

Enhanced Organizational Culture and Leadership: Children Services Division Dedicated to Protecting Riverside County Children

SUMMARY

The 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) began their investigation by reading through several news articles about recent child deaths (2019 and 2020), along with other reports of child abuse and neglect that had tragic outcomes. The details of the cases could not be accessed due to confidentiality laws. Instead, the Grand Jury investigation focused on Child Protective Services (CPS) policies and procedures, as revised, and the “process issues” identified in a published external review (referenced on pages 3 and 9).

The Grand Jury endeavored to gain an understanding of the current CPS organizational culture and to learn as much as possible about their work in the County. To the extent possible, our focus was to ascertain if the current policies and procedures are effective in meeting the challenges faced by the Social Services Practitioners (SSPs), their supervisors and the County entities that support them.

The Grand Jury also searched for unequivocal evidence that validates a statement made by Riverside County’s spokesperson in a July 2020 *Los Angeles Times* article, specifically:

“[Riverside]...County made several improvements since late 2019 to the County’s Children’s Services Division, including leadership changes and a shift in culture toward greater accountability and safer practices and outcomes.”¹

Therefore, the major points of interest we examined in our investigation, and in interviews, were as follows:

- Warrant for Removal process (obtaining court orders to remove a child from a dangerous environment)
- Use of the Structured Decision Making (SDM)[®] to ascertain the level of safety and risk in cases assigned for investigation
- “Staffing” procedures to “promote” an investigation, to seek guidance, and to make appropriate decisions to protect children
- Caseload management, standards and strategies for reducing SSPs workloads

In this report, the Grand Jury provides recommendations to address its findings in each of these areas.

A look into historical perspectives included certain reports which were important to our understanding of how CPS has evolved over the past decade. Those reports are summarized in the BACKGROUND section, which follows.



BACKGROUND

The mission of Riverside County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) is to "support and improve the health, safety, well-being and independence of our County's individuals and families."² DPSS develops and executes programs and policies, in accordance with many state and federal laws, to protect the most vulnerable members of our community: the aged, the developmentally disabled, and the children.

Riverside County's Children's Services Division (CSD) is a major component of DPSS and is generally known as Child Protective Services (CPS). Working under strict adherence to numerous state mandates, and a myriad of other statutory or legislative regulations, CPS has evolved over decades as the County's principal agent for protecting children from abuse, neglect and loss of life.

Riverside County CPS has a total staff of over 1,100 employees, with nearly 600 social workers, also known as Social Services Practitioners (SSPs). There are three levels of SSPs: SSP I, SSP II and SSP III.* These are highly educated, trained professionals who have an essential duty to act. In interviews, these workers expressed a sincere and genuine desire to ensure it's done right, despite the disquieting press reporting and overwhelming workloads.

2012-2013:

On June 27, 2013, the **2012-2013 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury** submitted a report that included their Findings and Recommendations, which was duly recorded and responded to by the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services/Children's Services Division (DPSS/CSD).³

The Grand Jury identified specific areas in which Child Protective Services (CPS) needed to improve, specifically how it handled child abuse and neglect cases, deficiencies in training, and unmanageable caseloads.

The most critical areas identified in the report were the policies and procedures followed by CPS investigators to assess and respond to the level of danger a child was exposed to in a home. It further concluded that social workers were "overloaded", which limited their ability to thoroughly and properly complete investigations. According to the report, some workers reported having up to forty cases and were "overloaded" with paperwork.

The findings & recommendations are briefly outlined in the INVESTIGATION section.

2016-2018:

During this period, DPSS/CSD appeared to be in a state of turmoil and under a high degree of scrutiny. The department underwent major leadership changes at the top of the organization,

* Brief descriptions can be found in the Bibliography section of this report

which could have been attributed to these two significant cases resulting from the department's failure in protecting children from abuse:^{4,5}

- March 2017: a three-year-old suffered severe neglect and, reportedly, was found in a filthy home, hugging her dead infant sibling. CPS had failed to act. Reportedly, a \$1.375 million settlement was reached
- November 2017: a 13-year-old girl suffered repeated sexual abuse and rape. She was impregnated by her mother's live-in boyfriend. CPS failed to protect her. According to this rape victim's attorney, she was awarded \$10 million

In these cases, the complaints allege that the social workers "repeatedly visited the homes of the victims, but failed to stop the abuse and closed the investigations prematurely." They also alleged that the workers were negligent and in violation of the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (*California Penal Code §11164-11174.3*).

