

Virginia Staffing Demonstration

Executive Summary

A Federal- and State-Funded Research Demonstration

Division of Child Support Enforcement
Virginia Department of Social Services

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**An Overview and Comparison of Small And Large
Office Findings, Conclusions And Recommendations**

Introduction

Objective

Funded in 1993 and performed between 1994 and 1998, this federal Staffing Demonstration was designed to determine the role that staffing standards play in the performance of local child support offices. The Staffing Demonstration, using the Delphi technique, established time standards for the following six discrete functions involved in enforcing child support:

1. Performing customer intake;
2. Locating the non-custodial parent;
3. Establishing paternity and/or a support obligation administratively;
4. Administering judicial matters (paternity establishment and/or support obligation), as necessary;
5. Enforcing obligations; and
6. Providing customer service.

Thumbnail Sketch of Virginia Child Support Enforcement

Virginia is an administrative-process state. Virginia has 22 district (i.e., local) offices, of which 18 are state-run; it meets customers' needs using a functional (e.g., Locate, Enforcement), not generic, organizational structure. It had a statewide caseload of 415,000 in FY 1998 (the last year of the study), of which approximately 25 percent were TANF cases and 27 percent were Interstate cases.

Research Questions

The Staffing Demonstration addressed the following four research questions:

1. *Are staffing standards and optimal caseloads¹ for child support functions feasible and desirable?*
2. *How do the recommended staffing standards and optimal caseload affect staffing levels and operational efficiency?*
3. *Do the recommended staffing standards and optimal caseloads improve productivity and quality of service?*
4. *Are the recommended standards and caseloads cost-justified?*

Experimental Design

In the Small Office study, only one treatment was involved: the introduction of additional employees into the Fredericksburg office (for a 15-month Experimental Period, June 1996 through August 1997). The control office was Charlottesville. The Virginia “small” office, handling a caseload up to 13,000 with a staff between 22 and 28, is typical of the size of local child support offices in many states.

In the Large Office study, two treatments were involved. One treatment was the implementation of computer-based macros in both the Richmond and Roanoke offices (tested for a four-month Macros Period, August through November 1996). The second treatment was the introduction of additional employees into the Roanoke office only (for a 15-month Experimental Period, December 1996 through February 1998). The control office for the introduction of the computer-based macros was Newport News, and the control office for the introduction of additional employees was Richmond.

¹ Caseload standards are being developed for the two demonstration offices currently. They should be available in early 2001.

Delphi Technique and Its Feasibility

Both studies involved the use of the Delphi technique, described below, to determine staffing levels during a Base Period (for the Small Office study, July 1995 through May 1996; for the Large Office study, July 1995 through July 1996). However, the method of selecting the members of the Delphi panels differed. In the Small Office study, the panel members represented all six offices defined as “small” in the Commonwealth. In Virginia, “small” offices are defined as those with caseloads under 13,000. In the Large Office study, the panel members were composed of employees solely from the Roanoke office. “Large” offices in Virginia are defined as those with caseloads over 22,000. Roanoke had more than 27,000 cases and a full-time staff of 56 during the Base Period of the study.

The Delphi technique was determined to be a feasible method for establishing staffing standards in these two offices. Employees who participated in the panels appeared to accept the technique as a practical method for determining standards. In addition, informal interviews with members of the management teams and employees in the two offices found general acceptance of the Delphi technique. These results were confirmed in focus groups of employees from the demonstration offices.

Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The Delphi Technique

Findings

The Delphi technique was used to determine staffing time standards in two different ways. One approach was to select panelists from each of the child support functional areas representing the six “small” offices in Virginia. Once the time standards were developed by specialty for small offices as a group, staffing standards were developed for one small office (i.e., Fredericksburg).

In the Large Office study, the panel members who developed staffing time standards by specialty represented the large office (i.e., Roanoke) exclusively. The

remaining process to develop the staffing standards was the same as for Fredericksburg.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Delphi technique offers a valid methodology for establishing staffing standards for local child support operations. Both approaches noted above developed time standards well, although the panels selected from a group of like-size offices had some benefits in representation and in providing a cross-cutting perspective that allowed for more accurate estimates and less bias.

