

CASS COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES SPECIAL BOARD MEETING
October 21, 2019

MINUTES

With quorum present, Commissioner Peterson called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.

Present: Chad Peterson, Glenn Ellingsberg, Duane Breitling (via phone), Mary Scherling, Brian Hagen, Rick Steen,

Absent:

Presenter: Chip Ammerman, Director; Sgt. Joel Stading; Birch Burdick, State Attorney;

I. Internal Investigation Report

Chair Peterson welcomed everyone present today. He reminded the members of the media that the Board meets every other Monday of the month and everything from Social Services to law enforcement and highways is discussed during these meetings.

Mr. Ammerman asked for direction from the Board members as to how they would like the information presented. Chair Peterson explained the Board is unable to meet outside a quorum, so besides himself and Commissioner Scherling, current Chair of the County Commission, other Board members are not apprised of the situation. Mr. Ammerman was asked to start at the beginning and present his plan for resolution. Chair Peterson also explained that while North Dakota is a Right to Work State, Cass County does not, as a government organization, have the ability to fire at will. Social Services is more unique in that it hires based on the Merit System, which outlines a different process for hiring and terminating employment.

Mr. Ammerman explained the report was initiated by a letter Jennifer Aldinger sent to the Social Service Board and State. After receiving the letter in April, Mr. Ammerman, with assistance from Human Resource (HR) Director Cindy Stoick, requested an internal investigation through the Cass County Sheriff's Department be conducted due to a report of a hostile environment. Mr. Ammerman referred to the summary provided to the Board Members, including the letter that initiated the investigation.

Mr. Ammerman identified there were two main concerns in the report: caseloads and hostile work environment. He stated the work that is done in Social Services is very emotionally exhausting and difficult as it involves working with people in crisis. This exposes workers to traumatic experiences, often referred to as secondary trauma. The agency must be very aware of this factor and consistently addressing. Some strategies have been implemented; however, he acknowledged the agency could do a better job in addressing this exposure. The Social Service Board and Commission have been informed of the high caseloads, not only during the budget process, but on a monthly basis as well. Caseloads that high are impossible to manage and do the quality level of work staff want to do.

Per Commissioner Peterson's request on November 4, 2019, he would like to recognize the lack of acknowledgement regarding the work environment.

Mr. Ammerman touched on each finding from the Cass County Sheriff's Office Facts and Findings found in the meeting packet. He reported speaking with Rick Van Camp, who

Cass County Sheriff's Office
Facts and Findings

Description: Complaint of working conditions at the Cass County Social Service Child Protective Services Unit.

The Findings are as follows:

1. On April 11, 2019, JENNIFER ALDINGER from the Cass County Social Service CPS Unit submits her letter of resignation to the Human Resource Director.
2. ALDINGER alleges that the working conditions in the unit are "hostile" towards staff.
3. ALDINGER alleges that in a meeting with RICK VAN CAMP, ALDINGER was told to, "Keep her head down and her mouth shut," and to "Do as you are told." She states that she was told that workers who have questioned management in the past no longer work for Cass County Social Services.
4. ALDINGER accuses CPS management of ethical violations for holding off on assigning cases for over two weeks after receiving them.
5. The Cass County Sheriff's Office was requested to investigate the allegations of a hostile working environment.
6. Line staff members of the CPS unit were interviewed about the allegations.
7. Most, if not all members, felt that the working environment in the CPS Unit could be considered hostile to a point. They stated that they are expected to complete their work even though some situations make it very difficult, if not impossible to do. They also described the unit conditions as extremely stressful and feel that the morale is very low.
8. Staff members stated that the reasons for these conditions were because of the large amount of cases assigned to each staff member, and the lack of support they are receiving from the supervisors and management of the unit.
9. Staff members claim that they are getting an unmanageable amount of cases assigned to them, and that the supervisors are not around to help them when they are needed. They also fear being reprimanded if they ever question supervisor/management decisions. Staff members believe that the ideas that they bring up don't matter to supervisors or management.
10. Staff members said in order for them to close a case, they need to meet with their direct supervisor and go through the case with them. They stated that direct supervisors are always being pulled away from the staff members by upper management, without notice, making it impossible for a staff member to close a case. They feel that management does not value the staff members' time.
11. Staff members said that if they had the time and support they need from supervisors and management, it would make the caseload not as much of an issue that it is now. They

stated that with proper supervision, they would be able to work with their supervisors efficiently, closing out cases in a timely manner.

12. Staff members also stated that they don't feel comfortable going to upper management to discuss matters, or close cases out with them if necessary. They feel intimidated by upper management. If upper management attend team meetings, the staff members will not verbally participate in the discussion for fear of being yelled at.
13. Staff members feel like they are being treated poorly by supervisors/management. Staff feel like they are not valued and can be replaced quickly.
14. The majority of the staff members said that they are currently, or think about looking for other employment. Others stated that they have already found new employment, and are going to be leaving the CPS Unit soon. All responded that the reason they are leaving, or want to leave, is because of the management of the unit. They also stated that they would not recommend to anyone that they apply for a position at the CPS for the same reason.
15. Direct supervisors were interviewed. They agreed that the amount of the cases assigned to staff is very high. It was stated that the amount of the work assigned, and the expectation for the staff to be able to handle the workload, was unmanageable. They also agreed that more time is needed to be set aside for them to "staff" cases so the staff members could close cases in a more efficient manner. They also believed that there might be problems with staff members and upper management, but they stated that there have not been any specific issues brought to their attention.

