays in providing support to children and families in need.

Social workers have challenging and stressful jobs. They often meet with children and families in times of crisis, and in complex and traumatic situations. Social workers face a level of danger when conducting home visits. In some cases, previous instances of domestic violence and/or abuse may cause parents or guardians to fear that a social worker may remove their children from the home. Additionally, parents or guardians participating in illegal activities may fear that the investigation could lead to arrest and incarceration. In such situations, parents or guardians may feel threatened by those investigating the case. Social workers usually travel alone to homes.

CFS experiences significant challenges in recruiting and retaining social workers, in part related to the challenging nature of the job. This is a long-standing problem, both in Contra Costa County and throughout the nation. There has been extensive research on this topic<sup>1</sup>. As an example of this long-standing problem, in a study published by the U.S Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, "Turnover of staff in social agencies has been a serious concern of agency administrators for at least the past 10 years. Repeatedly, at conferences and in the professional journals, the complaint has been heard that staff turnover (1) handicaps the agency in its efforts to provide effective social services for clients; (2) is costly and unproductively time consuming; and (3) is responsible for the weary cycle of recruitment-employment-orientation-production-resignation ..." (Tollen, 1960). The Grand Jury found that these issues continue to exist in Contra Costa County in 2025.

One of the factors contributing to the difficulty in hiring social workers at CFS is a shrinking pool of students enrolled in social work majors in the western United States (California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii, and Guam). This leads to fewer college graduates with the credentials necessary to pursue careers in social work. The following table illustrates this trend: Today, fewer college students in the western United States (California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii, and Guam) enroll in social work majors, leading to fewer college graduates with the credentials necessary to pursue careers in social work. The following table illustrates this trend:

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, The Child Welfare Information Gateway, The U.S Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, and The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development.

## Social Worker Degree Enrollments

	Bachelor's Degree Programs					Master's Degree Programs					Total BSW & MSW Programs			
	BSW Enrolled	BSW Degrees	Western Enrolled	Est. Western BSW Degrees*		MSW Enrolled	MSW Degrees	Western Enrolled	Est. Western MSW Degrees*		Total BSW & MSW Enrolled	Total BSW & MSW Degrees Conferred	Total BSW & MSW Western Enrolled	Est. Western BSW & MSW Degrees*
2022	56,709	17,972	3,289	1,042		83,610	32,801	7,358	2,886		140,319	50,773	10,647	3,929
2021	51,951	16,780	3,325	1,074		62,888	26,514	4,025	1,697		114,839	43,294	7,350	2,771
2020	61,907	19,474	5,200	1,636		75,851	31,750	7,661	3,207		137,758	51,224	12,861	4,843
2019	56,530	18,769	3,901	1,295		68,793	29,546	8,599	3,693		125,323	48,315	12,500	4,988
2018	58,733	20,133	4,934	1,691		67,084	27,296	8,251	3,357		125,817	47,429	13,185	5,049
2017	60,306	20,295	4,885	1,644		63,569	27,270	9,218	3,954		123,875	47,565	14,102	5,598
2016	63,530	20,348	3,748	1,201		64,486	27,659	8,577	3,679		128,016	48,007	12,325	4,879
2015	62,968	19,596	3,337	1,039		60,122	25,883	8,477	3,650		123,090	45,479	11,815	4,688
2014	64,811	19,278	3,889	1,157		56,403	25,018	8,066	3,578		121,214	44,296	11,954	4,734

Source: Council on Social Work Education (cswe.org)

### Notes:

- (a) CSWE is the accrediting agency for Social Work degree programs
- (b) Western states under CSWE definitions include California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii & Guam
- (c) BSW = Bachelor of Social Work
- (d) MSW = Master of Social Work
- (e) Data for 2021 reflects the impact of Covid lockdown

\*Estimated western degrees conferred assumes western enrollment percentage equals western degrees conferred percentage

Social Workers Employed in California: 92,840

Social Workers Employed in United States: 751,900

Estimated number of Social Worker Job Openings/year: 67,300 (Nationwide)

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Nationally, the estimated annual demand for social workers (67,300) exceeds the annual number of graduates (50,773). Based upon U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics data, California needs approximately 8,300 new social workers per year. Currently, approximately 4,000 students graduate from colleges and universities in the western United States with degrees in social work each year. This is less than half the number of social workers needed to fill the gap in California alone. These factors contribute to reducing the pool of potential applicants from which the County may hire. Because of these issues, among others (salary issues, housing costs, limited recruiting, job stress, etc.), CFS faces challenges in hiring social worker staff.