The Delphi technique is relatively easy to use and has significant advantages over staffing standards developed through peer/supervisory committees. Benefits include the following features:

- Written feedback is given to group members separately, allowing them the opportunity to consider their decisions by themselves, to compare them to the decisions of others, and to make changes if they choose
- Anonymity is ensured for group members
- Diverse personalities and communication skills are precluded from influencing the judgment of individual group members

A quick approach to developing office staffing standards: Based on the work in this study, a quick way to develop office staffing standards is as follows:

- (1) Start with the time standards developed in this project, by task for each specialty;
- (2) Determine whether, based on the way staff work cases, the Virginia time standards (from the staffing analysis) apply or need to be adjusted by task;
- (3) Develop annual frequencies for each task of each specialty; and

(4) Conduct the analysis described below:

- Multiply the annual frequency by the time standard for each task of each specialty
- Add the total time to perform each specialty in the year
- Divide the total annual time to conduct that specialty by the case worker standard (i.e., the number of hours per year the average case worker applies to direct case-related work). This result gives the number of positions required per year to perform the given specialty.
- Repeat the process for each specialty.
- Account for the optimal staffing level for the office by developing operating ratios for managerial span of control, support staff to case-related staff, fiscal staff to case-related staff, and fiscal staff to total staff.

Additional Staff Needed

Findings

Using the Delphi technique, it was determined that the each office was understaffed to work the caseload at the optimal staffing level:

- The small office (Fredericksburg) was 33 percent understaffed, with 28 full-time employees (FTEs) (versus 42 needed).
- The large office (Roanoke) was 28 percent understaffed, with 56 FTEs (versus 78 needed).

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The experimental offices, both large and small, were significantly understaffed prior to the addition of personnel during the Staffing Demonstration.
- The addition of employees in the Fredericksburg office had a positive effect upon six major indicators of district office performance—locates, paternities, administrative obligations, wage withholdings, dollars collected, and the benefit/cost ratio—as well as upon both employee and customer satisfaction.

- The addition of employees in the Roanoke office had a positive effect upon four major indicators of district office performance—locates, paternities, dollars collected, and the benefit/cost ratio—as well as upon both employee and customer satisfaction, although the results for customer satisfaction were less favorable in Roanoke.
- Employees in both experimental offices were generally pleased with the number of additional staff acquired, based on the results of the Delphi technique.
- The experience in the experimental offices indicates that management improvements may not be a necessary precursor to developing and implementing staffing standards. This is welcome news, given the dynamic nature of the world of child support enforcement.
- The Delphi methodology is sufficiently flexible for use in offices whose caseloads range from less than 13,000 to 27,000 cases.

Performance Indicators

Findings

The additional personnel in the Fredericksburg office during the 15-month Experimental Period (June 1996 through August 1997) produced some positive results in performance, compared to the control office:

- 1,214 or 73 percent more locates
- 276 or 1,500 percent more paternities established
- 74 or 44 percent more administrative obligations from the Base Period
- 699 or 633 percent more wage withholdings
- \$1.08 million more dollars collected or 61 percent more per employee
- \$1.80 increase in the benefit/cost ratio

The additional personnel in the Roanoke office during the 15-month Experimental Period (December 1996 through February 1998) also produced some positive results in performance, compared to the control office:

- 2,713 or 87 percent more locates
- 720 or 121 percent more paternities established

- \$66,144 more dollars collected or 2½ percent more per employee
- \$0.17 increase in the benefit/cost ratio

Conclusions and Recommendations

- In Fredericksburg, six major performance measures (i.e., locates, paternity establishments, administrative obligations, wage withholdings, dollars collected, and the benefit/cost ratio) showed improvement after the additional staff were added.
- In Roanoke, four major performance measures (i.e., locates, paternity establishments, dollars collected, and the benefit/cost ratio) showed improvement after the additional staff were added.
- The impact of additional staff on performance is ongoing, as evidenced by the continued improvement in performance after staff left each experimental office.
- Several events occurred during the Large Office study that may have affected the outcome measures in the Roanoke office adversely. These events were:

Implementing Computer-Based Macros

Determining the optimum number of employees to handle a given level of work is the goal of every organization. This goal is often elusive, however, when existing methods of work are not fully efficient or the manner in which work is delegated is cumbersome. For reasons like these, optimum staffing levels for an organization are usually established *after* procedures are refined and management improvements implemented, to ensure an optimum level of efficiency in current operations.

