

Health and Social Services

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES 2003-2004 GRAND JURY REPORT

I. Reason for Investigation

The Grand Jury received a complaint citing the lack of accountability at each level in the Child Protective Services program (CPS) of Solano County Health and Social Services Department (HSS) from Social Workers to the Managers and the Deputy Director. The complaint also cited the need for implementation and enforcement of CPS policies and procedures, along with using best practices to conduct investigations, assessments and recommendations. The complaint suggested that without accountability and adherence to established policies and procedures, the children of Solano County were at risk. Additionally, the complainant cited several newspaper accounts involving serious incidents of child neglect and child abuse, including the death of a four-year-old.

II. Procedure

The Grand Jury conducted a careful and systematic nine-month investigation including:

- Touring the CPS worksite
- Interviewing staff at each level in CPS from the Department Director through recent hires
- Reviewing information on program operations, policies and procedures and types of services provided to clients
- Reviewing CPS brochures, newspaper articles and other literature
- Obtaining a court order and reviewed case files from January, 2003, through June, 2003, on the CPS computer system

III. Background

1. The mission of CPS is to address the "...issues associated with the abuse and neglect of children. The ultimate goal of Protective Services is to preserve the family whenever possible while keeping the children safe..." (HSS Brochure 1/02). Children's service programs include: child protective services, family reunification, family maintenance, family preservation, adoptions, foster home licensing, placement assessment and independent living guidance. This report centers on the CPS program. Over the course of the inquiry, the Grand Jury uncovered a series of systemic roadblocks that prevent optimal operation of the CPS program.

2. According to testimony, three of the four current managers are not helpful in providing guidance and direction to either first-line supervisors and/or social workers when guidance is sought concerning case management. It was alleged that there was a general failure of all but one of the four managers to make critical decisions.

Testimony further revealed that:

- Managers were unwilling to sign documents that would indicate managerial review, decisions and/or approval.

- When social workers prepared their court reports based on their observations in the field, the content of the reports were sometimes altered by the supervisors and/or managers. Consequently, social workers were made to choose between refusing to sign altered reports or clarifying at the time of court testimony that they did not personally write portions of what might be viewed as evidence.

3. Interviews revealed conflicting testimony regarding the training of social workers. Management personnel within CPS reported that there was a suitable in-house training program in place with training modules and curriculum designed to address the areas of need for social workers new to the field or new to CPS. It was also reported that there were training opportunities at the Bay Area Academy and monthly All-Staff meetings. The Grand Jury reviewed the in-house training materials offered by CPS. The materials appeared to be adequate. However, testimony from the recipients of the training and some supervisory staff revealed problems in three areas:

Structure of Training

- Some interviewees had heard of the training but had not seen it.
- Supervisors were not aware of whether or not the social workers reporting to them had participated in the training.
- When social workers were scheduled for training, they were sometimes pulled away to do other duties.
- The training was scheduled as late as six to nine months after employment commenced.
- Mentoring was a part of the training program. The time varied as to how long a new social worker might be assigned a mentor in field work.
- Once the social workers returned to their units there was no support system in place to reinforce and support the limited training that was provided.

Content of Training

- Training did not adequately reflect what actually was expected of the social worker in the field regarding protocol and procedures. Thus, social workers were ill-prepared for the practical aspects of the job.
- There are no established standards for case evaluation and the links to remedial action. This results in unequal and sometimes harsher case resolution.

Outcome of Training

Substandard training can produce undesirable outcomes such as:

- Lack of proper training can expose CPS to liability.
- Poor interviewing skills resulted in interviews that were unduly influenced by an alleged offender.
- Minority families (African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, although not as often possibly due to a lower number of residents in the county) received harsher treatment plans than similarly situated non-minority families.
- Social workers have threatened to quit because, without adequate training, they felt they were just thrown into the field.

4. According to testimony, CPS does not have adequate working relationships with law enforcement agencies in all local jurisdictions. The Grand Jury notes that there is a very positive working relationship with the Vacaville Police Department.

