

PROTECTING THE COUNTY'S AT-RISK CHILDREN

SUMMARY

The Family, Youth & Children's Services Division of the Human Services Department (FYC) provides benefits and daily support to hundreds of abused and neglected children under the age of 18 in Sonoma County. These children come from homes where substance abuse or other adverse conditions exist.

Removing children from their home environment is a very traumatic event for all involved, and care must be taken to ensure a smooth transition. The FYC assists children who have been removed from their homes. Children may be placed at Valley of the Moon Children's Home (VOM), with an extended family member, or with a foster family for their protection and care.

Child Protective Services (CPS) is under the management of the FYC. The FYC is responsible for investigating suspected child abuse and assisting children and families enrolled in either voluntary or court-ordered programs. Protective and supportive social services for both parents and children are available through CPS.

A network of dedicated people exists who are committed to the safety and well-being of children. While there is some room for improvement, children in unfortunate situations are well cared for by CPS. The entire "village" of Sonoma County is involved to support those children most in need.

BACKGROUND

Children's safety in the child welfare system is of critical importance. In particular, those with special medical needs, allergies, and known illnesses are of concern. The Grand Jury investigated how children enter the child welfare system and the process by which social workers monitor home environments.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury spoke to staff from the Family, Youth & Children's Services Division including those from Child Protective Services and Valley of the Moon Children's Home. Additionally, the Grand Jury toured the Valley of the Moon Children's Home facility and reviewed documents provided by the County and independent sources.



DISCUSSION

Family Youth & Children's Services (FYC)

The FYC strives to reunite families. This occurs in 45%-50% of cases. In order to facilitate these efforts, the County has programs to educate parents on how to handle the demands of parenthood and to learn life skills. Some children are placed with extended family members or adopted. The social workers work directly with families to improve their home situation, which could allow their child to return home.

The FYC takes a team approach to provide services tailored to each child's needs. Each team has expertise in immediate response, court services, family maintenance, family reunification, and placement planning.

With the welfare of a child on the line, social workers face challenges with tremendous responsibilities. They deal with bilingual issues, varying family sizes, and geographic logistics. There are occasions when they must obtain court orders requesting law enforcement assistance with the removal of a child in the middle of the night. Team members have large case workloads and at the same time can be responsible for training interns, extra help, and rotational staff. Social workers often invest additional work hours to complete their caseload requirements in accordance with mandated deadlines. In spite of these demands, there is a low staff turnover rate.

Specific classifications of social workers are assigned as Immediate Response (IR) workers on a 24/7 two-month rotation schedule. They are the first responders to a suspected child abuse or endangerment report and must take action within 24 hours. The FYC does not have enough laptops to provide one to each field social worker. Currently, only the IR workers are assigned laptops. Supervisors can assign a laptop to non-IR staff; however, the laptop must be returned at the end of each day. In addition, access to the confidential computer network is restricted and requires an encrypted code. The County has purchased a limited number of encrypted codes, which are handed out judiciously. Staff without access to a laptop and a code must write field reports manually and later enter the information into their desktop computers at the office.

The FYC is notified of suspected child abuse or endangerment in a variety of ways: 1) Phone calls received during normal business hours are answered by an intake worker who uses a decision making program to assess the risk. Depending on the urgency, a response is required within 24 hours or within 10 days. 2) A mandated child abuse reporter such as a physician, teacher, or counselor completes a Suspected Child Abuse Report. Reports are entered into the computer system and action is taken within 10 days. 3) Reports of a non-immediate nature, received via mail or fax, are reviewed and assigned on a less urgent basis, but within 10 days. These include police incident reports that are crosschecked against any prior history of incidents such as prior abuse reports or DUI arrests with children in the vehicle. Reports are prioritized and distributed to in-boxes located in the intake area. The FYC acknowledged that the reports received in the in-boxes are not always processed promptly.

Daily rotating supervisors assign incoming cases. They may not be aware of the unique details of a worker's current caseload, such as trial preparation time, bilingual requirements, or family sizes. This can lead to unequal case assignments. The department is developing and testing a computer program that

considers caseload factors. Supervisors can then assign cases to the appropriate social worker based on consistent parameters.

Valley of the Moon Children's Home (VOM)

Children enter VOM through the legal system. This facility provides temporary care for children ages six to eighteen who are victims of abuse, abandonment, neglect, or whose parents or guardians are unable to care for them. Typically, children do not remain at VOM for more than 30 days. They are reunited with their family, placed with extended family, or placed with foster homes.

The facility accommodates up to 63 children. Historically, the population has been as high as 58, although during the investigation period the number of children fluctuated between 16 and 28. Staff attributed these low numbers to the success of the various support programs available thru FYC.