This customary approach was applied only in the experimental design for the large office study. Due to a combination of unfortunate factors, however, the only significant change that was made in the operation of the Roanoke office was the implementation of several sets of computer-based macros, intended to facilitate specialists' administration of their casework. These macros had already been implemented in the Richmond office, where employees were generally pleased

with them. Undoubtedly, a major reason for employee acceptance was that the architect was a colleague and supervisor in Richmond, well respected within the office and readily available to assist with their adoption.

The desired positive effect of the computer-based macros did not occur, however, in the Roanoke office, and is traceable to several factors:

- At that time, the Roanoke office did not use the statewide automated system (APECS) to its full extent
- Staff did not have a complete understanding of the features of the system designed to facilitate documentation and work assignment/priority (i.e., case events, work lists)
- Training on the year-old system and understanding its features were not the highest priority for the management team in Roanoke
- Challenges were almost always present during the implementation of the macros in the Roanoke office. These included the absence of continuous, on-site technical support (as in Richmond) and a lower response time on APECS once the macros were installed in Roanoke PCs.

Assigned Absence of District Manager

The Roanoke district manager was assigned to manage another district office part-time during the critical Experimental Period, when the additional employees were introduced into Roanoke. During his absence, his duties were delegated to other management team members in the office. This arrangement undoubtedly had an adverse effect upon the office since the management team was expected to accomplish its regular tasks, assume some tasks performed by the district manager, and also train and integrate into the office setting the additional employees identified as needed through the Delphi technique.

Deploying the Additional Staff

Over one-half the staff hired in the Roanoke office were hired as “specialists” (i.e., at the level of functional case worker), and management assigned these new

specialists to handle individual caseloads. Complicating this was the fact that some of these staff were assigned to a new unit handling interstate cases. As a result, some new staff were assigned to work the most difficult, most time-consuming, and most problem-driven cases in a child support caseload. These factors prevented or, at best, delayed the attainment of more positive performance outcomes, since many additional staff already faced a steep learning curve as case workers, and some new specialists had to wrestle with the most challenging caseload, interstate.

Employee Satisfaction

Employee satisfaction was tested in the five demonstration offices once during the Base Period and three times during the Experimental Period. All employees in each office were given the satisfaction questionnaire.

Findings

- Overall employee satisfaction (“*Overall, how satisfied are you with working here?*”) was 19 percent higher in the Fredericksburg office (than in the Charlottesville control office) toward the end of the period in which the additional personnel were employed.
- Comparably in Roanoke, overall employee satisfaction was 21 percent higher (than in the Richmond control office) toward the end of the period in which the additional personnel were employed.
- Employee responses to a question about the number of staff (“*For the work to be done, do you feel the number of staff in your office is _____? [Alternatives = very inadequate, inadequate, about right, overstaffed, and very overstaffed]*”) were 31 percent more favorable in Roanoke (compared to the Richmond control office) toward the end of the Experimental Period (when employees were added).
- Employees in the Fredericksburg and Roanoke experimental offices were satisfied with the number of additional employees added in the Experimental Period of the study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The implementation of staffing standards had a positive influence on employee satisfaction in both experimental offices.

Customer Satisfaction

A customer satisfaction survey was administered three times during the Small Office Experimental Period and once during the Large Office Macros Period plus twice during the Large Office Experimental Period. The survey was given to the first 100 walk-in customers from each office in each of the respective months.

Findings

- Similar to employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction is an important variable in evaluating the performance of a district office.
- For the question “*Is your case handled in a timely manner?*” the difference in customer responses for the Fredericksburg office (compared with the Charlottesville control office) increased by 9 percentage points in favor of Fredericksburg during the Experimental Period.
- For the same question and the same period, the difference in customer responses for Roanoke (compared with the Richmond control office) increased by 15 percentage points in favor of Roanoke. Compared to Newport News, however, there was a small decline in percentage points.
- For the question “*Are you treated courteously when you phone/visit the office?*” the difference in customer responses for the Fredericksburg office (compared with the Charlottesville control office) increased by 7 percentage points in favor of Fredericksburg during the Experimental Period.
- For the same question and the same period, the difference in customer responses for Roanoke (compared with the Richmond control office) increased by 23 percentage points. Similar results were obtained in comparisons with Newport News.

