



## **Go with the Flow: Increase Capacity to Transform Your Child Support Program**

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Never has the pressure to improve the program and do good on behalf of the children and families we serve been so intense. This pressure—fueled by increasing demands to improve federal measures and a new-found focus on parental engagement activities—comes at a time when programs across the country are experiencing significant staff attrition, decreasing budgets, and stagnant collections. To continue delivering on their promise and achieving outcomes that matter most, programs must rethink how they serve the modern family.

The challenge is daunting, but the transformation the Missouri Department of Human Services, Family Support Division, has seen as they have embarked upon rethinking how they perform their vital work, has given renewed hope. Unlocking capacity within their existing operation has been key. They have truly learned how to go with the flow...workflow, that is.

### **Caseworker Attrition Kickstarts a Downward Spiral**

All anti-poverty programs are experiencing record employee turnover, and child support programs are not immune from this trend. Based on our work with various child support programs in recent months, programs are experiencing between 20% to 60% annual turnover. Without a doubt, child support programs as we know them are not sustainable.

Caseworker attrition, or the loss of caseworkers from the child support program, kickstarts a downward spiral, significantly impacting the program's ability to provide services and collect child support payments. With increased vacancies, there are fewer staff resources to manage caseloads

and provide services to families. This reduced staff capacity leads to longer wait times for customers and delayed responses to their inquiries.

Attrition results in increased workload for remaining caseworkers. Required to take on additional responsibilities and work longer hours to maintain the program's operations, caseworkers are under

increased stress. Working in such an environment can lead to burnout and reduced job satisfaction.

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With attrition also comes significant loss of valuable institutional knowledge and expertise. This knowledge deficit can make it exceedingly difficult to manage complex cases and provide effective services to families. In addition, it takes time to recruit, hire, and train new caseworkers, and the process is also costly. This expense strains program budgets and reduces programs’ ability to provide services to families.

What can you do to stop the downward spiral of negative impacts on your program? The answer: regain capacity.

## **How Do You Start to Regain Capacity?**

High turnover, significant vacancies in some areas, and a loss of institutional knowledge all erode capacity and a program’s ability to serve. So how do you begin to regain capacity within your existing operation?

### *What is the Need?*

Quite simply, you first need to determine how much capacity you have and then determine how much you need to meet demand. The answer is all in the numbers.

To determine need across the entire program, you are essentially trying to identify:

$$\frac{\text{Work Time X Volume}}{\text{Available Resources}}$$

Many do not look at capacity this way. They think about caseloads and worry about backlogs or delays. They could not tell you what their values

were in the above math equation. But taking a deeper dive and changing how we think about capacity, we can begin to determine how we can maximize the staff capacity we do have to drive improved outcomes.

### *Make Work “Visible”*

Once you have determined how much capacity you need, you must explore how you can actually find this capacity. To regain capacity from your existing operation, you must look at the work and how it moves through the program from start to finish. Engaging staff and centering their voice is a critical component of identifying capacity-building opportunities.

To visualize the work process(es), begin with gathering and analyzing objective process performance data, including work volume. Next in the visualization effort comes meeting with supervisors and caseworkers to collect subjective data and learn more about the processes used.



Then it is time to bring the child support program experts together to analyze the existing process(es) in detail to identify inefficiencies and areas for improvement. This involves using process mapping techniques to visualize the flow of work and identify hand-offs, batching of work, bottlenecks, and backlogs to pinpoint areas where manual processes can be improved.

The result of these initial efforts is to have a clear picture of the work being done, how it is done, and who is doing it. In most cases the capacity math indicates there are not enough skilled staff to complete the work without process changes.

### *Make Work Flow*

Based on the analysis of the existing business processes and making the work visible, the next step is to make the work flow, ensuring children and families are served as quickly as possible. You do this by developing a new process design that considers staffing and skill levels, addresses the identified inefficiencies, and achieves the desired improvements in performance. This may involve simplifying or eliminating steps in the process, automating manual tasks, and introducing innovative technology or tools to ensure the redesigned processes remain visible and

manageable. It is in redesigning processes that a program can truly unlock capacity within their existing operation.

