

## **CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Grand Jury received a citizen's complaint regarding a decision made by the Juvenile Dependency Court and Child Protective Services. The Ventura County Counsel advised the Grand Jury that it's not within Grand Jury jurisdiction to review decisions of the Ventura County Superior Court. This led to an interest in Child Protective Services.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury conducted a protocol visit to Child Protective Services and submitted written questions to key personnel, supplemented by verbal questions.

### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

#### **CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES**

Child Protective Services receives approximately 7,000 reports of abuse and neglect each year. Approximately 72% of the reports are investigated; of these, 95% are closed with no follow-up needed. Twenty three percent of the reports are filed for information only because the child does not appear to be abused or the case does not fall within Child Protective Services' jurisdiction. If there is further risk to the child, the case will be reopened and followed. The remaining 5% of the reports result in a petition to the Juvenile Dependency Court for removal from the family. The Judge decides where the child is placed.

The Child Protective Services Hotline, (805) 654-3200, is always open, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Anyone may report child abuse – teachers, nurses, doctors, parents, neighbors and relatives.

The primary focus is always the welfare of the child. All information is confidential; employees, volunteers and foster parents sign confidentiality agreements. The public does have the right to know if a child dies while in County custody. Ventura County has a 4% rate of repeat abuse; this is substantially lower than the National average of 7% repeat abuse.

The caseload in Ventura County is 25 to 30 children per social worker. A supervisor must sign all investigatory work. Follow-up visits are made monthly to each child; exceptions to the monthly visits are made, for example, in long-term foster care situations. Social workers may also visit more frequently and check on school progress without parental permission.

## REUNIFICATION WITH PARENTS

Children may be reunified with parents, even in cases of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. The majority of child abuse consists of neglect, but approximately 15 to 16% is sexual abuse and 22 to 25% is physical abuse. Drug and alcohol abuse by the parents or other caregivers is responsible for 60 to 80% of foster care placements.

Services including counseling, substance abuse treatment and parenting classes are offered. The focus is on interfamily crisis intervention. Children may or may not be initially removed from the parents if the parents participate in the required programs. Twelve months of services are offered and can be extended to 18 months. The Drug Court often sets up programs for substance-abusing parents to care for their children.

In 2001, 14.6% of children in foster care in Ventura County were reunified with their parents. By law, FBI and police checks of parents are required before reunification. The agencies look only at convictions. The Probation Department and Child Protective Services make a joint assessment. Probation also looks at community safety. All information is provided to the Juvenile Dependency Court. If reunification with parents isn't possible, guardianship or other foster care arrangements are made. Keeping siblings together is always a consideration. Children are sometimes reunified with parents in other states or countries. In these cases the program in the receiving jurisdiction applies.

## FOSTER CARE

Ventura County has approximately 170 homes providing foster care for children. Only 15 of the homes are Spanish-speaking and five are African-American. MediCal pays for the children's health care. Generally, the maximum number of children allowed per home is six (two children per room). Foster care parents are considered volunteers and money received is not taxable by the Internal Revenue Service. Two special agencies also provide care for "special needs children."

There is a waiting list for foster care for teenagers, but no waiting list for younger children. Over 60% of foster parents adopt their foster children. If a juvenile is in foster care at age 18, they are emancipated; many are not ready and don't fare well.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The 2002-2003 Grand Jury has concluded that Child Protective Services has an organized, effective program caring for abused and neglected children, although there are challenges and problems in some cases of reunification of children with their parents.

The Foster Care program needs more volunteer homes, especially Hispanic and African American. The program has an excellent structure and is well run.

Child Protective Services management and personnel exhibited dedication to the job of protecting children. Their motivation and excitement became evident as they explained their duties and accomplishments.

## **NO RECOMMENDATIONS OR RESPONSES REQUESTED**