

Department of Public Social Services Child Protective Services

Background

Child Protective Services (CPS) is one of six divisions within the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS). Funding for CPS is allocated from federal, state and county sources. Federal and state funding is available only if the county provides matching funds.

The programs and services provided by CPS are intended to protect children from abuse, neglect and exploitation. Current services encompass responding to emergencies involving the well being of children. They are aimed at preserving or maintaining families, the reunification of families, adjudication, assistance with adoptions and intervention-type services. These services are provided in the following program units:

Emergency Response

Family Reunification

Family Maintenance

Adjudication

Central Intake

Permanent Placement

There are 592 licensed foster family homes in Riverside County. The majority of these licensed foster homes will accommodate children from ages two to seventeen years, with some homes accommodating infants up to twenty-three months.

The reasons children are made wards of the court are:

Physical, sexual and emotional abuse

Severe neglect

Parents in jail or prison

Illness of parent (physical, mental or substance abuse)

Unable to care for the child

Incorrigible child

While caseloads vary from month to month (approximately 3,800), the existing social worker staff continues to function with a shortage of fully qualified personnel. Social workers are traditionally devoted and overworked.

There are as many as 40,000 case referrals a year made to the Riverside Juvenile Court. One-half of these referrals turn out to be unsupported. Approximately 2,000 - 3,000 petitions a year are heard by the juvenile court judges and commissioners. Most petitions are "in custody" type where the children are removed from the home. Family reunification is always the first goal of the courts when the children have been placed in an out-of-home care facility. Processing of all cases is in accordance with California Welfare and Institutions Codes which include:

Detention hearing - within seventy-two hours

Jurisdictional hearing - about three weeks

Dispositional hearing - about three weeks (relatives, foster home, licensed facility)

Permanency planning - after one year

Review hearing - six, twelve and eighteen months (California Welfare and Institutions Code Sections 366.21 and 366.26).

In May 1995, the County Board of Supervisors engaged the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) to perform a comprehensive review of the county's child protective system and to report their findings. The CWLA report dated March 12, 1996, stated, in part, that their report ". . . includes recommendations that will greatly improve the protection of Riverside County children." As a result, the CPS reorganization established new regions in 1997 according to school district boundaries and zip codes. The establishment of regions resulted in some redistribution of existing management and staff.

CPS has approximately 269 case-carrying workers. Of this number, most have Bachelors or Masters Degrees in social work, social science or related fields. The staff is distributed throughout the county in six regional offices. The initial indoctrination period for a newly-hired social worker is approximately six weeks. The estimated period for full social worker competency may take up to eighteen months depending on the individual.

County vehicles are available for use by the social worker staff. When a social worker is hired, he or she must provide proof of valid driver's license and liability insurance. Workers find that it is more convenient to use their private vehicle in the performance of duties. They are not reimbursed for personal loss or vehicle damage.

The Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) began with legislation in 1988 mandating that California create a child welfare information system. The CWS/CMS project was in response to an offer by the federal government to pay 75 percent of the costs for all states to participate in a nationwide child welfare information

system. After a September 1997 deadline, federal funding dropped to 50 percent of the cost. If the state fails to implement the program fully, it can be required to repay the federal government.

Counties were asked to send representatives to Sacramento to provide input to the computer software system between 1990 and 1996. The housing of the mainframe computer and data storage for CWS/CMS is located in Boulder, Colorado. Since implementation, the general consensus from the state social workers is that the system favors data collection for auditing purposes rather than assisting in case management.

The necessity for employee overtime has been an expensive consequence of the CWS/CMS automated system. Ten hours of overtime per week is an accepted standard during the ongoing learning phase of the system implementation. In many cases, the normal ten hours of overtime, primarily authorized for the adjustment from a manual to an automated system, is not enough. Due to the overtime policy, additional uncompensated hours are often volunteered by the social worker.

Findings

1. The ongoing reorganization reassigns management and social workers into program units for which some are not trained.
2. Reorganization contributes to a condition where supervision is unfamiliar with the performance capabilities of their staff. This condition prevents timely preparation, review and submittal of annual performance evaluations.
3. The continued CPS staff shortage throughout the county includes bilingual social workers.
4. The lack of cultural/sociological knowledge prevents understanding between the social worker and the client.
5. The continuous growth of the county creates a demand for more sub-regional CPS office locations.
6. The current salary structure for CPS social workers does not attract or retain qualified personnel, particularly those with computer skills.
7. It has been three years since a drug and alcohol abuse awareness program was presented to management/supervision.
8. In a highly stressful environment, many social workers elect not to use accrued compensatory or vacation time because of genuine concerns for the children in their charge.

9. In keeping with the CPS Mission Statement, social workers are committed to child protection. When leaving the office, most social workers do not have essential equipment, county vehicle, laptop computer, cellphone, and camera to efficiently use their time. In spite of the risks involved, they opt to use their own personal vehicle as a matter of convenience.

10. Some parking lots adjacent to DPSS/CPS office buildings do not provide adequate lighting.

11. Implementation of the CWS/CMS system for case management causes a hardship on the social workers, such as:

a. Many of the social workers spend 50-70 percent of their time performing administrative duties, including travel, preventing them from giving attention to the needs of the children in their care. This condition is a major contributor to the need for overtime hours.

b. Many hours of overtime are not reported because they had not been pre-approved.

c. A lack of computer skills, compounded by the complexity of the CWS/CMS system adds additional demands for overtime.

d. Social workers are often required to navigate through multiple pages within the caseload management system exceeding 800 computer screens.

e. The inflexibility of the CWS/CMS system software programs creates a condition whereby social workers frequently input inaccurate data in order to satisfy program requirements.

f. The lack of timely CWS/CMS technical problem response from Boulder, Colorado, often interferes with meeting the time constraints demanded by the system for data collection and mandatory reporting.

g. Many social workers do not feel confident with completely paperless files.

Recommendations

Board of Supervisors:

Department of Public Social Services:

1. Direct that unit cross-training workshops be developed to provide in-house training that will improve the competency of the supervisor and the social worker.

2. Ensure that all employees are given a performance evaluation every twelve months.

3. Accelerate the recruitment of qualified staff to fill existing vacancies.
4. Direct that the Human Resources Department be aware of the need for bilingual social workers.
5. Provide training for management and staff, such as professional seminars, that emphasize a better understanding of cultural/sociological differences.
6. Conduct a survey of CPS referrals by region to determine the need for establishing new sub-regional offices that will better serve the region and provide for manageable caseloads for the social worker.
7. Conduct a compensation review for all social workers in order to establish a competitive salary range that will assist in the attraction and retention of qualified personnel.
8. Activate an alcohol and drug abuse awareness training program for management/supervision.
9. Direct that management/supervision enforces county policy regarding compensatory time off and regular vacation to provide relief from the stress experienced by the social workers.
10. Ensure that all social workers required to make client calls or court appointments are permanently issued a county vehicle, laptop computer, cellphone and a camera.
11. Provide adequate lighting and security for all DPSS/CPS office and parking lot locations.
12. Develop and implement a training program that includes a competency evaluation of management/supervision with the objective of improving leadership in the use of CWS/CMS.
13. Develop and implement a program that will cultivate CWS/CMS trained floor assistants and clerical support at all CPS regional offices in sufficient numbers to provide on-site technical training and program support.
14. Ensure that management/supervision begins a program which will reduce employee dependence on paper files and increase their confidence in the CWS/CMS system.