- Finally, for the question “*Have Child Support staff been helpful?*” the difference in customer responses for Fredericksburg (compared with Charlottesville) increased by 10 percentage points during the Experimental Period.
- For the same question and the same period, the difference in customer responses for Roanoke (compared with Richmond) declined by 6 percentage points. Comparisons with customers in Newport News showed similar results.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The implementation of staffing standards had a positive influence on customer satisfaction in both experimental offices, although more so in Fredericksburg than in Roanoke.

Comparison of Results for the Large and Small Experimental Offices

Table 1 (see below) contains results of a comparison for the key variables tracked during the demonstration for the Small and Large Office studies. These results have been discussed above. In brief, they are:

- The additional employees introduced into the Fredericksburg and Roanoke offices resulted in increases—compared to their respective control offices—in the number of locates, paternity establishments, dollars collected, benefit/cost ratio, and both employee and customer satisfaction. In addition, the Fredericksburg office achieved increases in the numbers of administrative obligations and wage withholdings. For the latter two variables, the numbers declined in Roanoke. The number of court obligations declined in Fredericksburg and remained the same in Roanoke.
- With the exception of customer satisfaction, the introduction of additional employees in the Roanoke experimental office did not reach the level of success achieved in the Fredericksburg experimental office. Three plausible reasons for this outcome are: (1) the level of employee dissatisfaction with the computer-based macros, intended to improve operational efficiencies, in Roanoke; (2) the

required, part-time absence of the Roanoke district manager for several periods during important phases of the demonstration; and (3) the approach that Roanoke management chose for deploying the additional employees hired during the Experimental Period of the study.

Conclusion

Staffing and caseload standards are a continuing issue in the child support enforcement program. As states and local agencies struggle to provide effective services to an ever more demanding customer base, managers need guidance on the correct number of staff, the best placement of those staff, and the number of cases (likely, by type of case) that individual staff members can manage. This study sheds light on many of these issues. It shows that staffing does have an impact on performance and that the Delphi methodology is a good way to develop the standards. The results also show that it is possible and relatively easy to determine the correct number of staff for a local office and that the process does not have a negative impact on the office during the development cycle. Finally, the study shows that, in a local office, *where* staff are deployed is equally as important as the *number* of staff employed.

Table 1: Net Results of Differences in Fredericksburg and Roanoke District Offices Compared to Their Control Offices: Post-Experimental (minus) Base Periods

Performance Variables	Fredericksburg		Roanoke	
	# per employee	Total	# per employee	Total
Locates	6.6* more (73%)	1,214 more	6.4* more (87%)	2,713 more
Paternity Establishments	1.5* more (1,500%)	276 more	1.7 more (121%)	720 more
Administrative Obligations	0.4* improvement (44%)	74 more	-1.6* fewer (-177%)	678 fewer
Court Obligations	-0.7* fewer (-70%)	129 fewer	No change	No change
Wage Withholdings	3.8* more (633%)	699 more	-6.0* fewer (-171%)	2,544 fewer
Dollars Collected	\$5,881* more (61%)	\$1.08 million more	\$156* more (2.5%)	\$66,144 more
Other Variables	Fredericksburg		Roanoke	
\$ Benefits/\$ Costs	\$1.80* increase in ratio		\$0.17* increase in ratio	
Employee overall satisfaction ²	19% higher		21% higher	
Customer satisfaction: Case handled in timely manner ³ Staff courteous ⁴ Staff helpful ⁵	Increased by 9 percentage points Increased by 7 percentage points Increased by 10 percentage points		Increased by 15 percentage points Increased by 23 percentage points Declined by 6 percentage points	

* Significant at the .05 level

Customer Satisfaction: Each question shows the change in percentage points from first to last measurement.

² Overall, how satisfied are you with working here?

³ Was your case handled in a timely manner?

⁴ Are you treated courteously when you phone or visit the office?

⁵ Have child support staff been helpful?