Sergeant Joel Stading
Cass County Sheriff's Office
Office of Professional Standards

OFFICE OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS
CASS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE, FARGO, ND

DESCRIPTION OF INVESTIGATION: ASSIST OTHER AGENCIES

AGENCY NAME: CASS COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES

DESCRIPTION OF COMPLAINT: HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES (CPS) UNIT

DATE COMPLAINT MADE: APRIL 11, 2019

DATE OF SHERIFF'S OFFICE INVOLVEMENT: APRIL 16, 2019

INVESTIGATOR: SERGEANT JOEL STADING

SYNOPSIS:

On April 11, 2019; an employee of the Cass County Social Service Child Protection Services (CPS) Unit, made a claim of a hostile working environment, and unethical issues, in the CPS Unit. At the time of this complaint, the employee was on administrative leave, but decided to resign from the employee's position before any formal discipline was given by the employee's supervisor. This complaint was in a resignation letter that the employee sent to the Cass County Human Resource (HR) Director.

At the request of the HD Director, the Cass County Sheriff's Office was asked to investigate the allegations made in the letter.

HOSTILE WORKING ENVIRONMENT DEFINED:

In United States labor law, a hostile work environment exists when one's behavior within a workplace creates an environment that is difficult or uncomfortable for another person to work in, due to discrimination.^[1] Common complaints in sexual harassment lawsuits include fondling, suggestive remarks, sexually suggestive photos displayed in the workplace, use of sexual language, or off-color jokes.^[2] Small matters, annoyances, and isolated incidents are usually not considered statutory violations of the discrimination laws. For a violation to impose liability, the conduct must create a work environment that would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to a reasonable person. An employer can be held liable for failing to prevent these workplace conditions, unless it can prove that it attempted to prevent the harassment and that the employee failed to take advantage of existing harassment counter-measures or tools provided by the employer.^[3]

A hostile work environment may also be created when management acts in a manner designed to make an employee quit in retaliation for some action. For example, if an employee reported safety violations at work, was injured, attempted to join a union, or reported regulatory violations by management, and management's response was to harass and pressure the employee to quit. Employers have tried to force employees to quit by imposing unwarranted discipline, reducing hours, cutting wages, or transferring the complaining employee to a distant work location.

The United States Supreme Court stated in Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.^[4] that Title VII is "not a general civility code." Thus, federal law does not prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not extremely serious. Rather, the conduct must be so objectively offensive as to alter the conditions of the individual's employment. The conditions of employment are altered only if the harassment culminates in a tangible employment action or is sufficiently severe or pervasive.

DEFINITION OF HOSTILE WORKING ENVIRONMENT:

Unwelcome or offensive behavior in the workplace, which causes one or more employees to feel uncomfortable, scared, or intimidated in their place of employment.

REQUIREMENTS FOR A HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT:

A hostile work environment is created by a boss or coworker whose actions, communication or behavior make doing your job impossible. This means that the behavior altered the terms, conditions, and/or reasonable expectations of a comfortable work environment for employees.

DETAILS:

On or around March 29, 2019, an employee of the Cass County Social Service CPS Unit, identified as JENNIFER ALDINGER, was placed on administrative leave, for possible violations on how she collected information. Prior to any resolution of her suspension, ALDINGER decided to resign from her position, and sent the Cass County HR Director, Cindy Stoick, her letter of resignation on April 11, 2019. In that letter, ALDINGER expressed several areas of concern she had as to how the CPS Unit was being run by the supervisors, how cases were being assigned to the unit bringing up ethical violations, and a hostile working environment for the CPS line staff to work in. Below is an abbreviated version of the resignation letter from ALDINGER. The full letter will be added to this report as an attachment.

April 11: Letter of Resignation

ALDINGER sent CINDY STOICK her letter of resignation from Cass County social Services (CCSS) CPS Unit.

1. In the letter, ALDINGER claims hostile work environment and ethical concerns created by management at CCSS.
2. Names RICK VANCAMP and LINDA DORFF directly.
3. Claims that on March 5, while discussing a case with VANCAMP, she questioned whether a full assessment was necessary even though conditions didn't suggest it. VANCAMP stated that he misread the report, but said that a full assessment would be good practice for ALDINGER.
4. ALDINGER stated that she didn't agree with doing a full assessment when it was not necessary because she felt it was a gross misuse of government funds and resources, as well as a disservice to the family involved.
5. ALDINGER states that due to her questioning VANCAMP, she was told that workers who questioned management at CCSS no longer work there. She claims that VANCAMP also told her to just, "Keep her head down and mouth shut," and, "Do as I am told." This took place in VANCAMP'S office with only the two of them present.
6. ALDINGER also stated she had issues with an e-mail regarding sandbag duties at the Cass County Road Department. She states that she felt the e-mail sent out by LINDA DORFF was intimidating to workers because it made them feel that they were being forced into doing manual labor. Some staff were worried that they would have to disclose some private medical issues so they were not forced into doing something they were not able to do.
7. ALDINGER discussed issues that she stated she had with TAMI ANDERSON. It appears that ANDERSON and ALDINGER discussed a case where ALDINGER believed that the assessment was not needed due to a false claim, but ANDERSON instructed the other staff member assigned to the case to continue with the assessment. ALDINGER also stated that ANDERSON reported that ALDINGER had challenging behaviors, because ALDINGER had issues on how the Cass County pay stubs were handed out to the employees. She questioned as to why they were not handed out to employees in a

concealed way due to privacy issues. She stated she was told by ANDERSON that that is the way they do it at CCSS.