"The Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA) passed in 1980. Amendments have expanded the definition of child abuse and the persons required to report. In California, certain professionals are required to report known or suspected child abuse."

September 2018

Riverside County's Director of the Child Services Division (CSD) resigned amidst these civil cases and allegations of continued severe child abuse, even after CPS had "finished" their investigations.

Subsequently, the Riverside County's Executive Office hired an "outside expert in child and family services" to conduct a review of the Riverside County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) Child Services Division (CSD). A report, "External Review Analysis and Process Improvement" was published in October 2019.⁶

"The purpose of the review was to perform a root-cause analysis for CSD related claims and lawsuits and institute actions resulting in safer and improved outcomes for children.....and offer advice and counsel to the County Counsel's Office and CSD."

The findings & recommendations are briefly outlined in the INVESTIGATION section.

2019-2020

Following are abridged accounts of tragedies, caused by child abuse and neglect, in Riverside County, as reported by prominent journalists of the Southern California News Group (SCNG), and other respected daily newspapers. The articles underscore the failures of CPS's decisions and the actions taken. Biased or not, these cases are tragic and saddening to read.

A 17-year-old female was a foster child with disabilities. She died on April 6, 2019. The foster home's owner faced a second-degree murder charge for her death.⁷

Riverside County [CPS] "effectively signed [*her*] death warrant by placing her in a foster home dogged by decades of complaints..."

According to this report, the California State Department of Social Services conducted an investigation and found *that the foster home “neglected to obtain emergency medical care in a timely manner...”*

An 8-year-old boy was last seen alive in March 2019. He was born with a birth defect called bladder exstrophy. His bladder was on the outside of his body and he had problems controlling his bladder. His body has yet to be found.⁸

According to one of several media reports on this case, CPS had 18 months of reports, detailing abuse and neglect. The SSPs decided those reports of abuse were either “***unfounded, inconclusive, or left open (no final determination).***” The SSP wrote in her report that “***no children are likely to be in immediate danger of serious harm***” in that household. Therefore, the children were not removed from the home.

Testimony before a Riverside County Criminal Grand Jury exposed the agency’s failure to take decisive action to protect this child from torture, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and from being brutally killed. The SSPs checked on the boy at least three times before his disappearance. They admitted that they were aware of the child’s hands being “zip-tied behind his back”, that he was “dunked in cold water”, and that he was “sent to school without pants.”⁹

The disappearance of this child is considered a “**no-body homicide**,” according to Riverside County District Attorney Mark Hestrin.¹⁰

A 14-month-old girl died of a fentanyl overdose in 2020. Allegedly, CPS failed to remove the child from her drug-addicted mother despite warnings from hospital staff.

According to a lawsuit before the U.S. District Court in Riverside, medical staff (**mandatory reporting**) contacted CPS to **alert** them that this newborn, and the mother, tested positive for amphetamines, barbiturates and opiates. The child’s grandmother, through an attorney stated: “As a result of their failure to act, this kid is dead. I pin it on them.”

According to a news report, the SSPs, with the concurrence of their supervisor, allowed the newborn to stay with the mother and advised her to participate in a “voluntary safety plan.” “Instead of filing a petition or seeking a (court order), which is what the social worker should have done, she cut the kid loose to the mother and said, ‘Go take some drug classes.’”¹¹

The SSPs left the newborn in the care of her “heroin-addicted mother”, and with their supervisor’s approval, the case was “closed.” Fourteen months later, when the child stopped breathing, Riverside police responded to a 911 call. She was taken to a hospital where she died from a fentanyl overdose. The parents are charged with murder and child abuse.