5. Further testimony stated that CPS lacks leadership, proper structure and accountability.

- Four positions exist that are not being utilized as intended. The positions are entitled: Family Group Conferencing, Integrated Family Support Initiative, Quality Assurance Quality Control Manager and Placement Worker. Workers do not utilize the positions as designed. For example, there are contracts that exist to locate placements for children, so the Placement Worker position is superfluous.
- First-line supervisors do not feel supported by the managers.
- Managers do not feel supported by the Deputy Director.
- Some social workers do not feel emotionally supported by management when faced with a crisis in their case management.
- Only one manager knows how to fully utilize the computer system. Most other supervisors and managers must depend on the one manager to provide computer assistance. It was stated that there is no computer manual nor is there supervisory computer training offered.
- Instead, social workers end up with larger caseloads. The social workers who shirk their responsibilities are not assigned their fair share of the work and little or no corrective action is taken when social workers shirk their responsibilities.
- CPS lacks personnel performance documentation. Social workers are not advised of the performance expectations for their jobs and are not advised of areas needing improvement early in their probationary period, thereby making it difficult to take corrective action later.
- In spite of the stated open door policy, problems and issues communicated to the Deputy Director are often not documented and often no action results.
- Performance expectations are not communicated to first-line supervisors or the social workers.

6. Testimony revealed that the Director does not get information vital to the successful operation of the CPS program from his chain of command, e.g., concerns regarding the training program and social workers threatening to quit due to lack of training and lack of support within the organization. At times, the Director has found it necessary to obtain information from the Union and employees rather than his senior staff. It was reported that the Director was hired to redirect and clear up organizational inefficiencies.

7. The Grand Jury was shown a Policy and Procedures Manual, which was requested by the previous 2002-2003 Grand Jury. However, those interviewees who would use the manual were not aware of its existence. Upon review of the manual, it was noted that it primarily related to general County procedures such as tuition reimbursement, use of leave, requisitioning supplies/equipment, use of County vehicles, etc. The manual did not provide standard operating procedures for successful casework. It was observed that since the Grand Jury's investigation, the Policy and Procedures Manual was at least visible in the CPS unit.

8. The Grand Jury made a series of on-site visits to CPS to review computerized case records. The case reviews revealed:

- The two-hour response time for investigations was generally met.
- The three-day response time for sexual abuse cases was generally met.
- The ten-day response time for both physical abuse and neglect cases was generally met.

- Cases were not closed in 30 days as required. Most were closed out in 6 to 10 months due to a variety of reasons, including referrals to other organizations and on availability of treatment programs for parents (drug, alcohol, etc.).
- Case plans were often not fully developed. Documentation and follow-up appeared to be lacking. Record keeping was sloppy with no indication of why cases were closed.
- In some records there were gaps of one year with no entries.
- Supervisors did not appear to have reviewed many cases, as indicated by the lack of a supervisory signature.
- Many files were not entered into the computer although they were listed as having been entered.
- Locating paper files that were not on the computer was a time-consuming process, even for experienced personnel.
- Many of the supervisors don't know how to use the computer system. This poses a problem as there is a supervisory module that allows supervisors to see which cases are not complete, or which social workers are not meeting required time lines.
- Initial intake logs were often illegible and difficult to decipher.

9. Testimony revealed that throughout CPS morale is generally low, and upper-level management “operates based on politics” and is focused on maintaining a positive public image rather than enhancing the workers’ ability to serve the children and families of Solano County.

IV. Findings and Recommendations

Each finding is referenced to the background paragraph number

Finding #1 - The Grand Jury uncovered a series of systemic roadblocks that prevent optimal operation of the CPS program, thereby endangering children in Solano County. Although there have been internal and external attempts to correct these deficiencies, CPS has continued to demonstrate an inability to self-correct. The organizational culture is subverting the achievement of the CPS mission. (1)(2)(4)(5)(6)(9)

Recommendation #1 – The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the formation of a Blue Ribbon Committee independent of HSS (modeled after the 2003 San Mateo County Blue Ribbon Committee) consisting of former judges, non-Solano County social workers, academics, concerned citizens and union officials to review the entire CPS program and recommend changes.

Finding #2 - Social workers are not receiving the practical training needed for them to conduct proper investigations and interviews in order to make appropriate decisions for the children of Solano County. (1)(3)(5)

Recommendation # 2- Employees should be given performance based training with successful results verified by their responsible line supervisors. This training should be a key component of an employee’s annual performance evaluation.

V. Comments

CPS is a vital program to Solano County and it is imperative that it be supported by effective program operations. It is necessary to bring about constructive change and to create an operation that is better able to meet the designated goals of the organization. To do less is a disservice to the dedicated men and women who serve in CPS out of a genuine desire to protect children and foster positive family

relationships. It is also a disservice to the children and families who depend upon this organization for their survival.

We recommend that the 2004-2005 Grand Jury continue to investigate and monitor CPS for progress in correcting the deficiencies enumerated above.

VI. Affected Agencies

- Solano County Board of Supervisors
- Solano County Health and Social Services Department
- Solano County Sheriff's Department
- Law Enforcement Agencies within Solano County
- Solano County Superior Court Judges – Juvenile Division (courtesy copy)