8. ALDINGER brought up her concerns about how the cases at CCSS were assigned to the staff. She claims that cases were held for an extended amount of time (2.5 weeks) prior to being assigned, and felt that they were not getting the necessary attention they needed in a proper amount of time. She stated that she felt that the workers were being overloaded with cases. She stated that when she first started at CCSS she was told the average caseload per month was about 14, but she stated that some workers had 30 to 50 open cases assigned to them, and that workers were being assigned up to 15 cases in a five-day span.
9. ALDINGER states that she contacted MARLYS BAKER who oversees CPS Policy and Procedures with the State of North Dakota and informed her of the concerns she has discussed in this letter. She stated that she was then approached by LINDA DORFF in what she described as a loud and domineering way, and stated that DORFF called her insubordinate. ALDINGER was asked for her county badge, and was escorted out of the building. She described DORFF as acting in an unprofessional manner and being intimidating.
10. ALDINGER states in a meeting she had with CHIP AMMERMAN, that AMMERMAN demanded to know how she would handle the assigning of excessive cases, but responded to him that she did not have the experience of assigning cases so she could not answer his question.
11. In the rest of her resignation letter ALDINGER states that there are others in the CCSS work staff who are also being "bullied" at CCSS. She states that AMMERMAN requested her to identify some staff, but she refused to provide any names of coworkers, due to her believing this was an attempt to identify workers to retaliate against.

As previously stated, the Cass County Sheriff's Office was requested to conduct an investigation into these allegations around April 16. Due to some position changes at the Cass County Sheriff's Office, this case was not given to me to investigate until I was re-assigned to the Office of Professional Standards around June 18, 2019.

After reviewing this complaint, I began to contact members of the CPS Unit to begin interviewing the employees (staff) who worked with ALDINGER, to discuss these allegations, and determine if her accusations were legitimate concerns.

As I began to communicate with the CPS staff requesting interviews with them, I began to experience some resistance from some staff for interviews. Several staff members were not comfortable discussing the ongoing issues within the CPS Unit. The reasons for the resistance to interviews were, some staff believed that these same concerns have been brought up before, but nothing ever gets done to correct the problems. Others were resistant because they believed that if they spoke out, there would be retaliation against them from the supervisors, and management of that unit. To gain the trust of the staff, I informed them that I would be conducting these interviews without audio recording their statements, along with formatting my report in a way where their answers, and information, would not reflect directly back to them, but would be information I received by the group as a whole. This method seemed to make the staff comfortable, and all agreed to speak with me.

This interview tactic was discussed with Cass County Administrator, ROBERT WILSON. He was informed as to the reason I would be conducting my interviews that way, and MR. WILSON approved of this method so to gain as much information as possible.

Interviews with CPS staff started on July 3, and continued for several weeks due to scheduling conflicts, members being absent, or vacation issues.

Topics discussed in the interviews were about the allegations made by ALDINGER, along with other issues such as, but not limited to, employee relations, employee and supervisor relations, working environment, stress and morale levels in the CPS Unit.

During the interviews; I was made aware of the way the CPS Unit was divided into two teams, with approximately six members on each team. One team supervised by RICK VanCAMP, and the other by TAMARA ANDERSON. LINDA DORFF is the Division Supervisor, and CHIP AMMERMAN, the Social Service Director.

Most if not all staff stated that they felt the stress level was very high, and the morale level was very low. The reasons given focused on two areas: The large amount of cases assigned to each staff member; and the interaction that the staff has with supervisors, and upper management.

Staff stated that the amount of cases they are being assigned to investigate is very large, which makes it difficult for them to work the cases properly, and in a timely manner. Reasons given from staff for the increased case assignment were the population growth in the area, and not adding additional staff to the CPS Unit to keep up with the case increase. Several staff members made the comment that even if CPS were to get additional staff, they would most likely still be short staffed on a regular basis, due to the turnover rate with staff in that unit.

What appeared to be the main cause for the stress and morale issues in the unit focused on the relationship between staff, supervisor, and upper management. The issues brought to my attention are as follows:

1. Lack of access to supervisors-

The staff members stated that access to the supervisors is critical, but is very limited due to the supervisors being in meetings, or away and not available. Staff members informed me that in order for them to complete a case and close it, they need to do what they refer to as "staff" the case with their supervisor. If a supervisor is not available to "staff" the case, they are unable to close the file. Staff members informed me that on several occasions during the "staffing" time that they set up with their supervisor, the time is interrupted by DORFF or AMMERMAN, pulling the supervisor away from the staff member, making it difficult or impossible for them to close a file and complete their work.

2. Lack of supervision-

Staff members' stated that the supervision is "lacking" when they go to their supervisors to get guidance or want to ask questions about situations pertaining to a case. Some members say their direct supervisor, TAMI ANDERSON, is unable to make decisions, is unable to give guidance, or direction when needed. They state that because of this, they will go to another supervisor, which is sometimes even from a different unit, in the Cass County Social Service system, to get the help they are looking for. Others state when they go to their direct supervisor, RICK VanCAMP, and during the conversation they have with him, if they question something VanCAMP gets defensive, makes a statement such as, "This is the way we have always done it," or, "Stop, we don't do it that way," and will put his hand up in a, "Be quiet," position, so the staff member quits talking. They state that because of this type of interaction, they do not feel that he is always approachable, and the suggestions or ideas from staff members do not have any meaning or value. Several members also mentioned that if the support from the supervisors were better, it would make the situation with the large caseload assigned to them, a lesser issue than what it is.

3. Employee/employee relations-

All that were interviewed agreed that the staff members on both teams work well together, assist and support each other when necessary. There were no concerns brought to my attention about employee relations within the two teams.

4. Supervisor/employee relations-

When staff members were asked to describe the way the supervisor/employee relationship is, the staff stated they feel this is the area of most concern. Along with the issues listed above, staff members stated they feel as if their opinions mean nothing to management when they try to make suggestions. If they question management, it will be held against them, and they will be reprimanded. Some made the comment that they have to be very careful as to what they say around management or they feel they will be retaliated against. Staff stated that when they do bring up concerns, such as the caseload assigned to them, they are called whiners and told that the staff members have negative attitudes. I was informed that management has told the staff that the high caseload is a staff performance issue, and not a numbers issue.

