

CHILDREN'S PROTECTIVE SERVICES



RESPONSES

**2011-2012 Sonoma County Grand Jury
Response Update on the
Child Protective Services – Reducing the Risk of Abuse and Neglect Report**

The Family, Youth and Children's Division of the Human Services Department has made changes in response to these recommendations from last year's Grand Jury report:

R2 – Once the new Emergency Response policies and procedures are developed by Family, Youth and Children's Division (FYC), there should be an on-going evaluation of their implementation and its results for improving the outcomes for children and the closing of cases.

R3 – Through policy and training, the social workers should be encouraged to bring forth previously closed cases, or cases which are forwarded to another section in the Division, and appear to have deficiencies in assessment or other decision-making, e.g., case closure or inadequate assessment. This is one means of training social workers to do more thorough assessments.

R5 – The procedure for a random review of cases should be carried out by section managers rather than, or in addition to, supervisors as a way to make section managers more familiar with the actions of their supervisors and social workers. Cases that were judged to be high risk should be a priority for re-review. A process for evaluating the implementation of the procedure needs to be established.

The Grand Jury met with the Family, Youth and Children's Division Director and is pleased with the amount of effort that has been put into the new Emergency Response Policies and Procedures. The FYC Division has developed and updated the policies as required in R2 and R3. The plan includes staff training as well as developing a methodology for continued quality assurance to ensure that the standards and practices as defined in the Policy are maintained and adhered to. They expect to have a first draft to the Grand Jury for review by March 2012 with full implementation by July 2012. Also included in the updates is a new Case Review Policy that addresses the issue in R5 for the random review of cases, both routine and formal. Section Managers are included in the policy to ensure their role in compliance and review of the cases with the social worker and supervisors.



Human Services Department
COUNTY OF SONOMA

AUG 29 2011



"Empower, Support, Protect"

Approved: [Signature]
Superior Court Judge

Date: 8/29/11

Jo Weber, Director
tel (707) 565-5855
fax (707) 565-5890

August 29, 2011

Jerry Dunn, Assistant Director
tel (707) 565-5750
fax (707) 565-5890

Presiding Judge Gary Nadler
Superior Court, State of California
600 Administration Drive
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

FILED

AUG 29 2011

Susan Chestnut, Director
Administration Division
tel (707) 565-5855
fax (707) 565-5890

SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA,
COUNTY OF SONOMA
BY [Signature] DEPUTY CLERK

Diane Kaljian, Director
Adult & Aging Division
tel (707) 565-5950
fax (707) 565-5957

Re: Response to 2010-2011 Grand Jury Final Report

Dear Judge Nadler,

Marion Deeds, Director
Economic Assistance Division
tel (707) 565-2198
fax (707) 565-2929

Please accept this response to the 2010-2011 Grand Jury Final Report regarding Child Protective Services (CPS) – Reducing the Risk of Abuse and Neglect. I appreciate the Grand Jury’s thoughtful review of our CPS system and the strengths that you have identified. I also agree with all six of the Findings and I am committed to continually improving our services related to these areas. In our responses below, and noted in the Final Report, good progress had already been made in some areas since the Grand Jury conducted its review, and in other cases we are committing to new actions in response to the Grand Jury Report.

Karen Fies, Director
Employment & Training Division
tel (707) 565-8501
fax (707) 565-8515

Our child welfare system includes four components.

Nick Honey, Director
Family, Youth & Children’s Division
tel (707) 565-4300
fax (707) 565-4399

- Emergency Response Referrals (initial response to, and investigation of, all reports of abuse or neglect). Referrals found to be “unsubstantiated” are closed unless the risk of future maltreatment is high. Referrals that are “substantiated” are opened as Cases unless the immediate safety issues have been mitigated and the risk of future maltreatment is low. Sometimes Referrals are found to be “inconclusive” and they can be closed or opened as a case depending on the circumstances.
- Family Maintenance Cases (voluntary or court-ordered in-home support to families at risk for abuse or neglect while the child continues to live at home).
- Family Reunification Cases (court-ordered services to families when the child is in out-of-home care and the plan is to return the child to the home).
- Permanent Planning Cases (court-ordered case management for children who can no longer be cared for by their parents including identification of a permanent plan).

Marla Stuart, Director
Planning, Research and Evaluation
tel (707) 565-5849
fax (707) 565-5890

Finding 5: Conscientious employees in ER are at risk of having low morale and being exhausted, partially due to inadequate supervision and management, time pressure to close cases, inconsistencies in interpretation of regulation for case closures, as well as the many cases that require investigation. However, the FYC's implementation of new ER policies and procedures and the hiring of case social workers could reduce this risk.

