**Onslow County Department of Social Services**

**Telework Analysis**

**11/01/2021**

Economic Services began a Telework pilot project on 5/21/2021, and included staff from 5 sections: Food & Nutrition Services Intake and Maintenance; Adult Medicaid Maintenance, Family & Children’s Medicaid Maintenance, Program Integrity, and Child Welfare Services. Selected staff from these units were allowed to work from home under the following conditions: work a pre-approved schedule between the hours of 7am -5pm, attend weekly virtual meetings with their supervisor, maintain the mandated accuracy requirement for their program/ unit and when possible, increase productivity by 20%.

Supervisors were required to track the telework employees’ productivity, accuracy, and attendance so that it could be compared to case workers in the office.

The following staff were selected based on meeting criteria:

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| **Employee** | **Services Area** | **Years with DSS** | **Current Status** |
| Kathy Avery | Economic Services/Food & Nutrition | 18 years | Continues to work from home |
| Heather Hargett | Economic Services/Family & Children Medicaid | 13 years | Continues to work from home |
| Debi Tirado | Economic Services / Family & Children Medicaid | 8 years | Continues to work from home |
| Jacqueline Ouderkirk | Economic Services/Food & Nutrition | 5 years | Continues to work from home |
| Cindy Lunceford | Economic Services/Program Integrity | 15 years | Continues to work from home |
| Tess Rollinger | Economic Services/Adult Medicaid | 4 years | Continues to work from home |
| Virginia Huie | Economic Services/Program Integrity | 4 years | Returned to office; too isolating/disconnected |
| Tiffany Hopkins | Child Welfare/18-21 Program | 6 years | Continues to work from home, specialized program |
| Cynthia Jackson | Child Welfare/CPS Assessments | 8 years | CPS Social Worker; work requires her being in the office; rarely works from home |

FNS Intake has one caseworker at home who was originally assigned all telephonic application requests. After a 60-day review, it was discovered that this caseworker was managing 65% more applications than the in- office caseworkers and after discussion, supervisor and caseworker felt like this was unmanageable/not sustainable. After a slight adjustment, this caseworker is now successfully managing **20% more applications** than her counterparts in the office. She has been successful in managing this caseload.

Prior to sending the FNS Maintenance caseworker home, caseloads were adjusted to allow for **20% more cases** to be managed. The larger caseload necessitated an increase in recertifications and changes that this caseworker has been successfully managing her caseload. Due to COVID and waivers in place for this program, certifications are being extended for a large part of the recipients, so this caseworker has recently begun to also process **telephonic applications** to assist the FNS Intake team.

Prior to sending the two caseworkers home from the F&C Medicaid unit, caseloads were redistributed to increase caseloads sizes by **20%**. Due to COVID waivers and policy adjustments, timeliness is not being tracked for Medicaid recertifications however, in addition to the increased recertifications, **these two caseworkers also manage all the changes reported during this timeframe for vacancies/ empty caseloads.**

Prior to telework, Adult Medicaid has two full time caseworkers managing the SSI/ SDX caseload for Onslow County. The caseworker selected for telework in this unit was **given all the SSI/ SDX cases and has effectively managed all recertifications and changes for this specialized caseload thus giving one full time position back to the Adult Medicaid unit for Private Living Arrangement (PLA) Medicaid intake and maintenance.**

Program Integrity currently has one investigator working from home. Due to COVID, referrals and investigations have been significantly reduced so it was not feasible to assign more work to these telework employees as it would have negatively affected the workload balance for the unit; all staff have remained on full rotation to keep work equitable. Beginning in September 2021, in an effort to increase the telework workload, the investigator is now assigned **all citizen fraud reports received telephonically**. The investigator has successfully managed the increased investigations for the first 30 days and will continue to be tracked.

All Economic caseworkers and investigators at home maintained accuracy standards for this time frame.

Economic Services Caseworker’s leave was also tracked against staff working in the office and average time out of the office for telework staff was .96% more. However, we must recognize that the staff working from home are our more experienced caseworkers with leave balances. Staff often report not taking leave because they feel like they will fall behind in the work. The telework staff are able to more effectively manage their caseloads, which makes them feel more confident in taking leave. Sick leave was also tracked as part of this initiative. **Telework staff used 51.473% less sick leave.**

Telework continues to be monitored monthly by the supervisors and program managers. Although it is additional work on the managers, they have been able to meet the challenge.

We had two social workers participate in the telework initiative. One CPS Assessment social worker and one social worker that manages the 18-21 program. The CPS social worker did not find it successful to work from home unless she was able to manage her schedule to type narratives all day. She reports she found she needed to be in the office too much to successfully telework full time

The 18-21 social worker has been successful in managing a caseload and not having a “backlog.” Backlog is defined by cases that have closed but are in need of documentation. The social worker was originally maintaining the 18-21 caseload as well as being assigned 2 foster care cases and 2 ICPC cases. It became apparent within the first 60 days this was not manageable nor sustainable. She now maintains the 18-21 caseload and 2 ICPC cases. For several months she managed a caseload almost twice the state standard, but this was due to COVID waivers and outreach to our youth that aged out of foster care. She has maintained her required contacts on her cases as well as being able to complete outreach. She reports being much more focused and efficient with her time and that was verified by her supervisor.

**Recommendations:**

We are recommending expanding this program now or in the near future. This has given the agency much needed space and has proven to be effective for most of the staff selected. Although we know telework is not for everyone, it is of mutual benefit to the employee and the agency when it is successful. If allowed to expand, we would want to maintain the same criteria for employees to be eligible (years of service). We believe it will be most successful with Economic Services Caseworkers as their work is easily tracked. We recognize that for the Social Work Division, telework is not as successful. It may be more successful once we get a case management system however, the challenge of our turnover will continue to be an issue as social workers would need to be able to work independently to a certain extent and our current social work division lacks experience and longevity.