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MENDOCINO COUNTY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICE EMERGENCY RESPONSE UNIT

Child Protective Service (CPS) is a division of County of Mendocino Department of Social Services. The Emergency Response (ER) Unit of CPS responds to reports of abuse, neglect or exploitation of children under the age of 18. CPS has offices in Ukiah, Fort Bragg, and Willits.

The investigating Social Worker of the Emergency Response Team is responsible for intake, assessment, and investigation of allegations, cross reporting to law enforcement and placement in Emergency Shelter. Currently the Emergency Response Social Worker is also responsible for the initial court work.

Reason for Review

The Grand Jury conducted an oversight of the Emergency Response Unit.

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury interviewed the Deputy Director of CPS, the Court Social Worker Supervisor, Licensing Supervisor, Emergency Response Supervisor, two Social Workers, and two Aides. Documents reviewed: Child Welfare Services Program Requirements, Intake Guidelines; Emergency Response Investigating Worker Protocol, Shelter Placement Summary; Family and Children's Services Division Mission Statement, Policies and Procedures, Suspected Child Abuse Report Form, On-Call training outline; Ukiah Emergency Response Search Checklist; Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) Off-line Intake Screening Form; Law Enforcement Cross-Report and Two Day On-Call Training Outline for Social Workers. The Grand Jury visited the CPS office.

Relevant Law

Penal Code Part 4, Title 1, Chapter 2, Article 2.5, The Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act. Welfare and Institutions Code section 300.

Findings

1. Some Social Workers (SWs) responding to a referral lack CWS training and skills in ER.

Response (Social Services): Agree in part. The Department has a training program for new staff and review training for existing staff. The overall shortage of staff with prior Children's Services experience and the need to move new staff into active duty rapidly can lead to social workers with less than optimal training and skills being on-call to receive referrals.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and Department agree with this finding in part and recognize that it is a critical issue throughout rural counties. The overall shortage of staff with prior Children's Services experience, coupled with the urgent need for more staff, can lead to social workers with less than optimal training. The Department has a training program for new staff and continually reviews the need for on-going training for existing staff.

2. CPS administrators and staff indicate it is difficult to hire and retain experienced SWs due to stressful job demands and the resulting burnout.

Response (Social Services): Agree. In the past six months, out of 16 social workers who left Children's Services, 12 left to enter private practice or other less demanding positions.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board agrees based on information supplied by the Department which indicates that 12 of 16 Social Workers who left Child Protection Services in a six month period, did so to go into private practice or to take less demanding assignments elsewhere within County service.

3. Top administrators stated that it is difficult to find SWs with experience in CWS.

Response (Social Services): Agree. Finding Social Workers with direct Child Welfare Services experience is a statewide problem, that is of special concern in rural counties. The problem is so acute that the County Welfare Director's Association, in cooperation with State Merit System, has established a standing committee to address the issues of recruitment and retention of staff.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding and note that it is a frequent topic of discussion among rural counties statewide.

4. CPS has recently hired a new training supervisor to provide information about State and Federal guidelines on Child Welfare Services. The training will also include the Department Policies and Procedures, Court procedure and case management process. The department plans that new SWs involved in ER will participate in Emergency Response investigations during the training period. The University of California Davis has been contracted to provide Mendocino County specific training in Ukiah.

Response (Social Services): Agree. The Department has made a major commitment to expanding the breadth and depth of training for all staff.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding. The Board commends the Department for its commitment to expanding the “breadth and depth” of training for its staff.

Recommendation

Core Training in CWS should be mandatory for all SWs involved in ER.

Response (Social Services): Agree. Core Training in CWS is mandatory for all social workers.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding and note that such training is already mandatory.

Time Frame for Implementaton: Core Training to be provided June 2000 – June 2001.

Findings

5. At the time of our oversight, the screener, classified as an Aide, took the initial telephone call, recorded pertinent information and assessed the urgency of the situation.

Response (Social Services): Agree.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board agrees with this finding based on the response of the Department.

6. The Child Welfare SW supervisor determines whether an immediate or 10-day in-person investigation by the ER unit, referral to a community agency or no action at all is appropriate.

Response (Social Services): Agree.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board agrees with this finding based on the response of the Department.

7. The clerks research possible prior complaints and input information into the CWS/CMS computer system.

Response (Social Services): Agree.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board agrees with this finding based on the response of the Department.

Recommendation

The Grand Jury commends the ER Unit for recently staffing the screener position with fully qualified SWs who perform these duties on a rotating schedule.

Response (Social Services): Agree. The Department appreciates the understanding and support of the Grand Jury for program changes that we have implemented.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this recommendation and thank the Grand Jury for recognizing and supporting these program changes.

Time Frame for Implementation: ER staffing with Social Workers implemented May 2000.

Finding

8. State standards regulating caseload assignments for Emergency Response SWs were developed in the early 1980s before the state mandated CWS/CMS Data System was implemented. While the information this system makes available is considered most useful, all staff stated that the current program for data input is extremely cumbersome and requires extra time for SWs to collect and enter information.

Response (Social Services): Agree. It is estimated conservatively that the CWS/CMS computer systems increased the workload of social workers by approximately 10%.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding.

Recommendation

On-going training in the use of the CWS/CMS computer system is necessary. It would be desirable if the statewide system were more user-friendly.

Response (Social Services): Agree. Training in the use of CWS/CMS is provided. A Help Desk position is also available to provide assistance to staff. Unfortunately the Department has no control over the statewide system.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding, noting that training in the use of CWS/CMS is provided and a Help Desk position is also available for staff. While the Board and Department staff have no control over the statewide system, county officials will continue to provide feedback and be a part of efforts to improve this system.

Time Frame for Implementation: On-going Training for CWS/CMS to be implemented January-June 2001.

Finding

9. Family and Children's Services Division SWs are on-call on a rotating basis to provide 24-hour coverage to assess children's situations for immediate danger.

Response (Social Services): Agree. It should be noted that the stand-by rate is \$1.25 per hour and has not been increased many years.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding.

10. All changes in placement are made in consultation with the ER Supervisor.

Response (Social Services): Agree.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding.

11. ER in Ukiah has been divided into two separate units: ER which follows the case through the initial court disposition and the Court Unit which stays with the case for continuing services, that can end with family services or continue until the child is 18. If this division proves successful, it will serve as a model for the remaining CPS offices in the county.

Response (Social Services): Agree.

Response (Board of Supervisors): The Board and the Department agree with this finding.

Comments

The Grand Jury commends Child Protective Services and the Emergency Response Unit for initiating a reorganization of their department. The aim of this reorganization is to terminate Emergency Response involvement after initial court action and assign the case to a single Social Worker throughout the time the case is active with the Child Welfare System and thereby promote consistency in case management.

Response (Social Services): Agree. The Department worked with the Child Welfare League of America in 1999 to develop a strategic plan to guide the reorganization and continuing improvement of the Children's Services Division. Changes will take place over time, but progress is being made in building a strong and effective continuum of services to children and their families in Mendocino County.

Response Required

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors

Response Requested

Mendocino County Department of Social Services