### *What Works Best for Your Program: Caseload or Task-Based?*

If you have been in the child support community for any time, you have been engaged in the long-time debate of using a task-based model for case management versus a caseload mode, and there are many opinions on which is the best approach. There does not appear to be a clear winner because every program utilizes a different service delivery model and has unique needs. But if programs are looking for ways to regain capacity, they should consider the crucial decision of caseload vs. task-based, particularly in the dynamic world of child support and the evolving needs of children and families. The answer does not have to be one or the other in a black and white context; the answer could be a hybrid, as long as the right work gets to the right caseworker, at the right time, based upon their skillset. Let's explore it.

In child support, the role of the caseworker is to really know the family—the situation, the collective and individual needs, and all the details of the file. The caseworker should have a relationship with the family that is deep enough to create a path for the work, resolve issues, and help steer the family to resources that can better the family's situation. Having a single point of contact to help families navigate the complexity of government for the lifespan of a case sounds appealing, but the reality of today's staff attrition makes managing caseloads at this level of involvement and knowledge increasingly difficult.

For instance, it is possible for caseworkers with 50-150 cases to know and remember families' stories, but due to today's high staff attrition rates, programs are facing caseloads upwards of 500-1200 for each worker! Even with case management systems, a caseworker would need a photographic memory or enough time to comb through the case history to understand the work completed and still needed. And, of course, the work still needed is likely to be further complicated by the challenge of connecting with participants. If one participant does not make an appointment... if one worker calls in sick... if one situation causes a thirty-minute discussion to go for two hours...if one cannot contact or locate a participant...if we must re-serve legal documents or reschedule genetic testing, there is a ripple effect that can have an impact for days and weeks to come. Suddenly,

work is ready, but it is sitting, waiting for participants and the caseworker to connect.

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Missouri faced such a situation, and a shared, task-based model made sense for their program. They replaced their individual caseload with a list of all the program’s cases detailed at the task level. All tasks that need to be completed are visible and shared among all the workers in their program across the state. Regardless of who owned the case before or who the participant is, Missouri’s caseworkers receive the right work, at the right time, based upon their skill level and what they can do. Caseworkers share the work, so they feel less pressure to rush, and they always know the cases on which they should focus.

According to Kim Evans, the Missouri Family Support Division Director, a task-based model has truly transformed how they do their work, and their agency has benefited. Evans said, “Our software shows us the types of cases that need done. We can match that to employees who have the right skillsets to accomplish those. When we see a case list in a specific area growing larger than our skillset resources, we know we need to train more people to help there. New workers do not need to know how to work a case from start to finish; we can get them productive sooner by training them on the most popular cases and build their skills over time.”

Some see sharing work as demotivating and fear that, without ownership over the entire case, caseworkers can “pass the buck” to another worker. In the shared caseload model, this fear can be addressed by using a quality control process that incorporates monitoring completed work daily, weekly, and monthly rather than only annually or bi-annually as part of the audit.

By using a shared, task-based model and having visibility into the total outstanding work, child support programs are better suited to maintain virtual operations. Overall, remote work can offer many benefits to both employees and employers, including flexibility, increased productivity, cost savings, improved work-life balance, and access to a wider talent pool.

Missouri was initially concerned with this impact. As Evans said, “Ironically, some of our most experienced staff are feeling a renewed connection with families. They see the results of their work every day, instead of passing work off to other workers, so they know they are making a difference. Also, since leadership has unparalleled visibility into the cases being completed and the results of their efforts, they can confidently offer our workers the flexibility to work from anywhere.”

## Capacity to Transform

Transforming child support programs to ensure they remain relevant and meet the needs of the modern family is critical. But for impactful and sustainable transformation to occur, child support programs must first have capacity to change in a meaningful way. The talented team in Missouri understood how important it is to maximize the capacity of your operation—and what is possible when you do! Since moving to this new business model in June 2022, Missouri has experienced a 20% increase in average tasks completed per caseworker.



Only when we build sufficient capacity within our existing operation can we expand our parental engagement activities to drive voluntary compliance and achieve other mission-critical outcomes that matter most.

And then, all you have to do is just go with the flow.

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**April Klatt** began her public service career with the Arizona Department of Economic Security in 2001, first as a call center specialist and then as a supervisor. During her career, April has developed extensive experience with front line operations as a child support enforcement officer, supervisor, process improvement specialist, program manager, and most recently as an operations administrator responsible for program improvements at all levels of the organization. April is currently a Consultant for the Change and Innovation Agency and is a dedicated child support professional committed to the child support program's expansion as an important anti-poverty program. April is also involved with WICSEC and currently is on the Board of Directors as the Second Vice President.