The well-being of our staff is a top priority. Child welfare work can be exhausting both physically and emotionally. Child welfare social workers deserve to have manageable caseloads and effective supervision. Recent budget constraints resulted in a supervisor position being kept vacant for an extended period of time leaving existing supervisors with more staff to supervise. Furthermore, and as the Grand Jury suggests, FYC had identified areas of inconsistency in its assessment system and in its policies and procedures prompting the transition to a new assessment system (SDM) and the revision of several policies and procedures. In addition to moving forward with the recommendation regarding F5 (see Recommendation 4 below), in August 2011, FYC also started the recruitment process for the vacant supervisor position.

Recommendation 1 (Re: F1, F2, F3, F6, page 4): Currently using SDM process, referrals must be prioritized and coded to require investigations within either 24 hours or 10 days. Each referral/case also should be coded when the case is closed on a "seriousness scale" as a means of alerting staff if and when a case has to be re-reviewed or might be reopened. The coding can be based on the SDM final risk levels.

The recommendation has been implemented.

As the Grand Jury suggests, our new Structured Decision Making (SDM) system has and will continue to greatly improve our identification of and response to different levels of safety and risk in our child welfare cases. The use of SDM was implemented on October 1, 2010 and the integration of this tool in our practice has continued to expand since the Grand Jury initially conducted their inquiry. SDM contains evidence based Family Safety and Risk Assessment tools used throughout California and the nation. They are completed five times – including during the initial investigation of a referral and at the closure of a case. Each time the SDM assessment is completed, the social worker obtains an objective appraisal that helps him/her to develop an appropriate plan. SDM assessments are used during supervisors' bi-weekly conferences with staff, by section managers during their review of the referrals or cases in their section, and are included in a monthly report to the Executive Team. When a child re-enters our child welfare system through a new referral, the Emergency Response Unit has access (via our secure web-based case management system) to previous involvement with any child welfare system throughout the state (including Sonoma County). This includes previous SDM assessments (such as the initial safety assessment and the closure risk assessment).

Recommendation 2 (Re: F1, page 5): Once the new ER policies and procedures are developed by FYC, there should be an ongoing evaluation of their implementation and its results for improving the outcomes for children and the closing of cases.

The recommendation has been partially implemented and will be completed by November 2011.

The "Back to Basics" project regarding the revision and implementation of the new Emergency Response (ER) policies and procedures began in October 2010 and is well under way. This project will result in the revision of the Emergency Response Policies and Procedures and the training or retraining of staff and supervisors so that the updated policies are reflected in everyday practice in the Emergency Response program. Steps 1 through 10 out of 17 have been completed and review and feedback from staff about the revised policies is currently being solicited. The training to disseminate the revised policies as well as the implementation of a new case review protocol will be completed by November, 2011. The case review protocol will ensure consistent and appropriate services for children and families served in ER. In addition, it will serve as the evaluation of whether or not the policies are being used as intended.

Recommendation 3 (Re: F2, page 5): Through policy and training, the social workers should be encouraged to bring forth previously closed cases, or cases which are forwarded to another section in the Division, and appear to have deficiencies in assessment or decision-making, e.g., case closure or inadequate assessment. This is one means of training social workers to do more thorough assessments.

The recommendation has not yet been implemented and will be implemented by November 2011.

Although staff are already informally encouraged to bring cases forward for further discussion, we agree that a written policy needs to be developed to strengthen and standardize this method of improving our practice to ensure the best outcomes for all the children and families we serve. Currently, 1) social workers bring forward questions or concerns about previously closed cases when they deem necessary, 2) case history is reviewed as part of every subsequent investigation, 3) referrals and cases are reviewed and approved by the supervisor whenever closed, and 4) as part of the bi-weekly supervisory conferences between social workers and their supervisors, and previous actions taken on a case are routinely discussed, and 5) any issues of concern are brought forward to a manager. We will develop a written policy that clarifies and encourages these practices and delineates the circumstances and method for workers to bring cases forward for further review. This will be implemented by November, 2011.

Recommendation 4 (Re: F1, F5, page 5): A written procedure, including guidelines, should be developed allowing a case to stay open beyond the 30 day limit and requiring a follow up by supervisors after a pre-determined time.

The recommendation has been implemented.