The challenges in hiring and retaining social workers result in unfilled positions within CFS. Between 2015-2020, CFS reported an average vacancy rate of 16%. The current vacancy rate is 19%, with 31 of 167 authorized positions unoccupied. Having 31 unfilled positions negatively impacts operations within CFS. Understaffing increases the workload of existing staff, contributing to increased job stress and turnover. This was confirmed in multiple interviews with CFS staff. If all the open social worker positions were filled, there would be 31 more social workers available to share the workload. Additionally, the increased workload can result in a

negative impact on services provided to children and families, including a longer time to close cases. When a social worker leaves CFS, if that person has not entered casework notes into the computer system, the social workers taking over the open cases must re-interview and re-investigate the cases. This causes increased work for existing staff, additional stress for children and families, and delays in providing them with support.

Social Worker salaries in Contra Costa County are fractionally lower than the average of near-by counties (see table below). The differential is particularly noteworthy versus San Francisco County where the average salary for a senior social worker is approximately 13% higher than in Contra Costa. This differential has contributed to staff departures in Contra Costa for comparable positions with competing agencies offering higher compensation.

## Social Worker Salary Comparisons - Child Protective Services

County	Level II	Level III	Job Title
Alameda	\$97,578	\$108,966	Child Welfare Worker Protective Services Worker -
San Francisco	NA	\$120,679	Family & Children's Services
Solano	\$96,750	\$106,427	Social Worker - Adult or Child Services
Contra Costa	\$95,238	\$107,028	Social Worker - Adult or Child Services
Average	\$96,522	\$110,775	
Contra Costa vs. Avg.	99%	97%	

### Notes:

Data based on 2025 salary schedules for each County

Salaries are an average of the minimum and maximum salary at each level

While job titles vary by county, the job descriptions are similar in each case

San Francisco County does not distinguish between Levels II and III in its Job Classifications

The HR department recruits social workers from colleges and universities within the Bay Area. They conduct little to no recruitment in other regions in California or other states. The hiring process is lengthy and cumbersome, which can discourage potential applicants. For example, the county hiring process includes 27 steps and hiring new staff members takes on average 113 days. Existing social workers must take on an increased workload until the HR department hires and trains the new staff.

EHSD implemented some changes to improve the hiring process. Since the 2023-24 fiscal year, three additional support staff have been added to facilitate the recruiting and hiring process within EHSD, including CFS. These support staff make a positive impact on hiring and reduce the number of vacancies. Between January 2024 and February 2025, the number of vacancies within EHSD has been reduced by 17%, reflecting these additions of staff. Additionally, to broaden the pool of applicants, the County lowered the educational requirements for social



workers newly hired into CFS from a Master of Social Work degree to a Bachelor of Science degree, plus relevant experience in the field.

As a tool to aid recruitment and retention, CFS developed an internship program to host university Master of Social Work (MSW) interns. Additionally, CFS supports their own employees in their MSW program by continuing their salary while they are in school and hosting them as interns. Since 2019, CFS hired eight of 28 university interns and promoted five of 23 employee interns into permanent social worker positions.

Due to the number of unfilled positions, CFS does not spend its entire personnel budget allocation each year. CFS could potentially re-allocate unspent funds on a variety of strategies designed to increase recruitment and retention. Some strategies might include participating at recruiting/hiring fairs nationally, developing an employee referral program, implementing hiring and retention bonuses, providing incentives such as student loan forgiveness and housing assistance, paying for transportation costs for candidates coming from outside of the area for interviews, paying for moving costs for newly hired employees, and developing/expanding motivational, recognition, and wellness programs for current employees. Some of the above suggested changes require consultation and agreement with employee unions.