Although there are concerns with staff and their direct supervisors, it appears that there might be a larger issue between upper management and line staff. During the interviews, staff members expressed concern with LINDA DORFF and how she is treating them. Staff described her demeanor with them as being mean, intimidating, unprofessional, verbally and nonverbally rude, along with fake, controlling, loud and aggressive. Staff members say on several occasions while they are "staffing" a case with their supervisor, DORFF will interrupt them and DORFF will pull the supervisor away from the staff member for something she wants them to do. This issue has been discussed previously in this report, but again staff say that makes it impossible to do their job if they do not get time with their supervisor.

Other complaints made are that DORFF will say bad things out loud about staff members to other staff members, and even in front of the person she is talking about. I was told that she is also very loud around the offices of the staff members. They say DORFF is a distraction the way she will pound on their office doors, and talk loudly. The staff members say that DORFF acts like she takes priority over everything and their work time is not as important as hers. The majority of the staff members say that they try to avoid her if they can.

Staff members also discussed the relationship they have with CHIP AMMERMAN. Staff members stated that they have limited interaction with AMMERMAN, but also described him as being intimidating, arrogant, and disrespectful. I was informed that AMMERMAN deals with the intake process mostly, limiting his contact with the CPS staff. I was informed that the majority of interaction they have with AMMERMAN is during meetings he attends with CPS staff. Several staff members stated that they do not verbally participate in the meetings that AMMERMAN and DORFF are present in, because they do not want to get into trouble by him or DORFF for things they might bring up for discussion.

I asked the staff members how they felt like they were being treated by the supervisors, and management of the CPS Unit. Some of the answers were: Disrespected, unappreciated, completely disposable, replaceable at any time, terrible, not at all valued, and treated as just a number.

The staff members were asked if they have, or are in the process of seeking employment elsewhere. The responses I got were that some have already found different employment and will be leaving the Cass County CPS Unit soon. While others stated they are currently looking, or think about leaving the unit every day. The main reason given was because of the relationship between staff and management.

Another question asked to staff members was if they knew someone who was in this field of work looking for employment, and there was an open position in their unit, would they suggest that person apply for the job? The answer from everyone was, "NO." Again, the reason for this answer was because of the way the unit was run by management and the relationship between management and employees.

After interviewing the staff members, I spoke with the direct supervisors for each team, RICK VancAMP, and TAMERA ANDERSON. In my interviews with them, we discussed the letter that was written by ALDINGER, and if any of the accusations ALDINGER stated were legitimate concerns. VancAMP stated that he was surprised to hear what ALDINGER was accusing him of saying during the meeting between the two of them, but denies the accusation.

What was talked about at length was the issue with the amount of cases that were being assigned to staff members, and the amount of time they were able to give the staff members to assist them in closing cases. Both agreed that the amount of cases being given to staff members was a real concern, and was a reason for the stress/morale issues. It was stated that assigning the staff the large amount of cases and expecting them to be able to manage such a large caseload, was the fault of Supervisor/Management. They also agreed that the time for case staffing was frequently being interrupted, making it difficult or impossible for cases to be closed. They agreed that a majority of the interruptions were caused by upper management pulling them away from staff members when they were "staffing" cases with them.

I was informed that within the last few weeks, the CPS management has implemented a new procedure, which limits the amount of cases assigned to staff members at around ten each. This is implemented so staff members can focus on a smaller amount of cases, and reduce the workload for them. In addition, to limit the amount of staffing interruptions, the upper management is requesting the supervisors give them a copy of the supervisors' schedules, so they know when the supervisors have time reserved for staff members.

VancAMP and ANDERSON were asked if they see any issues of concern between upper management and staff members. Each answered this similarly. They stated that staff members have brought up issues/complaints to them in the past, but no specific issues directly, just what was described as hearsay. It was stated that they have not ever seen any issues directly. It was also said, that it appears that the relationship between staff and upper management has gotten better over the last year.

Although the direct supervisors feel that the relationship between staff members and management are good or have been getting better, the issues brought up by all staff members seem to be issues that the whole unit is dealing with. During the interviews, all the staff members described the issues or situations occurring in the unit in the same way. They all made it sound as if these issues were still going on at, or around the time I interviewed them. With the responses being similar from all interviewed, it appears that the problems discussed are being observed by all staff members.

CONCLUSION:

JENNIFER ALDINGER made accusations of a hostile working environment for staff in the CPS Unit, and management making an unethical decision to delay case assignments for approximately two weeks.

As far as the unethical issues which related to the delaying case assignments, I was unable to determine if this process, which I was told was to help staff members get caught up with workload that was already assigned, fit that criteria. When I asked staff members and supervisors if it was against their department, or state policy, to delay case assignments, no one knew that answer. If this is not a process against any policy, it appears that management was trying to do something to help lessen the staff's workload.

As far as the hostile work environment for staff members:

If some conditions for a hostile work environment are making it impossible for someone to do his/her job, as well as making someone feel uncomfortable or intimidated, then there might be some real issues that need to be addressed.

The concern that was brought up by staff members stating that their scheduled time to "staff" cases with direct supervisors is frequently being interrupted by upper management, and are pulling supervisors away from time they had reserved for staff members. This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to close cases that are ready to be closed. This delays them from going onto other cases, which need to be addressed in a timely manner, reducing the efficiency of the staff member's work performance.

Finally, the relationship between staff, supervisors and upper management:

During the interviews, the responses I received from staff members was that there is a disconnection between the staff members, supervisors, and management, making the staff members feel like they are on their own.

