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The Grand Jury agrees with the CSIU Report in which it is stated that the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool's function, training and usage by Hotline employees must be reexamined for its intended purpose.²

COMMENDATION

DCFS is commended for its operational staff at the Hotline, who were very conscientious, knowledgeable, open and extremely helpful to the 2012-2013 Los Angeles County Grand Jury.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After conducting its investigation and based on its findings, the Grand Jury provides recommendations to DCFS and the Board of Supervisors as follows:

4.1 **DCFS should initiate**, in conjunction with the **Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors**, a separate crisis/information telephone number.

4.2 **DCFS Hotline needs to be reconfigured** so that call handlers only take calls from specific regions, for example Pomona, Long Beach, or the San Fernando Valley, in order to be better able to identify local resources.

4.3 **DCFS must find a method** to recognize the specialized performance requirements of the Hotline employee. It must also enhance and reward the work experience for its productive Hotline employees. Most importantly, the Hotline must not be used to accommodate employees who cannot function adequately elsewhere.

4.4 **DCFS must reduce** or streamline the policies, procedures and practices that Hotline employees are expected to master.

4.5 **DCFS management must** become more directly involved with the actual Hotline calls system by directly experiencing real time calls.

4.6 **DCFS should create** a separate phone number from the Hotline for calls involving children who are absent without leave (AWOL) from their foster home or those calls involving "re-placements."

4.7 **DCFS must reduce** the number of unwarranted referrals, by which it is meant those referrals found to be "unfounded." This can be aided by allowing the Hotline employee to deviate, if need be, from the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool and rely more on their background and work experience. DCFS needs to allow for regional and cultural differences while ensuring consistency and efficiency.

4.8 **DCFS must reduce** the scope of the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) applied to urgent Hotline issues. The Hotline should focus on how to respond

² Ibid., pp. 38-39.

quickly, gathering only as much information as necessary to make a determination for child abuse or neglect.

4.9 **DCFS has to aggressively** engage the community (e.g., churches, Alcoholic Anonymous, and the like) in its efforts to provide safety for the children in the County. The community's resources have to be accessed to reduce the need to make "the call." The Point of Engagement (POE) approach, which shows promise in Torrance, for example, should be deployed countywide.

4.10 **DCFS should expand** the pool of employees who are available to work at the Hotline to include those applicants without social work backgrounds. It must recognize the specialized nature of Hotline work and include persons with, for example, police backgrounds, in its applicant pool. This recommendation is similar to that made in 2012 by the CSIU.³

METHODOLOGY

In investigating the operations of the Hotline, the Grand Jury's investigative committee visited the Hotline a number of times, consulted with senior officials of DCFS and also interviewed a number of employees who worked at the Hotline as well as those who receive its referrals. The Grand Jury also reviewed documents, statistics, and interviewed a number of persons in other, affected public or private agencies and regional offices who are conversant with the issues involved in foster care. The Grand Jury also witnessed firsthand actual Hotline calls and the interactive interrogations.

Moreover, the Grand Jury's committee reviewed the 2012 "Confidential and Privileged Report" to the Board of Supervisors from the CSIU. That document may be viewed on the website of the Los Angeles Times.⁴

The Grand Jury also reviewed the strategic plan currently being developed by DCFS.

BACKGROUND

The County of Los Angeles and its DCFS recognize that the health, well-being, and safety of its young people is an incredibly important concern, a concern that is shared by the entire community. Its citizens must share the responsibility of protecting society's youngest from abuse and neglect.⁵

This obligation to protect the youngest has led to a system of "mandated" reporters, those persons in a position to observe suspected child abuse and pass that suspicion along to the appropriate authorities. This system is codified in the California Penal Code, section 11164, which pro-

³ Ibid., p.2.

⁴ "Report: Front-End Failures in Deaths of LS County Foster Kids" Los Angeles Times. Feb. 14, 2013 <http://documents.latimes.com/reports-severe-problems-los-angeles-county-department-children-and-family-services/>

⁵ DCFS, Hotline Model of Practice, 2012, pp. 3-4.

vides a list of such reporters. That list includes teachers and school personnel, medical personnel, law enforcement officers, clergy, and many more. DCFS staff and a previous DCFS director have stated to the Grand Jury that approximately 80% of the calls that come into the Hotline come from these mandated reporters.

