

SISKIYOU COUNTY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

SUMMARY

Child abuse or neglect is a serious public health problem with substantial consequences for both the individuals affected and society as a whole. There have been major strides in this area in recent years, but continued efforts are needed to ensure the safety of all children. Siskiyou County community members have an important role in protecting children from abuse and neglect. If child abuse or neglect is suspected, a report should be filed with qualified and experienced agencies that will investigate the situation.

BACKGROUND

One of the duties of the Siskiyou County Civil Grand Jury is to review the function and operations of county departments. In carrying out this responsibility, the 2016-17 Grand Jury elected to examine Child Protective Services (CPS) which operates under the Social Services (SS) division of the Siskiyou County Health and Human Services Administration (HHS).

METHODOLOGY

The grand jury interviewed several staff members from SS and CPS. In addition, the following documents were provided and reviewed:

- The Structured Decision Making System, Policy and Procedures Manual, California Department of Social Services (SDM)
- The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)
- Child Abuse Central Index (CACI) report
- CA Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) Siskiyou County participation rates of alleged and substantiated abuse cases according to age and ethnicity

Online information included:

- Siskiyou County CPS website
- CA Welfare and Institution codes and Penal codes
- CA Department of Social Services website

DISCUSSION

Child Protective Services is the major system of intervention for child abuse and neglect in California. Existing law requires intervention and the provision of services to abused and neglected children and their families. It is the legal obligation of Siskiyou County through CPS to investigate allegations of child abuse or neglect as defined by Penal Code (PC) 11165.6, Welfare & Institutions Code (W&I) 300 and the California Department of Social Services Division 31-100 regulations.

CPS provides 24/7 emergency responses to reports of child abuse or neglect. Child abuse reports are received from the general public, schools, law enforcement, hospitals, physicians and other mandated reporters. The Siskiyou County CPS agency receives an average of 55 complaints a

month. At the time of this report, there are 133 active cases, 17 of which are out of county. Youth are ordinarily transitioned out of the program at age 18; however, foster youth are eligible to receive extended services until age 21. Currently in Siskiyou County, seven youth are participating in this extended foster care program.

Allegations are screened by an emergency response system to assess risk to the child. CPS staff utilize a computerized process to determine whether a child is in imminent danger. If so, CPS must respond within 24 hours. For reports involving concerns such as neglect, filthy homes, no power or food, or noxious odors, a CPS investigation begins within three days. For a child at risk, but not in immediate danger, an in-person response is required within 10 calendar days.

All types of child abuse are found in Siskiyou County: neglect, sexual abuse, trafficking, exposure to domestic violence, and emotional and physical abuse. Ninety percent of abuse cases in Siskiyou County involve neglect which occurs when the person responsible for the child fails to meet the child's basic needs. General neglect is the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter or supervision, without physical injury to the child. A majority of the neglect cases in the county are the result of parental substance abuse. When CPS substantiates cases of physical abuse, the results are reported to the Child Abuse Central Index (CACI), which employers can access when considering job applicants.

Prior to a home visit, a social worker will investigate the family history: prior law enforcement involvement, drug/alcohol issues, employment, transportation issues and any previous CPS history. An investigative social worker from the Emergency Response Unit is sent to the home to investigate allegations of abuse and assess the safety of the child in the home. As part of the social worker's investigation of the complaint, CPS uses the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool, which is an evidence-based, internationally accepted practice that ensures every worker is assessing the same items in each case. The SDM responses to these items lead to specific decisions regarding child safety. The SDM is utilized from the initial investigation until a permanent placement decision is made for a child.

The safety of the child is the social workers' primary issue. The SDM tools guide the social worker to assess the child's safety in the home. Safety concerns can include: physical or sexual abuse of the child by someone in the home, failure to protect the child, failure to provide proper supervision for the child, and failure to provide basic provisions such as food, clothing, shelter, or necessary medical treatment. SDM removes bias and cannot be manipulated. If the case is inconclusive, unfounded, or is not able to be substantiated, it is considered closed. If the case is substantiated, the social worker evaluates the family for support programs and may work with the family in a Family Maintenance Program (FMP). Family Maintenance services are provided to families in which children can reside safely in their own home, but where ongoing supervision is required. These services can be provided on a voluntary basis or may be ordered by the Court. The social worker completes six-month evaluations until the case is closed.