Staff members also state they try to avoid, and do not approach upper management unless necessary. They feel intimidated by them, and say that if they do something that upper management does not agree with, they believe that they will be yelled at, and they worry about being reprimanded. Most staff members, who have been around for some time said that they have felt this way for several years now.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Letter of resignation from JENNIFER ALDINGER.
2. Exit interview and letter of resignation from ASHLEY PETERSON (07-15-19) outgoing CPS Unit staff member.
3. Exit interview of CHAD FISHER (8-27-19) outgoing CPS Unit staff member.

SERGEANT JOEL STADING
Office of Professional Standards

JS/dkb

adamantly denies making the comment to Ms. Aldinger. Mr. Ammerman stated there is no way for him to confirm or deny whether this occurred or not.

Ms. Aldinger also reported ethical violations due to the process in which cases were assigned. Per Ms. Aldinger's report, cases were being assigned that should not have been due to no justification per State guidelines. Cases that are assigned are addressed between the supervisor and worker on what the process would be to assess the needs or safety issues of the child. The foremost concern reviewed is what the protection needs of the child are. The agency will err on the side of safety for children, as long as they meet the criteria and are within the guidelines.

Another concern was regarding the delay in assigning cases, which was due to staff shortage and amount of cases received. The State was contacted and, although the delay was not ideal and needed to be addressed, it allowed workers time to complete other cases. Supervisors reviewed and assigned cases based on immediacy. As workers closed cases, they were assigned additional cases. Mr. Ammerman conferred with the States Attorney, Department of Human Services, two people on the North Dakota Social Work Ethics Board and one on the Minnesota Social Work Ethics Board. They identified the case assignment, as well as caseloads, are aspirational and not ethical violations. He explained from a moral standpoint, they had to make a determination of whether it was ethical to assign those cases and put the extra demand on the workers. This unhealthy amount of cases was reported to the Social Work Board in the past, but there was no alternative. In the last three years, internal solutions to this issue included: adding two staff in the Child Protective Services (CPS) Unit; two different emergency staff; assigned cases to Short-Term Case Managers (STCM) with CPS experience, supervisors, divisional manager, and Mr. Ammerman; and assistance from neighboring counties. However, due to their caseloads and staffing, this created minimal impact to our agency. Mr. Ammerman recognized and appreciated their support in their attempts to assist.

During the Sheriff's Office interviews, Mr. Ammerman believed the majority of the CPS staff, if not all, were interviewed as well as the two supervisors. He and Linda Dorff, Divisional Manager, were not. When Mr. Ammerman spoke with the investigator afterwards, the investigator did not indicate behaviorally what the hostile environment looked like other than all of the staff interviewed felt the environment was hostile. Staff that were interviewed identified this environment was created by unmanageable amount of cases assigned and lack of support from supervisors and management. Mr. Ammerman has spoken with the supervisors as well as the divisional manager to create a plan to address the concerns. This included different ways of communication and the intent of the agency in providing supervision, while continuing to maintain compliance to State and Federal guidelines. However, this should not be their primary purpose. It should be a coaching and teaching environment that is created.

Mr. Ammerman reports the large amount of cases is reality. Staff were hit very strongly with the number of cases. He reports in the last two years, the agency saw a growth of 21% in the number of CPS reports received. In 2017, the agency averaged approximately 100 cases per month with fluctuations during the school year. During a high month in 2017, the agency saw 120 cases per month. There are now 150-160 investigable, assignable cases. The number of all reports received in a month averages to approximately 300 cases, with the ones not assigned being screened out to other counties or reviewed by the regional representative.

An additional concern in the report was staff's inability to meet with direct supervisors. This was confirmed, primarily due to the Pilot Project and the need for our agency to be actively involved in the process. Corrections have been made regarding this. Supervisors now have protected time where they will not be interrupted except for extreme emergencies and when no one else is available. Staff stated accessibility to their supervisors and management would reduce the impact high caseloads have as they would be able to close out more cases in a timely manner. Mr. Ammerman personally believes the caseloads are a significant issues and are impacting staff's well-being by having that demand on them constantly. This is not only an issue for CPS, but for all units within the agency.

Mr. Ammerman acknowledged staff do feel intimidated by himself as well as Ms. Dorff. He does not believe he yells or uses any type of threatening behavior, but states he can be direct and clear with his expectations. He does hold staff accountable for their behavior and at times, after consulting with Human Resources, State Attorney's Office, County Administrator Robert Wilson, and the Social Service Board, have put staff on work plans and given disciplinary letters. This is only in extreme situations. He feels the agency has failed to implement a true growth work plan versus compliance, punitive approach. Mr. Ammerman stated he is aware of current staff seeking other employment because of professional growth but also because of the culture within the CPS Unit.

Sgt. Joel Stading from the Cass County Sheriff's Office explained his role of interviewing the CPS Unit staff. He was assigned and reviewed the information provided. He attempted to contact staff to interview but found reluctance in speaking with him. It took time to gain the trust of the staff for them to speak about the allegations, stating it has been brought up before and nothing was done and the concern of retaliation. Sgt. Stading conferred with Mr. Wilson completing a more anonymous investigation by leaving out the names of the individuals he spoke with and assuring there would be no audio recording. Staff were more receptive to this approach.

The main themes Sgt. Stading discovered during the interviews included overwhelming amount of cases assigned, supervisor staffing unavailability, and interaction with upper management. Staffing was a major theme as supervisors were constantly pulled away from that time, making it difficult to close cases out.

