

Public Social Services Agency Children's Protective Services Division

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The Grand Jury conducted an investigation into the procedures of the Children's Protective Services. These procedures include the removal of abused children from their parents and the subsequent "Family Reunification" services.

BACKGROUND

- Children's Protective Services is a State and Federally-mandated program designed to pay for basic care in Foster Homes, special homes, therapeutic homes, Family Reunification services, contracted professional services, 24-hour Emergency Response, 24-hour shelter homes and adoption procedures.
- There are 78 Social Workers with individual caseloads of 34-38 children, ten more cases each than is considered effective.
- For the fiscal year 1994-95 (ending 6-30-95) Children's Protective Services received 6,567 referrals (calls to investigate). Approximately one-fourth were assigned to a Worker and a case was opened. A total of 11,000 cases, both new and ongoing, were served during this year.
- Of these referrals, investigations revealed that 1,450 children were being physically abused, 1,240 were being neglected, and 754 were being sexually abused. The use of drugs and/or alcohol by the parents is a factor in most of the placements.
- Of these referrals, 483 children were placed. There are approximately 1,000 children in Foster Homes at any one time in Ventura County.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

- Interviewed Director of Public Social Services Agency (PSSA).
- Interviewed Deputy Director and Program Managers, Children's Protective Services.
- Interviewed County Social Workers.
- Interviewed police officers and observed patrols during a "Ride-along" program.
- Observed Social Workers visiting families, both as ongoing cases and as initial investigation of complaints.
- Observed hospital staff and social worker in conference concerning a newborn.
- Observed court hearings concerning ongoing cases and contested cases.
- Reviewed police records, statistics, and agency forms and documents and newspaper articles.

FINDINGS

1. When a Social Worker receives a call reporting possible child abuse:
 - a. Specific facts are requested from the caller and written on a form.
 - b. The Supervisor is notified.
 - c. The Worker goes out immediately if it is determined that there may be imminent danger. Otherwise meetings are scheduled between the worker and the family.
 - d. The child may be removed by the Worker to a "shelter home" on a temporary basis.
 - e. A Court date is set for hearing and the court decides on the placement of the child.
2. When visiting a family about which little is known, the Worker often takes a cellular phone to call for help quickly, if necessary, and to arrange needed referrals for the family. A limited number of phones are kept in the office to be shared by all the Workers.
3. In cases where the family does not speak English, a translator is provided.
4. A plan for improving the family situation or for Family Reunification is drawn up by the Worker and agreed to by the family.
5. The parents must show that they are complying with the plan and following the assignments. These may include:
 - a. Attending drug/ alcohol rehabilitation programs
 - b. Anger management classes
 - c. Personal counseling
 - d. Homemaker skills and/or parenting classes
 - e. Additional professional services may be ordered by the court.
6. The Worker monitors the family by making visits and writing reports during the next 6 months. The case is placed on inactive status when the family meets the requirements of the plan.
7. If the police answer a call reporting child abuse, a) it may be necessary to take the child to the police station, b) the social worker is notified and comes to evaluate the child, c) the social worker may take the child to a shelter home immediately, or d) in other instances, the Social Worker calls the police if there is violence in the home that she is visiting.
8. Doctors, teachers and other caregivers who work with children are mandated by law to report suspected abuse and/or neglect.
9. According to law, homelessness by itself is not sufficient reason to remove a child from its parents.
10. A case can be opened if the social worker determines that a child is at risk from danger, neglect or abuse.

COURT PROCEEDINGS

1. According to the Welfare and Institutions Code Section 300 et al (SB 14), every effort must be made toward family reunification when children have been removed from parents. This is done over a period of 6 to 12 month and the time period may be shortened or lengthened by the court.
2. The County Superior Court, Juvenile Dependency Department, has jurisdiction over children who are returned home or placed in "protective custody". The child may be placed in a temporary arrangement in a relative's home, a shelter home, a group home, a residential treatment home or a Foster Home.
3. There are periodic court hearings when the child has been placed. The Worker continues to monitor the case and may appear in court. The child has a court appointed attorney and each of the parents has an attorney.
4. There can be as many as eight hearings for a child who is in custody. The time period may be extended if there are objections made by the parents, through their respective attorneys.
5. There are 3 types of permanent placement: Referral for Adoption, Legal Guardianship and Long-term Foster Care. Each one requires many interviews and extensive documentation.
6. A child who has been in foster care for 18 months must have a permanent placement plan established. There are also waiting lists of adoptive parents in Ventura County. At the same time, more infants and children are going into the system, but are not adoptable.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE SHIFT

1. Problems have occurred when the "evening shift" receives two or more serious calls at the same time. There are only two Workers on duty which requires that they place priorities on incoming calls.
2. The high priority calls are defined as a child being in "imminent danger". Workers respond by telephone and in person, but can respond to only one "imminent danger" call at a time. There is limited "back up" for serious calls.
3. There have been instances when a police officer reported abuse and/or neglect and the Workers said that they would come out shortly, but did not arrive nor call back. This leaves the caller waiting and the child without a place to stay.

COMMENDATIONS

The 1995-96 Grand Jury commends Children's Protective Services for the following:

- Social workers who are willing to work overtime in order to provide a safe place for a child.
- Social Workers who are now working in cooperation with local police departments, the District Attorney's office and schools.
- Public Social Services for a written plan of action with the schools for reporting suspected abuse or neglect.
- Dependency Court hearings for efficiency, compassion and thoughtful consideration of each case.

- The County attorneys who represent Children's Protective Services and the court liaison for Children's Protective Services for thorough preparation and a spirit of cooperation.
- Foster Care Licensing Department for ongoing newspaper notices of meetings to recruit foster parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1995-96 Grand Jury recommends that Public Social Services Agency and Children's Protective Services:

1. Add staff to the Emergency Response Shift so that more calls can be answered, particularly between 6:00 PM and 11:00 PM during the week and in the afternoon and evenings of weekends and holidays. There should be a Worker available to handle an additional incident of "imminent danger" as well as to respond to less serious calls.
2. Gather statistics to show the number of calls, serious and otherwise, that come in at specific hours of the evening, weekends and holidays. This will help determine the number of personnel needed to handle high priority calls effectively.
3. Set up more programs of cooperation and information sharing with local police departments.
4. Revise the procedures to allow Social Workers to contact the police directly in certain emergency situations, rather than having to obtain permission from the Supervisor.
5. Provide an adequate number of individual cellular phones for emergency use while making home visits. Individual phones would provide the Worker with added protection and safety. Management controls should be established to assure that phones are used only for essential, official calls.
6. Recruit more "shelter homes" that can be used on short notice.
7. Obtain fully qualified community/county service providers in sexual abuse counseling, particularly for perpetrators, the non-offending parent and the victim.
There should be a provider in the East County as well as the West County.
8. Recruit more community/ county service providers for professional family counseling coordinated with personal counseling and classes in "parent education".
9. Increase the efficiency of the County Foster Care Licensing Department so the public will be better informed regarding the need for long-term Foster Homes. Information regarding the acute need and the qualifications, responsibilities and financial arrangements should be sent to the media and public/ private agencies.
10. Review PSSA Adoption Services procedures in certain cases to shorten the time a child is "in the system."
11. Parents who have inflicted serious injury or cruelty to their children should also be limited to less than the current 12-18 months of public services to reunify the family.

RESPONSES REQUIRED

Public Social Services Agency

Children's Protective Services