Each staff member is certified in first aid and CPR every two years. The ratio of children to staff is typically 3 or 4:1 with a maximum of 10:1.

Each child is evaluated by a doctor or nurse as soon as practical after intake. Medical conditions such as diabetes, asthma, or allergies are noted in each child's record. Medications are stored in a secure room and dispensed by trained personnel. In the case of dietary needs or food allergies, photos of affected children and their sensitivities are posted on a designated kitchen wall to alert staff. A doctor or nurse is available on site or on call 24 hours a day.

Staff guide each child at VOM in developing social and life skills and positive behaviors they may not have learned at home. VOM uses the Motivational System, a component of a widely- accepted program created by Boys Town in Nebraska. Initially, a child is assessed for three days. During this time, information is gathered to determine behavioral and developmental levels. A child may progress in the program from Level I through Level III. Points are tallied for positive and negative behavior. Points can be exchanged for access to additional outdoor recreation activities, television, videos, handheld games, telephone usage, and snacks, among other things. At the end of every day, a VOM social worker sits with each child and talks through the events of the day. Challenges faced during the day are discussed and social workers praise success and give encouragement.

A common concern of staff is the rigidity and inflexibility of the program for early school-aged children. As designed, the program makes Level I through Level III assignments based on chronological age. In practice, there are no provisions for the child's developmental age.

Volunteer groups perform supportive functions that enhance the lives of the children. Some care for the babies while foster parents attend scheduled training at VOM and others read to the children. Civic groups, businesses, and residents of the County donate clothing, supplies, and services to VOM. One example is the ongoing effort to collect luggage for children exiting the facility with their belongings in a suitcase rather than a paper sack. Each child passing through VOM is treated as an individual.

Foster Homes

The County has approximately 100 state-licensed foster homes. There are several categories of foster care: 1) Emergency Foster Homes most commonly provide homes for babies and toddlers, but care for

children up to age 12 when immediate needs arise. 2) Concurrent and traditional foster homes provide longer-term care, and the potential to adopt. 3) The Respite Care Homes offer up to 72 hours short-term relief for foster parents.

All foster families receive a medical history and a behavioral profile for each child in their care. Daily records of the child's behavior are maintained by the Emergency Foster Home parent. The FYC social worker receives these records weekly. The concurrent and traditional foster homes document the same information for the social worker on a monthly basis.

There is a shortage of culturally diverse homes and homes that accept older children. Efforts never cease to recruit new homes. Some recruitment efforts include distribution of fliers and informational brochures as well as speaking to community groups.

Foster parents are certified in both first aid and CPR. Continuing education exceeds the state-mandated requirement of eight hours per year and the County requirement of twelve hours per year. Foster families are asked to care for a child as long as necessary. The ultimate goal is to return children to their biological parents. Many foster families establish long-lasting ties to their foster children that go well beyond their adolescence and into adulthood. Interviewees consistently stated that the foster families are exceptional people. They are well respected within the FYC for their tireless contributions.

FINDINGS

- F1. Social workers manage a large workload and face challenges getting their work done.
- F2. The lack of a full-time trainer on staff increases the workload for social workers.
- F3. The number of laptops available to the employees is insufficient.
- F4. Requiring employees to check laptops in and out on a daily basis is inefficient.
- F5. Limited availability of remote computer access results in duplication of work.
- F6. Reports of a non-immediate nature, such as mail and faxes sent to Family, Youth & Children's Services, are not well tracked and may not be handled in a timely manner.
- F7. The number of cases that each social worker manages may not be a true indicator of actual workload.
- F8. The Boys Town Motivational System Program used at Valley of the Moon Children's Home is inflexible.
- F9. There are never enough foster homes in the County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that the Family, Youth & Children's Services:

- R1. Create a position for a full-time case assignment supervisor who would also provide all training.
- R2. Finalize and implement the computer program currently in development that will assign cases based on known factors such as current workload, trial preparation time, bilingual requirements, and family sizes.
- R3. Assign each field social worker a laptop.
- R4. Equip field social workers with 24 hour a day remote access to the FYC computer system.
- R5. Revise the current system for managing all mail and fax communications received at FYC to enable tracking and efficient processing.
- R6. Modify the Boys Town Motivational System Program to accommodate the additional consideration of a child's developmental and emotional age.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6 - Division Director, Family, Youth & Children's Services Division of the Human Services Department

DISCLAIMER

This report was issued by the Grand Jury with the exception of one member of the jury who recused him/herself. This juror was excluded from all parts of the investigation, including interviews, deliberations, and the writing and acceptance of the report.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Family, Youth & Children's Services organization chart
- Valley of the Moon Children's Home organization chart
- Valley of the Moon Children's Home admit checklist and procedures
- Juvenile Court Process Documents
- Foster Parent Guidebook

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.