During several of his staff interviews, Sgt. Stading reported the emotion among staff when discussing the work environment in the unit. Many used the words "hostile", "toxic", or described it as an environment they did not enjoy working in. A couple staff reported dreading going to work on Mondays. Part of this was due to the feeling of intimidation or bullying by direct supervisors and upper management. They reported being bullied, talked down to, and yelled at. They worried about verbal reprimands for voicing ideas that upper management and supervisors might not agree with. When asked, Sgt. Stading clarified he met with CPS line staff and direct supervisors, Tamara Anderson and Rick Van Camp. In total, he spoke with approximately 14 staff of whom had left, were in the process of leaving, or were current staff. The themes reported were consistent amongst all staff interviewed. Commissioner Steen questioned why Mr. Ammerman and Ms. Dorff were not interviewed. Sgt. Stading reported he did not interview Mr. Ammerman, Ms. Dorff or Ms. Aldinger due to the fact that when he started interviewing line staff, he received similar responses from everyone at that time. The direct supervisors were interviewed and some of the same issues were brought up. When he asked the supervisors about concerns with staff and upper management, they stated it had

been brought to their attention before but were not aware of the specifics and believed it to be a good working relationship with upper management. Sgt. Stading did not interview upper management because of those statements.

Sgt. Stading did not provide staff prior to the interviews of the questions he would be asking. All answers were similar and stated there was no way staff could have notified others about how to answer the questions. Other than staff not being able to complete their work and the intimidation factor mentioned, Sgt. Stading found no illegal activity within the unit.

A member of the public stood up and asked to address the Board members. Mr. Peterson stated they would not be able to do so today, but they could be added to a future agenda by contacting him directly.

Mr. Ammerman provided a handout outlining behavioral changes for himself, Ms. Dorff, Mr. Van Camp, and Ms. Anderson as well as a Workflow Review and how the caseload will be addressed. Some steps have already been implemented, such as Mr. Ammerman reviewing "grey" cases from Intake as to whether they should be assigned or screened. He will also have more involvement as a member of a mapping team to review the work and appreciate the quality and in-depth interaction staff are providing families. Both supervisors and upper management will actively use Coaching Strategies in their interactions with staff. They will participate in Organization Trauma education, planning, and implementation of strategies along with other management and leaders within the agency. Mr. Ammerman states he is also researching a Workforce Well-Being Project, which is provided via consultation through an outside agency. There is a significant cost associated with that service, however.

Regarding Ms. Dorff's behavioral interactions with staff, the first step will be to resolve and discontinue those types of practices voiced by staff. She will update staff on a weekly basis, if not more often. Some staff reported experiencing anxiety and concern with the lack of communication and whether their concerns were communicated appropriately with management and Social Service Board. Ms. Dorff will be more conscious of staff's well-being by approaching them more routinely and having scheduled time to meet with them weekly. She will also review her responsibilities and prioritize her focus on projects and where her time will be devoted.

CPS supervisors have already identified their calendars will be open so staff are able to see their availability for supervisory and staffing time. There will be protected time for staff each morning. It is also identified the supervisors' primary focus will be expanding staff's skill set for success rather than looking and evaluating strictly for compliance. Supervisors will be updating staff on bi-monthly basis or more frequently as needed. They will review their responsibilities, prioritize projects, and maintain that intent in order to create time to focus on staff needs.

Some changes regarding the workflow will be the discontinuation of daily morning huddles to discuss their current workflow, which is now done electronically. Supervisors will be document their coaching supervision with staff and notate the meeting taking place. If it did not, they will explain why. There will be a review of supervisor's tasks in order to realign and match their strengths. Staff will also be reviewed and reassigned to match their needs with supervisor's strengths. Supervisory tasks will be reviewed, continuing to focus on distribution of

responsibilities. A defined process will be developed to address performance and/or conduct concerns.

Staff have been added to the budget in 2017, 2019 and pre-approved to add two CPS staff for 2020. There has been and continues to be a temporary emergency staff as well as assigning cases to the director, manager, supervisor, STCM and other counties. CPS staff no longer assist in the role of Back-up Intake and adjustments have been made to case assignment that are consistent with State-approved case flow.

Upon opening up questions and comments to Board members, Commissioner Steen questioned when HR and upper management became aware of the work environment concern. Mr. Ammerman stated concerns regarding workflow and management interactions have been brought to his attention sporadically over the years. He has attempted to address the issues with different strategies. Unfortunately, some humans react to stress by reverting back to unnatural tendencies based on stress and demand. The concern of assigning cases that should not be assigned has been brought to Mr. Ammerman's attention for many years. He consistently advises that if it meets State guidelines, they must be assigned. The staff and supervisor can determine how the case will be addressed. Each child in the community deserves the same kind of response regardless of the agency's caseload but there are limitations to the agency being able to respond.

Commissioner Steen asked for clarification on what was meant by a Workforce Well-Being program. Mr. Ammerman explained it is provided through a company the agency has actively been involved with to redesign the Foster Care program. They would provide education, support, and consultation with the supervisors and leaders of the agency in order to provide a level of support and assist in implementing coaching and teaching strategies. The cost of the whole program would be approximately \$100,000 per year.

Commissioner Steen questioned the opportunities Ms. Dorff has had to attend leadership training or conferences. Mr. Ammerman explained what Commissioner Steen is referring to would be a program promoted by the agency. Ms. Dorff has been informed of the availability, but was not encouraged or forced by Mr. Ammerman. Internally, there were other internal programs Mr. Wilson and Ms. Stoick were aware of, including small groups reviewing leadership books and contracting with Sagency, a local agency that works on leadership development. Managers meet weekly with two meetings a month focusing on the function of the division and the other two to three times discussing leadership strategies.