The task of protecting the children within the County starts with the Hotline, as the Child Protection Hotline is known. It is a separate telephone line maintained by the County around the clock for the reporting of suspected child abuse. The Hotline is the way that abuse is initially reported to the County.⁶

FINDINGS

The Hotline is administered by the DCFS and staffed by approximately 150 personnel referred to as Children's Social Workers (CSW) at a centralized location in downtown Los Angeles. The Hotline receives over 180,000 calls each year.⁷ Half of the calls involve allegations of child abuse. These calls are screened to obtain appropriate information in an expedited way, then that information must be digested quickly in order to determine the response fitting to the situation. The Hotline employee must assess the level of danger, obtain basic information such as the place where the child is located, search records to determine if this family unit has a history involving child abuse, and generate a referral and level of response. The CSW must then determine the proper DCFS office to contact to conduct an investigation.

CSWs must have a particular set of skills and the ability to operate under pressure. They must know how to listen, to calm agitated callers, to think critically, to ask important questions and they must know the types of abuse and neglect, whether physical, emotional, or sexual. They must also know their own biases and realize that they cannot jump to conclusions. They must also apply the appropriate level of probing into possible hidden critical issues. This requires special skills, training and experience mastered to varying degrees by each CSW. They must also exercise critical judgments to set priorities on how quickly to respond or if DCFS is to respond at all.

To assist in this particular decision making task, the County uses a software tool known as Structured Decision Making (SDM) to guide a CSW to an appropriate response. Given all the foregoing, it is no surprise that SDM is a long and complicated tool that requires considerable learning time to use effectively. Fortunately, it is understood that significant upgrade and modifications to this tool are in development.

That is not all. All the information that is received by the CSW goes into a system known as CWS/CMS, which, as noted above, stands for Child Welfare Services/Case Management Sys-

⁶ Ibid., p.4.

⁷ Department of Children and Family and Family Services, Executive Committee Reports, Data as of October 9, 2012 (pages IV-B-3 and IV-C-3)

tem. If it is determined that a call to local law enforcement is needed, a Suspected Child Abuse Report (SCAR) is generated. Done electronically, this then becomes an Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Report (ESCAR).

A senior employee pointed out that all this activity takes considerable time. The activity that previously took a worker 15 minutes to process can now take an hour. The information is there. It is valuable, it is important, but takes considerable time to process.

DCFS Must Reduce The Number Of Calls Into The System

A. The Hotline Responds To a Wide Range of Calls

According to a respected former senior manager, there is a general consensus that the Hotline simply handles too many phone calls. During the month of March 2012 there were over 19,000 calls. There was an average of over 16,000 per month in 2012.⁸ The Hotline receives as many calls in one day as a city-county such as San Francisco receives in a month.

The issue is how to most effectively and efficiently address this massive volume of calls, in order that the limited resources of the DCFS are prioritized properly and deployed to the most serious cases. The occurrence of a child's death, a tragic event, triggers scathing criticism from almost every conceivable source. The assertion is made by the critics that DCFS is out of control and that its Hotline is to blame. The CSIU report, for example, cites the Hotline as having a significant role in the deaths of 13 children in a 14-month period from October, 2010 to December, 2011.⁹

B. The County Must Establish a Separate Crisis Line

As stated previously, some 80% of calls to the Hotline come from mandated reporters. It is thought that excessive caution drives these calls. If a mandated reporter even suspects child abuse, it is better for that person to call than not to call. No one will get into "on-the-job trouble" for calling, whereas one might have significant liability if the purported abuse is ignored.

The solution may lie in San Francisco's approach. It has a separate crisis line and not every call goes through its equivalent to the Hotline. According to those Hotline employees interviewed, some calls come from foster parents who simply are in the midst of a family crisis or who need information. The Hotline does make referrals to a 211 (information line), but a separate crisis line might be a valuable and cost-effective option based on feedback from the Torrance regional office. The County's 211 system has a strong reputation for its ability to make appropriate responses so a well-advertised separate information line would be a worthwhile idea.

⁸ Department of Children and Family and Family Services, Executive Committee Reports, Data as of October 9, 2012 (pages IV-D-5)

⁹ CSIU Report, p.7.

C. There is a Need to Eliminate Certain Calls from the Hotline

In addition to removing non-crisis or general information calls from the system, an effort should be made to minimize or eliminate calls involving AWOLs or “re-placements.” The AWOLs are children who are unaccounted for, such as runaways. Re-placements are children in the system who are being moved from one foster home to another. These children are already in the system and their situation has to be monitored, but the Hotline is not seen as the best option to do this.

