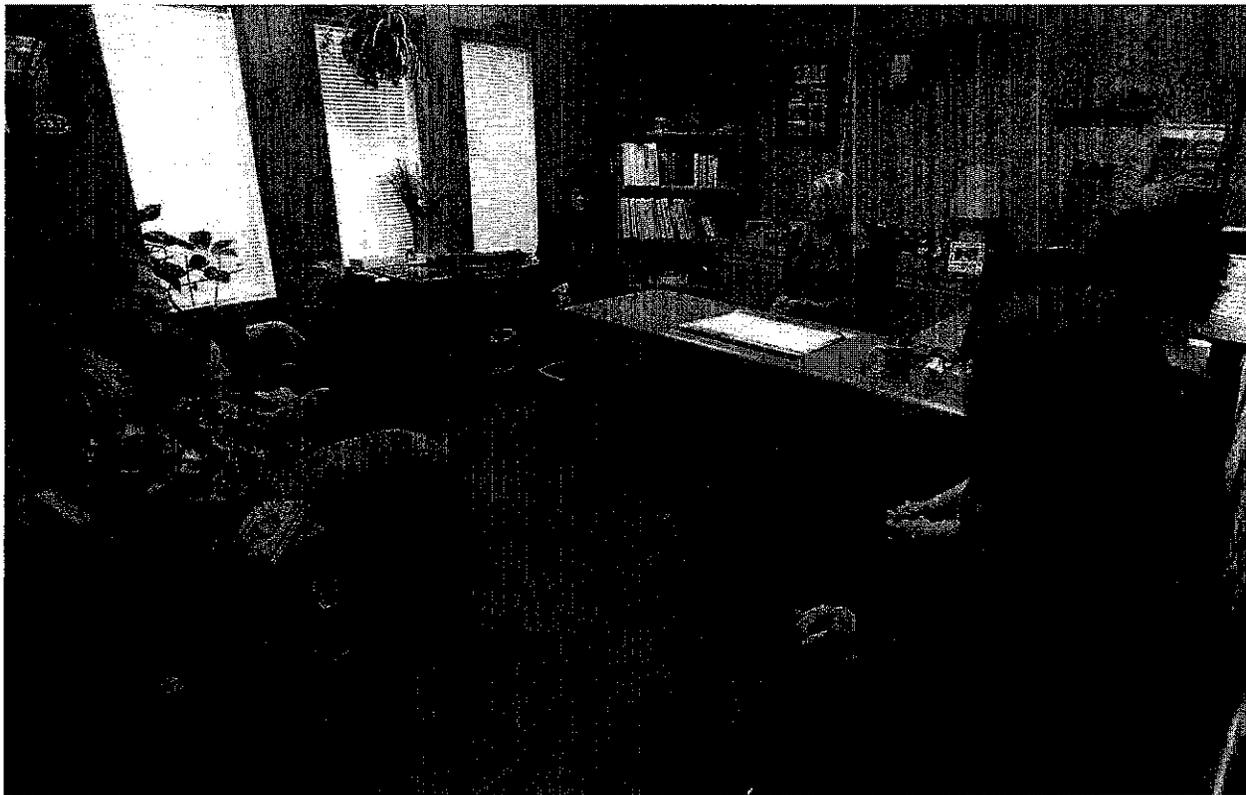


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Montana child protection specialists face daunting job

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Larry Mayer photos for The Montana Standard

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Child and Family Services staff members in Miles City gather for a morning meeting. It can be a tough job. Emotions are directed at child protection specialists because they are a parent's initial and primary contact with CFS.

MILES CITY - Early Wednesday in supervisor Jennifer Winkley's snug office, Child and Family Services employees gather for a meeting.

Three reports and two requests for services had come in that morning – representing five children, siblings or parents who needed the immediate attention of the four child protection specialists employed here.

There are supposed to be six of them, child protection specialists who work with parents and children to assure well-being for children who are at risk of or have been subjected to maltreatment. One position is vacant; another employee is going through training.

Turnover is one of the many problems that have plagued this state agency. Director Sarah Corbally, who is leaving the job in April, has said about 30 of the 178 positions across the state are vacant at any given time; some remain open longer than a year.

Winkley, sitting at her desk, leads the group. The Minnesota native has been in Miles City for more than a decade and her office shows how well she fits in – a European-style deer mount hangs on the wall, and boots make up a big part of the decor. There's a saddle chair children like to sit on. Photos of boys and girls she's placed into permanent homes cover part of a wall. A large drawing from a child she helped is taped up behind where she sits. Written in crayon, it says "Thank you for helping me" and "You are my best friend and make me happy."

