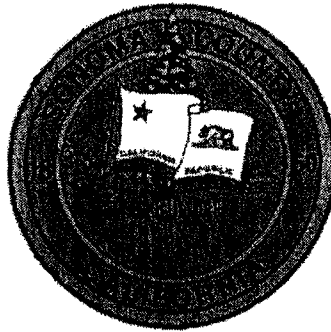


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October 1, 2008

TO: The Honorable Knoel Owen
Presiding Judge, Sonoma County Superior Court
FROM: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
SUBJECT: **Response to Final Report of the 2007-2008 Grand Jury**

**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
RESPONSE TO THE 2007-2008 GRAND JURY FINAL REPORT**

Ensuring Fairness in Child Support Services

*R1: DCSS should educate clients on court procedures and the workings of the child support system
(Page 32)*

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the next nine months.

DCSS recognizes that communication regarding the court system can always be improved and fine-tuned. Therefore, DCSS has recently indicated to key Court leaders its interest in collaborating in further outreach efforts to the public. DCSS also has a desire in participating with the Family Court in conducting

joint clinics for the purpose of both educating the public and enhancing the administration of justice. This concept is in its infancy but has garnered great interest from the Superior Court and family law leaders. The expectation is for this project to be fully implemented in the next nine months.

R2: DCSS should provide clear and thorough documentation of child support payments to all parties involved (Page 32)

Response: The recommendation has been implemented.

In March 2006, as part of the statewide plan to convert all counties to one child support system, Child Support Enforcement (CSE), the State took responsibility over payment processing of child support payments with the creation of the State Disbursement Unit (SDU). Instead of non-custodial parents paying directly to the counties, all non-custodial parents were required to submit their payments to Sacramento. Since that time, the State has assumed responsibility for providing reliable and accurate records of child support payments. In October 2007, DCSS converted from CASES to CSE which supports and prepares all the documentation about the cases.

R3: DCSS should clarify and verify responsibility of health insurance for children involved in each case

Response: The recommendation has been implemented as indicated by the department.

The Board of Supervisors agrees with the recommendation. As mentioned in the department's response to Finding 2, DCSS has a Medical Support Unit to assure that the children of DCSS's caseload receive health insurance when available.

New federal medical support regulations were issued by the Office of Child Support Enforcement on July 21, 2008. The new federal regulations provide for alternatives other than enforcement of medical support against only the non-custodial parent. These regulations vary considerably from previous regulations and require the State Department of Child Support Services to issue new directives regarding medical support establishment and enforcement in California. DCSS anxiously awaits further guidance from the State Department of Child Support Services to legally and appropriately enforce medical support orders.

R4: To minimize disputes, DCSS should evaluate and monitor client understanding of and satisfaction with its services. Client evaluations should occur after three months, nine months and annually thereafter (Page 32)

Response: The recommendation will not be implemented because the specific request falls within the purview of the State Department of Child Support Services. The Department, however, has safeguards in place to ensure its high level of customer service.

Pursuant to legislative mandate (Family Code section 17303), DCSS is, in essence, a State program with a local office. DCSS is entirely funded by the State Department of Child Support Services and most of its business practices are now mandated and regulated by the State. The last State Department of Child Support Services customer satisfaction survey was conducted between June 2001 and December 2001. When asked about their satisfaction with Sonoma County's child support agency in general, the customers' satisfaction level was 8.6% higher than the state as a whole.

Also, with its quality assurance authority, the State now has direct audit access to Sonoma County's data and activity and is able to directly track how many customer calls are handled and how long those customers remain on hold. In addition, authorized State Department of Child Support staff can directly access Sonoma County's financial and legal case documentation, as well as Activity Log notes in CSE, in the event that a customer makes an inquiry directly to the State's Public Inquiry Response Team (PIRT).

Though the State has assumed purview of this responsibility, DCSS is extremely proactive in its efforts to provide high quality and timely service to its customers. The Department does not require its customers to make appointments in order to be seen by staff. Generally, drop-in customers are seen within 10 minutes of their arrival. DCSS attorneys routinely call customers prior to court hearings in an effort to reach resolution without the necessity of litigation. This additional effort is unique when compared to child support agencies statewide.

R5: DCSS should appoint a neutral third-party ombudsman to ensure a fair process. This volunteer would ideally have a background in child support issues (Page 32)

Response: The recommendation will not be implemented because the Department already has an Ombudsperson pursuant to state mandate.

It is our understanding that the Ombudsperson received four formal complaints, a very low number.

R6: DCSS investigations should include written documentation or other corroborating evidence regarding disputed issues (Page 32)

Response: The recommendation has been implemented as standard operating procedure.

Written documentation of all communications and case research is currently entered in the DCSS statewide computer system as standard business practice. Since 1991, when Sonoma County converted to the CASES system, all communications with customers and other case investigative information has been documented in the narrative section (EVD) of the system. Since conversion to the statewide computer system, CSE, all case notes have been entered in the Activity Log.

The statewide automated computer system, CSE, is mandated by federal law. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has issued operational specifications for what must be included in terms of data entry in order to qualify for federal certification of the system. These specifications specifically prohibit entry of information in a system outside of CSE. Therefore, communications and other investigative information are all tracked within CSE.

R7: If budget constraints allow, DCSS should reinstate parenting classes. If this training cannot be funded, volunteer resources should be explored (Page 32)

Response: The recommendation will not be implemented because the funding is not available.

While the Board agrees with the Grand Jury's recommendation to reinstate DCSS parenting classes, budgetary constraints have severely limited DCSS's ability to do so for the foreseeable future. Parenting

classes, similar to those previously provided in collaboration with DCSS, remain available at a low cost to the public. DCSS keeps outreach materials regarding these parenting classes in its lobby and they are available to customers.

If adequate funding for parenting coursework becomes available, DCSS should pursue new opportunities to re-establish parenting classes. In the meantime, information is posted in the DCSS lobby regarding parenting classes that are offered at a low cost through the same community based organization with which DCSS had previously offered classes.

As the department indicated in their response to the Grand Jury, relying upon volunteers is not a suitable substitute for parenting classes provided by appropriately trained professionals. Many of the parents participating in the program have a history of high conflict interpersonal communication, mental health issues, and substance abuse issues. DCSS is concerned that its association with anything other than a professional and accredited program may not provide its customers with the services they need and could subject the County of Sonoma to undue legal liability.