



Vermont State Employees' Association

155 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05602;

Phone: (802) 223-5247

Fax: (802) 223-4035 E-mail: vsea@vsea.org

Website: www.vsea.org

Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee

October 20, 2015

Written Testimony

Kara Haynes, MSW

CIES Social Worker

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this very timely and important topic of Worker Safety. We are all keenly aware of the recent murder of Lara Sobel, a social worker with the Family Services Division of the Agency of Human Services for the State of Vermont. There is no doubt that Lara's death was tragic and a worst case scenario but safety issues in Family Services are systemic and this was not an isolated incident.

The Labor Management Team has been meeting since January and the primary concerns that we have brought forth to management have been regarding worker safety and high caseloads. We have asked management to provide trained law enforcement officers in each Family Services office because it shouldn't matter what office a parent or social worker walks into, the security needs are the same.

Worker safety and high caseloads are inextricably linked. When a worker is working to keep children safe, their own safety falls to the bottom of the priority list. Especially given that nearly half of FSD staff have less than 2 years of experience in the field, management needs to be the driving force in prioritizing and recognizing staff safety.

When new laws are passed and new policies are put into place, it often creates an increase in our workload. The reality is that our workloads and job responsibilities are not adjusted to accommodate the new work that may come from any newly passed laws or newly implemented policies. We ask that you keep this in mind as you struggle with addressing workplace safety, along with the fact that there are a lot of vacancies currently in many of our district offices.

We also have concerns regarding the capacity of law enforcement to support us in the field. There are wide varieties in the capacity and willingness of local law enforcement to support workers in the field (both during the day and in the evening hours).

Finally, there is great concern over the lack of internal communication regarding the threats and safety concerns since Lara's death. The concerns are not consistently communicated to staff and vary widely from district to district. This issue is as concerning to us as any of the above issues I have mentioned. Given the grave outcome of this particular act of violence against one of our co-workers, staff needs to feel that management is being completely transparent anytime that a threat is made so we can all be aware and take the appropriate actions to help keep ourselves and our clients as safe as possible.