Consequently, there should be a separate phone number for foster parents to call instead of the Hotline. For example, a foster parent with a problem foster child may need another foster parent colleague to talk to, but the Hotline surely is not the best place to do so. Again, other lines are needed so as to free up the Hotline for real emergencies.

D. Hotline’s Best Employees Must Be Rewarded

The Grand Jury believes that there must be a way to provide additional compensation to the very effective, efficient and productive workers at the Hotline.

Call handlers who are efficient and effective, and handle a large number of calls should be rewarded for their performance. Ineffective and inefficient employees and those who are placed in the Hotline because they did not perform adequately elsewhere should be removed. The Hotline is too critical to be staffed by the “walking wounded.” Of course, the union that represents the CSWs must be engaged in the process and the civil service rules must be honored

The Grand Jury is also aware of this finding from the CSIU’s 2012 report, “DCFS should explore expanding the qualifications for social workers to include a broader range of educational backgrounds and types of experience.”¹⁰ This simply means the “what happened?” part of the investigation is of primary importance. Persons with experience and background in soliciting information quickly and accurately, such as those with a police background, must be employed in this specialized area. The gathering of information in the first instance colors the whole process. It must be done by persons with the ability to do the task correctly, efficiently and effectively.

E. Senior Managers and Regional Workers Need to Witness Actual Calls

As the report from CSIU indicates, the Hotline and its work is probably the most important aspect of the business of reducing child abuse and neglect.¹¹ The ultimate result of DCFS’ involvement with a family cannot be good if its investigation starts off with misinformation or a lack of direction. “Good decisions cannot be made without good information.”¹²

If this task is as important as the CSIU report indicates, senior management has to be totally involved. Put senior management on the line. Having a call supervisor on call duty for a day or two

¹⁰ CSIU Report, p.2.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 9, 12.

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

each month would enable them to clearly gauge the current situations. Top management must make the Hotline a priority.

Another possibility would be to have CSWs from the field come in for a turn at the Hotline. If the field workers could see exactly how the Hotline actually works, then the CSWs from the field would be able to see the difficulties inherent in the system and, perhaps, allow for referrals that may seem unimportant.

F. The County Needs to Reduce the Number of Policies

Hotline staff members have informed the Grand Jury that employees at the Hotline must be aware of “everything,” from the federal rules to the latest county policy statements. Does the staff get sufficient training? The Grand Jury understands that eight weeks of training is offered. Consideration should be given to expand training and/or staggered multiple training sessions.

Moreover, the number of policies and procedures in place is simply too great. As the CSIU Report indicates, there seems to be a policy for everything, including a seven-page dissertation on how to handle non-English speakers. The number of policy pages totals 4364, according to the CSIU report, at pages 24-25. This number has to be decreased as the amount of information is more than any person can handle. If nothing else, DCFS should establish a program by which its “cumbersome and voluminous” policies and procedures may be quickly accessed. This is similar to a recommendation made in the CSIU Report, at pages 24-26.

The DCFS Must Reduce Its Number of Referrals And Make Its Work More Efficient

A. Referrals Take a Great Deal of Work-Hours

Since the Hotline receives too many calls, its problems are compounded by the fact that the system generates too many referrals. For example, during the 2011-2012 fiscal year reporting period, there were 165,442 referrals in L.A. County equating to about 11,000 to 15,000 per month resulting in about 24,867 case openings per year, equating to 1,600 to 2,200 per month yielding 10,275 removals per year of the child from the home.¹³ Staff has noted that each referral generates an investigation which takes a minimum of 30 hours of work. Referrals tend to multiply. A call that references the alleged abuse or neglect of one child in a home will often lead to questions about other children in the home, to other adults who live in the home or adults who regularly visit the home or family.

Nonetheless, as the CSIU report noted at p. 16, approximately one-half of all referrals are deemed to be “unfounded.”

Another issue, as noted above, is that most calls come from mandated reporters, amounting to approximately 80% of the calls received. It is understood that a majority of these calls come

¹³ Department of Children and Family and Family Services, Executive Committee Reports, Data as of October 9, 2012

from schools. Naturally, these types of calls will never be seen as “crank calls.” They have to be investigated, so a referral is generated; therefore, the system builds on itself.

Abuse referrals amount to about half of the calls that come in and the other half are for neglect. They must be cross-referenced to the local law enforcement agency. While this has to be done, more strain on the workload and more paperwork is generated.