Social workers face many challenges in the course of an investigation. For instance, a parent or custodian is not required to allow a social worker into their home even when the social worker is accompanied by law enforcement. In fact, the presence of law enforcement may elevate the parent's anxiety and/or defensiveness. The social worker's job is not to cause anxiety or concern,

but to help and offer services with the goal of keeping the family together, or achieving safe reunification of the family. The investigator often goes to the home alone, and is not always comfortable in the situation. The CPS investigator wears a protective vest, carries a cell phone and stays close to the home's exit. If investigators feel unsafe, they may leave the home at any time with the full support of their supervisor.

If it is determined that a child cannot remain safely in the home, a parent may voluntarily assign a child to foster care. If the child is removed from the family, the child may be placed with a friend or relative after a background check determines the person and home are suitable for the child. If there is no family or non-relative extended family member available to care for the child, the child is placed in a foster home through Children First Foster Family Agency, the primary foster family agency in Siskiyou County. (Remi Vista Inc. Youth and Family Services currently provides one foster home in the Siskiyou County area.) Children are sent to other counties when there are no local foster families available.

Once a child has been removed from home, the law requires that a petition be filed in Juvenile Court within two business days and heard at a detention hearing within three business days. Attorneys are appointed to represent the parents and the child. It may take several hearings to agree on the best case plan for ensuring the child's safety and future reunification. The court may order drug testing and parenting and/or anger management classes for the parent. If the court has ordered drug testing, the test takes place prior to any visitation with the child. If the test is positive, the visit is canceled. Parental visitation is monitored by CPS staff and takes place at Behavioral Health. CPS reports that drug testing costs \$300,000 a year which is covered by Medi-Cal.

When children are temporarily placed in out-of-home care, parents may receive family reunification services for up to 18 months. The goal is to return children to their own home when it is safe to do so. As the family progresses in reunification, CPS may allow visitations off-site, increasing the visit times and lengths. This transition process then leads to the reunification of the child in the family home full time.

Permanency planning allows parents up to twelve months to show the court they can provide a safe environment for their child. The child is either returned home during that period, or further hearings are set to establish a permanent plan for the child. The permanent plan, in order of preference, is adoption, guardianship or long-term foster care. The court oversees every step in the process.

Native American children receive specialized consideration when they are removed from their home. CPS is governed by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978. This Act addresses the best interest of Native American children through promotion of stability and security of federally recognized Indian tribes and their families. ICWA establishes minimum federal standards for the removal of Native American children from their families, and the placement of such children in foster care or adoptive homes which reflect the unique values of the Native American culture. CPS provides assistance to the tribes in the operation of children and family service programs. Further, ICWA requires that the preferred placement of a Native American child in foster care be the home of the child's extended family, or an approved foster home as

specified by the child's tribe. The *goal* of family maintenance and reunification for a Native American child is placement with his/her family or tribal community. Currently there are only two licensed tribal foster homes in Siskiyou County.

Generally, only about 10% of CPS cases in Siskiyou County are new to the system. In fact, many of the cases have been in the system for more than one generation. During the period 2005-2015, the Child Welfare Indicators Project reported that approximately 20% of abused children in Siskiyou County are one year old and under.

The jury found morale high at Siskiyou County CPS. Investigators are dedicated and very committed to their work and feel supported and appreciated by their supervisors and co-workers. Supervisors consider the current CPS staff to be "amazing". There has been minimal turnover. Secondary trauma is a risk for CPS employees. Secondary trauma, defined as stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering individual, and/or families is a risk for CPS employees. Further, it is difficult for Siskiyou County to recruit qualified staff due to the county's rural aspect and lower salaries than those found in comparable counties. Therefore, the agency "grows their own" social workers. New hires are required to have 30 college units; employees continue their education while working, taking core classes such as those offered through UC Davis and other higher education institutions.

CPS appears to be functioning well, providing worthwhile services to those most vulnerable in the population.

FINDINGS

F1) CPS impacts a specific segment of the population, with positive outcomes.

F2) Because there are an inadequate number of placement homes in Siskiyou County, foster children may be sent out of the county for care.

F3) CPS appears to be functioning well, with high morale and professional staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1) None

R2) The County is encouraged to assist in all agency efforts to recruit additional foster families in Siskiyou County.

R3) None

INVITED RESPONSES

Deputy Director of Siskiyou County Social Services Division
Program Manager of Siskiyou County Adult and Children's Services