That's what the public never sees – the happy, safe children and the families that are reunified – said child protection specialist Joyce Turner, who has worked for the agency for about three years.

"I've never read or heard anything on a news show about 'this family was reunited,'" she said. "You never heard about those things. All the public hears is the negative side of it, then of course that's what they know."

Across the state, a wide variety of groups has volleyed rage at Montana's Child and Family Services workers. About two dozen men and women picketed outside the Billings regional office, holding signs with messages like "Child Protective Services declares war on families." An organization called Grandparents Group of Montana has staged rallies at the Capitol and in cities around the state.

Their claims about the system are serious – children are taken away from parents who have done nothing wrong and are stuck in the system too long. Child protection specialists have too much power with no one to keep them in check and hide behind confidentiality rules.

Agencies and systems seem faceless. Those words detach the work from the people like Winkley and Turner, the ones sitting at the kitchen tables of families at low points and connecting them with services that can help.

"I'll admit, sometimes it's difficult," Turner said of the criticism the agency receives. "Sometimes you have to bite your tongue. Sometimes, unfortunately, the negative gets so publicized that the positive gets lost in the shuffle."

Winkley and Turner were two agency employees willing to discuss their jobs with the Lee State Bureau. They can't discuss details of specific cases due to the confidentiality their jobs require.

Child and Family Services is run by the Department of Public Health and Human Services. Reports of abuse or neglect are received by the department's Central Intake, a toll-free line that operates 24/7. Cases that trigger investigation are sent to one of 29 field offices across the state.

For fiscal year 2015, central intake received 35,812 calls and took 17,754 reports for the whole state. Of those, 8,908 required investigation involving 12,897 children, and 1,850 of those resulted in a child being removed from a home. Over the same time period, nearly half of the children were returned to the home from which they were removed, 12 percent were placed with their noncustodial parent and 9 percent were placed permanently with other family.

Emotions are directed at child protection specialists because they are a parent's initial and primary contact with CFS. After decades at similar jobs in several states, Turner still gets nervous knocking on a family's door to talk with a mother or father for the first time.

"You're intruding on someone else's life. ... You're not a bull in a china shop for sure. It is their home and you have to respect that. You have to put yourself in their position of if someone was knocking on your door and how that would make you feel."

One of Winkley's favorite phrases is, "It's a big darn deal." She says it most often when talking about making the decision to remove children from their homes.

Though critics say child protection specialists make decisions without basis, they operate under a set of state-created protocols. Winkley's specialists take what they call "The Bible" with them on initial visits to document everything.

"One of the first things I ask the worker is, 'Tell me how this child is in immediate danger,'" Winkley said. The danger must be observable, significant and meet a certain threshold. If there's immediate danger, the child protection specialist will put a protection plan in place.

Protection plans can range from leaving a child in the home or the child going to foster care, to working with a family on a voluntary basis or eventually filing a court case.

The agency's first goal is to keep children in their homes, Winkley said, a fact that seems to be overlooked by critics.

Not all cases result in a child being removed from his or her home. And of the cases that do, many result in reunification, Winkley said.

"I would say we all but stand on our heads trying to keep kids in the home," Winkley said. "If we can do some type of a safety plan, where we have safety resources coming into the home and monitoring for safety, if we can keep kids in the home, that's best for kids and families really."

But that's not always the reality.

"Sometimes we walk in the door and parents are getting arrested and we have no providers. And we end up doing a notice of removal right then and there," she said.

One of Winkley's employees was threatened by a mother she worked with. In the end, she was able to reunify the family. The parent sent flowers and a thank-you card to the worker.

"It said I know this was not easy, and you have an incredibly difficult job and I want to thank you for what you did," Winkley said.

Personal threats are hard to quantify. There are things said in the heat of the moment, words that can be written off as deflections of guilt. But some are more serious.

"You do get those," Winkley said. "You do get the police calling you saying, 'This threat has been made against you.'"

Turner had a stretch where someone had to walk out with her at night. "It was a short period of time but it was just reassuring," she said.

Her first week, she walked up on a man smashing the windows out of an employee's car in the parking lot – the wrong employee's car, it turned out.

Violence on that level isn't a weekly occurrence, or even monthly, Winkley said. "This is a smaller office, but it does happen, and we take precautions."

Her 6-year-old son has even been the subject of threats.

"I'm probably maybe a helicopter mom," she said. "He doesn't get to ride around the block by himself on his bike. He's with me. I make sure somebody has his eyes on him."