Fear again drives much of the system. For example, it is unlikely any person working the Hotline will ever get into trouble for making a referral. This may be why some of those interviewed say 80% of all calls lead to a referral. In many counties, the number of referrals is more in the vicinity of 60-70% of all calls, according to information obtained from a former senior official at DCFS.

Another possibility would be to use the State guidelines as opposed to the County guidelines. According to staff interviews, the State’s guidelines are more accommodating and would necessarily lead to fewer emergency referrals and create less stress on the regional offices. This is because, as the Grand Jury learned from one of its interviews, that the State requires an immediate response to be accomplished within 24 hours as opposed to the County requirement that an immediate response be made before the work day is over. It is understood by the Grand Jury that this is not a popular idea with many staff, who prefer the County’s more demanding “immediate response” protocol, but it should be done in order to reduce the stress inherent in the work.

B. The SDM tool must be modified

DCFS uses a software tool known as “SDM” in its decision and urgency/immediate response process. SDM provides guidance to the CSW taking a call as to how quickly to respond to the information at hand, but it is seen as focusing on or leading to referrals. If one goes through the SDM process, a referral is usually created. The CSW handling the call does have discretion to override the SDM result, but why do so? SDM said to do it. Why take a chance? The answer has to be that a CSW’s common sense, experience, and knowledge regarding the response decision have to be respected. The CSWs are trained and that training has to be more than how to follow a checklist.

The CWS/CMS is the statewide system for tracking child abuse and neglect. The County uses all of this information in its effort to deal with this terrible problem, but it is a time-consuming process. According to Hotline employees, other counties (albeit smaller counties) use only a portion of the CWS/CMS to track problems, but Los Angeles, despite its tremendous workload, uses it all.

The Grand Jury observed that this entire process involves a climate of fear. Fear of lawsuits, fear of being the one CSW who failed to do a referral in a case that subsequently turned into a horrible situation or even a case that surfaces years later. No one wants to be faced with the question, “Why didn’t you do more?” Therefore, the system generates more referrals, based on more calls, leading to greater stress.

C. Report-Writing Takes Too Long

Writing the description portion of the CWS/CMS is a problem in that it often takes too long. A 15-minute phone call often generates a report that requires 45 minutes to complete according to a Hotline worker. During that time, the CSW is writing the report and not available to field calls.

Even with the best workers and best software tool, the documented referral may not be 100% correct. Employees in the field have pointed out to the Grand Jury that if the Hotline generates a referral that goes out to a regional office, it is difficult to reverse. A supervisor at the local office level has to be willing to make the request and to fight for the reversal. He/she also has to be able to get through to the person at the Hotline who generated the referral to convince that person to make the change.

Referrals do tend to multiply, with “follow-ups” and “open” investigations. Interviews with staff indicate that most referrals lead to a minimum of 30-40 hours of work. The initial caller has to be contacted, of course, but the family, neighbors, school officials, etc. will need to be addressed. A referral casts a wide net.

The Grand Jury thinks that cases stay open too long and the system is overwhelmed with cases. Nonetheless, the number of actual removals from the home is about six per cent of calls that are received. As noted above, thousands of referrals (180,000 or so per year) are made with approximately 10,000 children actually removed from their homes and placed in foster care. The number, of course, is a huge number standing by itself, but stands as a relative few when compared to the total number of calls received. It is clearly desirable to take remedial action to alleviate the situation and allow the child to remain in the home.

D. An Effort Must Be Made To Regionalize the System

The Grand Jury recommends that DCFS pursue some effort to regionalize the call system. In years past, the call system was regionalized in terms of physical locations. That system no longer exists. There was concern, perhaps valid, that child abuse in one sector of the County might not be seen as child abuse in another. Consequently, that type of regionalization where child abuse in one part of the county may not be seen as abuse in another part of the county has been avoided in recent times. And there is no reason to establish call centers in different portions of the county. The call center recently relocated to downtown Los Angeles. That type of consolidation resulted in improvements in efficiency and consistency.

However, if CSWs who take the calls had specific knowledge of resources in one particular locality, it would benefit the caller. For example, a CSW who, in general, took only calls from the San Fernando Valley would quickly come to know the availability of resources in that area as opposed to being responsible for knowing everything about every resource in every sector in the county. These regional Hotline specialists would be housed in one central location and have calls channeled to them.

While this was implemented to some degree in the past, and was less than successful, the time might be right for a re-try given the developments with information technology and computer networks making information quickly available and at one’s fingertips. Many observers believe that L.A. County has to recognize that its very size is an issue and an effort must be made to regionalize the system would address that issue.