Another potential source of funding is Measure X, a ½ cent county-wide sales tax. The tax was passed on November 3, 2020, and generates approximately \$120 million each year to support a variety of services. The provisions of Measure X explicitly allow funding for early childhood services and protection of vulnerable populations.

CFS faces long-standing challenges like those encountered by child service agencies nationwide. In a 2019 Civil Grand Report (Report 1906: Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect – A Review of Children and Family Services in Contra Costa County, May 2019), the Grand Jury noted a number of vacancies among social workers, a lengthy hiring process, heavy workloads, and a stressful work environment. While CFS has taken steps to address these issues, we note that many of the same challenges remain today.

## FINDINGS

F1: The Children and Family Services staff is dedicated to the important work they do.

F2: The social worker job is challenging and stressful, contributing to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining of staff.

F3: Children and Family Services faces challenges in both hiring and retaining social worker staff.

F4: Social workers have resigned and taken positions with competing agencies offering higher pay.

F5: As of January 2025, Children and Family Services has a current social worker vacancy rate of 19%, with 31 of 167 authorized positions unfilled.

F6: Understaffing increases the workload for existing staff.

F7: The absence of a full staff of social workers can result in a negative impact on services provided to children and families, including delays in service, requirements for re-interviews, and the related stress on children and families.

F8: The hiring process is lengthy, with 27 steps and taking on average 113 days, which can potentially discourage applicants from completing the process and receiving an offer of employment.

F9: Fewer college students in the western United States are enrolling in social work majors, reducing the pool of potential applicants.

F10: Children and Family Services does not recruit for social workers at universities and colleges outside of the Bay Area or participate at recruiting/hiring fairs nationally.

F11: Children and Family Services has reduced the educational requirements from Master of Social Work to Bachelor of Science plus relevant experience, to increase the pool of potential applicants.

F12: Adding dedicated Human Resources staff to Employment and Human Services Department has aided hiring efforts.

F13: Children and Family Services does not reimburse new employees for relocation expenses.

F14: Children and Family Services does not reimburse interviewees for travel expenses.

F15: Children and Family Services provides limited motivational, recognition, and wellness programs for social workers.

F16: Children and Family Services does not have an employee referral program for social workers.

F17: Children and Family Services does not have a hiring or retention bonus program for social workers.

F18: Children and Family Services has university and employee internship programs. Since 2019, CFS hired eight of 28 university interns and promoted five of 23 employee interns into permanent social worker positions.

F19: Several of the challenges identified by the Grand Jury in 2019 (including a number of vacancies among social workers, a lengthy hiring process, heavy workloads, and a stressful work environment) still exist today.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

R1: By January 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to recruit for social workers at universities and colleges outside of Contra Costa County, participate at recruiting/hiring fairs nationally, and host virtual job fairs, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

R2: By January 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to develop an employee referral program, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

R3: By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to implement a hiring and retention bonuses program, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

R4: By January 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to create other incentive programs for new and existing staff, such as student loan forgiveness programs and housing assistance, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

R5: By January 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to expand internship programs to generate increased interest in working with CFS in Contra Costa.

R6: By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to streamline the hiring process to reduce the time it takes to hire a social worker.

R7: By January 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to develop and implement a program to pay for moving expenses for newly hired social workers, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

R8: By January 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to develop and implement a program to pay for travel expenses of employees when recruiting social workers, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

R9: By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Human Resources Department and the Employment and Human Services Department to provide additional motivational, recognition, and wellness programs for social workers as an incentive in recruitment and retention, potentially using Measure X funds as a source of funding.

## REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code § 933(b) et seq. and California Penal Code § 933.05, the 2024-2025 Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury requests responses from the following governing bodies:

Responding Agency	Findings	Recommendations
Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors	F1 - F19	R1 - R9

These responses must be provided in the format and by the date set forth in the cover letter that accompanies this report. An electronic copy of these responses in the form of a Word document should be sent by e-mail to [ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov](mailto:ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov) and a hard (paper) copy should be sent to:

Civil Grand Jury – Foreperson  
725 Court Street  
P.O. Box 431  
Martinez, CA 94553-0091

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