With the implementation of Structured Decision Making (SDM), the Emergency Response Unit now has a new practice and policy regarding the management of all child abuse or neglect referrals. Hotline social workers complete an SDM assessment for every referral. The daily supervisor makes a decision about the next steps for the referral based on the SDM assessment and the social worker recommendation. On average, the Emergency Response unit investigates

222 referrals each month. State law requires that any referral to a child protective service be closed within 30 days. This ensures a timely response to allegations of abuse or neglect. For all substantiated referrals that warrant ongoing involvement (either through voluntary or court-ordered services), the ER social worker recommends and the supervisor approves the transfer of the referral to a case within the 30 days time limit. (Other and longer statutory timelines exist for cases than for referrals.) Each month in Sonoma County, Emergency Response social workers transfer an average of 49 referrals to cases.

Recommendation 5 (Re: F6, page 6): The procedure for a random review of cases should be carried out by section managers rather than or in addition to, supervisors as a way to make section managers more familiar with the actions of their supervisors and social workers. Cases that were judged to be high risk should be a priority for re-review. A process for evaluating the implementation of the procedure needs to be established.

The recommendation has been partially implemented and will be completed by December 2011.

The referenced procedure was written in 1999/2000 and has been rendered obsolete by subsequent changes that are reflected in practice but not in the policy. This policy will be revised by December, 2011 to reflect and improve current practice. Current state and federal laws include requirements to meet specific outcome measures related to safety, permanency, and well-being, and to conduct regular case reviews. In response to these requirements, California has developed a comprehensive web-based case management system into which social workers record all case information and from which social workers, supervisors, and managers can and do extract reports about compliance with required case processes and outcome measures (using a computer application called Safe Measures). (Reports about these outcome measures are also available to the public at http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/.) For example, each month social workers and their supervisors print and discuss reports about monthly contacts, required time frames, and progress towards case plans. With the use of these reports (which are not reflected in the current and outdated policy), information about all cases is reviewed on a monthly basis by supervisors, section managers, and the Division Director. With the implementation of Structured Decision Making (SDM), additional reports are produced each month related to safety and risk and reviewed, for instance at the monthly Supervisors and Managers meeting. Recently, this group has been engaged in a review of random Emergency Response referrals to determine if socials workers interpret and respond to the statutory term "cruel and excessive punishment" in a consistent way. The next planned review is focused on determining if high and very high risk referrals are transferred to cases appropriately and consistently. In addition to these current practices, and in response to this Grand Jury Recommendation, the revised policy will also include a new Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement system through which social workers, supervisors, and section managers will review and improve a variety of case practices through the collective review of random cases.

Presiding Judge Gary Nadler

RE: 2010-2011 Grand Jury Final Report regarding Child Protective Services

August 29, 2011

Page 5 of 5

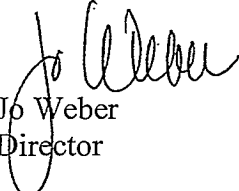
Recommendation 6 (Re: F4, page 5): The FYC Director should develop a means for better informing staff of the Division's self assessment and the System Improvement Plan and giving periodic reports on their results over the plan's three-year lifespan. For example, since there are regular staff meetings where the topics can be discussed, they can be addressed at the beginning of the meeting.

The recommendation has been implemented.

The System Improvement Plan (SIP) is currently discussed at the monthly all-staff meetings and in section meetings. In addition a SIP bulletin board has recently been installed in a prominent location to advertise and invite input to SIP activities and SIP Newsletters are being distributed to staff and community partners. In response to this Grand Jury Recommendation, this issue will also be put on the agenda of the next Joint Labor Management Committee with a view to establishing a focus group, representative of the staff, to gather their input about the preferable method of communicating and inviting input to SIP activities. An annual SIP update is required by the State and this will also be distributed and discussed during the October 2011 all-staff meeting. More than understanding the details of the SIP document itself, it is important that staff are engaged in improving outcomes for the children and families they serve, as delineated in the SIP, and as measured on an ongoing basis. The key is to ensure staff develop a broad understanding of the big picture, and recognize that it is an important part of their work to know how their interventions contribute to the outcomes we seek on an individual and agency wide level.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the 2010-2011 Grand Jury Final Report. If you need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Jo Weber
Director

Cc: Valerie Brown, 1st District Supervisor
David Rabbit, 2nd District Supervisor
Shirlee Zane, 3rd District Supervisor
Mike McGuire, 4th District Supervisor
Efren Carrillo, 5th District Supervisor
Veronica Ferguson, County Administrator
Janice Atkinson, County Clerk