Commissioner Steen questioned if staff are in agreement of discontinuing the use of huddle meetings in the morning. Mr. Ammerman stated staff have made this recommendation in the past; however, when he met with staff they preferred to not be involved with those types of discussion so this plan was created based on input from the supervisors, division manager, and Mr. Ammerman. Commissioner Steen asked how long staffing typically takes and Mr. Ammerman explained that based on the complexity of the case, anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour.

Mr. Hagen stated he understands the accessibility to a supervisor being an issue, but states a process change may or may not change the culture and based on his experience, it is changed by day to day interactions. He suggests doing a semi-annual culture survey through an outside

company until adequate improvement is made. Mr. Ammerman agrees with this and feels there are two different phases to this: caseload issues and the culture/interaction style. He explains for the last 10 years, the agency sends out a cultural survey every two years. This is reviewed by the Employee Committee, who makes recommendations to the management team on what should be a primary focus.

Mr. Ellingsberg followed up on Mr. Hagen's question regarding the processes. He questions if all these processes will increase or decrease the stress and/or workflow. Mr. Ammerman explains this is why current practices and responsibilities will be reviewed. He agrees with Mr. Ellingsberg that if something is added, something must be reduced or removed. Many of the strategies described today have been introduced in the past but it is a matter of practicing them.

Mr. Ellingsberg asked how the change from County to State funding of Social Services will impact the ability to address the caseloads and hiring of staff. Mr. Ammerman it is difficult for Cass County Social Services to be compared to other agencies within the State because of the difference in caseloads. Some are comparable, but most are dramatically different. Cass County Social Services serves at least twice as many clients in every division and program compared to other counties. Mr. Ammerman is unsure how that will reflect in the future but it can only be addressed as time goes on. He believe when the State begins looking at caseloads and how to portion resources, it will result in Cass County receiving more staff.

Commissioner Steen asked for clarification on staff counts for 2017-2019. Prior to 2017, there were 11 total CPS staff; 12 in 2017; no additions in 2018; and 13 in 2019. In 2020, there will be 15 FTE positions in CPS.

Chair Peterson asked what staff turnover looks like. Mr. Ammerman explained that prior to 2017, there was marginal turnover. Most staff left due to other opportunities within the community. This continues to happen, but the work atmosphere has assisted in this as well. In the last two years, Mr. Ammerman is aware of at least three to four staff leaving specifically due to the work demand and environment. Chair Peterson questioned when former Family Services Division Manager, Pat Podoll, retired. Mr. Ammerman believed it was in 2016.

Commissioner Breitling questioned Mr. Ammerman's use of the terms "units" and "division" interchangeably. Mr. Ammerman stated it is not used interchangeably, that Social Services are made up of four divisions: Economic Assistance, Family Services, Adult Services, and Support Staff. Each division has program units, such as CPS Unit, and within that unit, there are two supervisors and 13 staff. Mr. Ammerman explains Mr. Van Camp and Ms. Anderson's CPS supervisor roles includes daily contact with staff with the primary responsibility of managing that unit. Ms. Dorff's role as divisional manager is to ensure legalities from federal and state guidelines are maintained as well as the embedding of the strategies within the agency. Ms. Dorff oversees several units within Family Services such as Licensing, Foster Care and In-Home Case Management, and CPS. As director, Mr. Ammerman is responsible for the workflow of all divisions, oversight of the managers, budgetary responsibilities, commitment to the community, and outlining the overall direction of the agency.

Commissioner Breitling directed his next question to Sgt. Stading inquiring if Sgt. Stading considered interviewing other units within the Family Service Division. Sgt. Stading did consider

this, but the information presented appeared to be directly within the CPS unit and not the other units. Sgt. Stading confirmed he was confident in conducting the interviews that way.

Chair Peterson stated he does not believe anyone is against the process that was presented today. While caseloads are not ideal, he does not feel that is the main reason for the meeting today. Chair Peterson reports if the environment was comfortable and friendly, it would not cause anyone to leave. Chair Peterson struggles with not seeing any substantive changes with Mr. Ammerman's plan. Although acknowledging not being familiar with the work and having an answer, he believes there are more steps to be taken to correct the environment.

Mr. Ammerman responded his intent is not for anyone within the division to lose their job. Chair Peterson stated he did not believe the Merit System allowed the agency to do that without a severe incident occurring. In order to terminate an employee within the Merit System, it requires progressive discipline, to include letters, talks, etc. Chair Peterson suggested the possibility of shifting staff around. Mr. Ammerman explained the plan does discuss realignment of staff by looking at tasks and responsibility. Staff have certain Merit System classification so in order for them to maintain their classification, certain minimal requirements must be performed.

Commissioner Scherling directed a question to Birch Burdick, State Attorney, as to whether the Merit System is voluntary and the possibility of opting out. Mr. Burdick stated the federal government requires the use of the Merit System when federal monies are involved, but believes there is a provision that would allow opting out of a Merit System under North Dakota Law. He states this was reviewed in the past, but at the time it was not plausible for the agency. Mr. Burdick does not believe the Merit System restrains management from properly disciplining or moving forward based on performance, but invokes a protocol and process for doing so, such as implementing a Work Performance Plan.

Commissioner Scherling asked Mr. Ammerman if a Work Performance Plan will be included within his plan for his staff. He stated that is the intent of this plan, along with additional elements that will be included. Commissioner Scherling stated she did not recall the results of a survey being shared during her time as a Board member. She questioned whether a survey like that would be more beneficial being administered by HR and then reported back to the Board in order to receive more accurate accounting of the culture. Mr. Ammerman reports participation in the survey is typically over 50% of staff. It is done every two years with a summary presented to the Board each time in order to identify agency goals. The Employee Committee reviews for patterns to prioritize and address. This is an internal review and HR is not involved with the process. Commissioner Scherling finds this concerning and feels HR should be involved with the survey and all exit interviews for all departments within Cass County. She suggests creating an additional investigation or analysis to fully understand what the situation might be. Mr. Ammerman responded that HR has not been involved due to the progressiveness of getting the information versus what HR has provided to the county or agency. Often time, Mr. Ammerman does not receive exit interview responses and must ask for that information. Commissioner Scherling would like to see HR and Administration staff more directly engaged.