The Miles City office covers 25,000 square miles over seven counties in eastern Montana – Custer, Garfield, Fallon, Carter, Powder River, Rosebud and Treasure counties.

In January, child protection specialists logged more than 12,000 miles driving to conduct investigations, get children to doctor appointments, facilitate family meetings and more.

Turner covers Rosebud and Treasure counties. Workers are assigned to regions so they can build relationships with service providers – health departments and mental health providers – in the area.

More than once, she's driven hours to meet with parents and nobody's home. She'll hang out, try the house a few more times. If it's a bust, she'll head home and come back the next day.

A legislative audit citing the agency's problems with meeting deadlines set out in state law for responding to reports of alleged neglect and abuse, lack of documenting its work and other problems can't be blamed on an increasing workload, as its director has said is the problem, because the agency isn't handling more cases.

But Corbally said the audit only looked at a small piece of the agency's work and that the number of children in foster care has increased 75 percent in the last several years, as well as the number of cases filed by the agency in district courts.

"This is not an 8-to-5 job, period," Turner said. "And if anybody thinks it is, they are so wrong."

Sometimes there's just not a local placement for kids. Winkley and Turner know without consulting a map that Missoula is just as far as Minot, and those are both places they travel often when there's not a closer spot for a child who needs a mental health assessment.

It can feel like the office operates in triage mode sometimes, moving from one crisis to the next. Employees can't catch their breath between putting out fires.

Turner carries about 10 ongoing court cases, typical for a child protection specialist here. A list of what these cases require every day can quickly add up to more than a 40-hour workweek.

"There's so many little things people don't really realize that we do," Winkley said. "It's transportation, it's hand-holding, it's encouraging, it's setting up services, it's monitoring the services, it's taking them to services, in addition to doing an investigation, preparing court affidavits, they're testifying in court, they're attending treatment team meetings, family engagement meetings. There's just so many things that are expected of them."

And that's in addition to those five calls that need investigating on this Wednesday morning.

Recently, Turner got a call from a foster parent at 7 p.m.

"Of course, you have your work phone and you answer it because you never know," she said. "And when they know that you're available and supportive, it eases their concerns or worries a little bit."

Weekends aren't a given. Turner had a grandmother call her on a Saturday at 10 a.m. because she was having a difficult time with a grandchild. They met and got things worked out.

"Anything you can do to support a placement is wonderful," Turner said. "You have to remember that you're doing this for the children. If you don't step in and help alleviate those issues, you might lose that placement and that's not good for the kids. It's all about the kids for me."

As a supervisor, Winkley is involved in all of the cases. "It's 24/7. I don't get to shut my phone off."

She walks each child protection specialist through a case before they leave the building. They'll call her three, four, five or six times when they're making an initial assessment.

"It's OK for my workers to come into my office and cry, and they do. They yell, they scream," Winkley said. "This is an emotionally charged line of work. They need to have a safe place to go."

It's clear for Winkley and Turner that the demands on their time are frustrating, but not because they don't get to detach from work. The women don't focus on vacations spent with a cellphone always turned on, but on how more hours to spend on cases would help children and parents.

"The more time you can spend with a family the more successful they are," Turner said, "and the shorter the time period we have to have the kids in out-of-home care. When you have so many cases and you're doing new referrals as well ... I would love to go and see these kids every single week, but time-wise it's just not possible."

Turnover has been an issue in Miles City for a few years, Winkley said.

"This is an extremely demanding job, and I think you have to have really some kind of internal motivation to do this line of work," she said.

For Turner, that motivation comes from a deeply rooted desire to do what's right for children. It might seem small, but nothing tips her over the edge more than seeing children carry their belongings into a temporary home in a garbage bag.

"It's about what's right for children," she said. "They didn't make those choices, they deserve to have a good, healthy life."

As a child, Turner went through the system. She grew up poor, mostly in Washington state, and had 13 siblings. "Things weren't good at home and you didn't want to be there, it was your fault."

She lived in a few foster homes. "Things were done so differently. The word 'incorrigible' was really prominent. It prevented, I think, the departments back then from being able to hold the parents accountable for behaviors." Now, she can do just that.

Winkley looks back on past success to get her past hiccups.

She still has contact with a now-grown woman from her first case, who tells her: "You're the only one that has stuck through with me," Winkley said. "She says, 'You're the mom I didn't have.' And how, I mean, that's huge. What better way to know that you're doing something important when you get those affirmations."

Currents