Mr. Ellingsberg recommends the cultural surveys be done more often than every two years given the amount of concerns of the working environment within the agency. He also suggested the information presented today be put into personnel files to be reviewed for progress.

Commissioner Steen confirmed with Mr. Ammerman that Ms. Dorff is the manager of Family Services. He then questioned the dynamics of the division. Mr. Ammerman explained Family Services consists of CPS, Intake, and Foster Care/In-Home/Program Unit. These units are supervised by four other individuals. Commissioner Steen would be interested in finding out if there is something unique to CPS that these issues have come up only in that unit or if it is something bigger than that. He understands the Sheriff's Office did not expand its questioning to other units, but when trying to come up with a solution to the problem, he would like to pinpoint if this is specific to CPS or the entire division. Mr. Ammerman acknowledges this is an agency-wide issue with the demands overwhelming for all staff. Commissioner Steen states he is aware of that but it is how it is handled within a division or unit that matters. Mr. Ammerman agreed. Commissioner Steen is looking for more information as to whether this is specific just to CPS, the division, or the entire agency. Mr. Ammerman states each division is exposed to a lot of demand and emotionally charged situations. He reports the plan is designed to assist the supervisors to be more effective in their work, but it is much more complex than looking for the problem. There are multiple factors contributing to the overall functioning of the division.

Commissioner Scherling questioned how the outlined changes will affect the culture system wide. Mr. Ammerman explains the Organizational Trauma education will assist all leaders within the agency by making them more educated and aware. It also assists in recognizing their true responsibilities and primary focus, which will be to help staff grow and provide emotional support.

Mr. Wilson stated he has had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Ammerman, supervisors, and CPS staff twice. While difficult meetings to attend, he appreciated the opportunity to get a sense of what employees were feeling, experience the level of frustration and their commitment to the job. Mr. Wilson spoke with Mr. Ammerman after each meeting and discussed the change needed to move forward. He reported that as an outsider looking in, he viewed it as dysfunctional. He reported to Mr. Ammerman that the level of trust needs to be rebuilt and questions if this current plan will accomplish that.

Chair Peterson reports there being a work plan and ideas to make things better, but feels this work plan needs to be progressive. He would like an update on the progress at the next two Social Service Board Meeting to include the changes within that time. If there are no substantial changes at those updates, he will request an adjustment to the plan. Mr. Ammerman questioned how he should measure the type of improvement Chair Peterson is requesting and what needs to be measured in order to define improvement. Chair Peterson would like to hear from staff conditions are improving. Mr. Ammerman defined success as staff feeling they have accessibility to their supervisor, manager, and director and reporting their interactions are no longer combative. Mr. Ammerman can provide reports back but acknowledges there are opinions that will be difficult to change. When he has talked with staff recently, they have described their interaction with their supervisors and Ms. Dorff as primarily a positive. Mr. Ammerman acknowledges he does not have a lot of interaction with the staff, which is a reason why he will be making himself more available. Historically, his interaction with a staff is regarding a complaint that rises to his level so the interaction is not necessarily pleasant. More interaction with him and/or Ms. Dorff could positively impact staff's views of them, but it will take time.

Mr. Ellingsberg suggested having HR provide a report to the Board within three months of their findings as to whether improvements have been made.

Commissioner Steen would like to see updates, but does not expect immediate changes. He would like HR and Mr. Wilson to be in contact on a regular basis with CPS staff with an update at the November 4, 2019 meeting and November 18, 2019 meeting. He would like to see obvious improvements and efforts. This will require trust in HR and Mr. Wilson, but without honest responses, it will be difficult to do anything.

Commissioner Scherling asked Mr. Wilson and Ms. Stoick if there has been any examination into an outside agency coming in and assisting. Mr. Wilson has had discussions with Ms. Stoick regarding an independent, outside agency performing a department-wide evaluation. He has not had the opportunity to make contact, but does have a list of resources. Mr. Ammerman reports this has never been discussed with him.

Mr. Hagen suggested doing a survey now and in six to 12 months to show progress with results being sent to HR. He also recommends doing a Performance Improvement Plan with specific dates, following the guidelines of the Merit System.

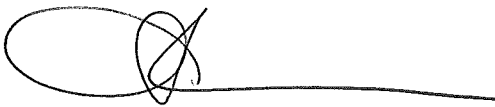
Commissioner Steen is not opposed to doing the survey, but does not want to wait six to eight months to see results. He would like to do this in conjunction with his suggestion of regular contact with staff by Mr. Wilson and HR. He feels this may assist in rebuilding the trust.

Mr. Ammerman concluded by stating he does not want to give the impression the agency does not have quality people working for them. It is a demanding job that is emotionally draining. Staff do quality work. If there are issues about services not being provided to community members, it is addressed. He has no doubt staff are committed to the work, the agency, and the community. Despite stereotypes staff do care about the work and services they provide.

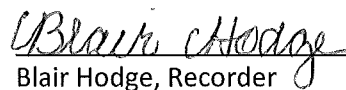
Commissioner Steen clarified that Chair Peterson is currently the acting portfolio chair. Chair Peterson confirmed this.

II. **Adjournment**

Ms. Scherling made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 3:03 p.m. Mr. Ellingsberg seconded it. Meeting adjourned.



Chad Peterson, Chair
Cass County Social Services Board



Blair Hodge, Recorder