Riverside County’s spokesperson claimed that the County could not comment on the case, but offered the following statement:

“Our social workers are dedicated to best practices and keeping children safe. We are saddened when a child suffers an untimely death and reflective about the circumstances surrounding that death,” ...“Our hearts go out to [her] family and loved ones.”



METHODOLOGY

- I. Developed an Investigation Plan: Defined what is being investigated; prepared lists of interviewees and the interview schedule; defined the milestones/timelines/goals for completing various stages of the investigation.
- II. Conducted Research: there is a considerable amount of research papers, articles, and publications on the subject of CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT, which are accessible on the internet and other sources. Only a partial list is shown in the BIBLIOGRAPHY, along with other reports and reference material we studied.
- III. Consulted with Legal Experts, Advisors, and Riverside County Departmental Authorities:
 - a. Riverside County District Attorney's Office:
 - Deputy District Attorney
 - Chief Deputy District Attorney Major Crimes
 - b. Criminal Information Technician, Riverside County Sheriff's Department - Information Services Bureau (ISB)/Records
 - c. California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP), School of Social Welfare - University of California, Berkeley
 - d. Correctional Sergeant, Riverside County Sheriff's Department, Professional Standards Bureau
 - e. Senior Legal Analyst, California Department of Social Services, Information, Technology and Administrative Litigation Branch, Information, Audits and Personnel Unit
- IV. Conducted Interviews: Through a series of interviews, the Grand Jury learned about the roles and responsibilities of SSPs, "front-end" (Investigative Services) and "back-end", (Continuing Services) and the CPS organization in general. The interviews included:
 - a. Riverside County District Attorney Investigator
 - b. Chief Deputy District Attorney Major Crimes - Child Death Review Team
 - c. Riverside County Office of County Counsel, Chief Deputy County Counsel (CDCC)
 - d. Employee and Labor Relations Manager, Riverside County Human Resources, Employee and Labor Relations Division
 - e. Assistant Chief Executive Officer/Director of Human Resources, Riverside County Human Resources Director
 - f. Human Resources Analyst, Riverside County Human Resources, Employee and Labor Relations Division
 - g. Assistant Human Resources Director, Riverside County Human Resources
 - h. Principal Management Analyst, Riverside County Executive Office
 - i. Riverside County Public Information Officer
 - j. Assistant Chief Executive Officer (ACEO), Riverside County Human Services/ Director, Department of Public Social Services (DPSS)

- k. Assistant Director, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), Children's Services Division
- l. Administrative Services Officer, Community and Government Relations, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS)
- m. SSP interviews were selected at random from each of the operating regions that report to five Deputy Directors. We were specifically interested in speaking with case-carrying SSP IIIs in Investigative Services, but also included SSPs I and II. Approximately 30[†] interviews were conducted on site at the following locations:
 - DPSS offices - Riverside
 - CPS office - Blythe
 - CPS office - Riverside (La Sierra)
 - CPS office - Temecula
 - CPS office - Moreno Valley
 - CPS office - Indio
- n. Regional Manager and Deputy Director interviews were held at the Grand Jury office (6)[‡]



INVESTIGATION

Regarding the foregoing reports of the children who suffered, or died, as a result of abuse or neglect, DPSS/CSD management is prohibited from directly and authoritatively responding to the various editorials and articles. Officially, the organizations cannot provide a response due to legal constraints. Following is the statute and related codes that prohibit public information officials from answering questions from reporters, or others that are specific to a client or case:

“Disclosure of information concerning children or dependent adults who may have been at risk of or suffered abuse and neglect is expressly prohibited by Welfare and Institutions Code sections 308, 827, 5328, 5328.04, 10051, 10053, 10850 HIPAA, the California Confidentiality of Medical Information Act (Civil Code section 56.10 et seq.), Penal Code sections 11167 and 11167.5, Health and Safety Code section 1536, and Family Code sections 9200 and 9203. This also includes records that are exempt pursuant to Government Code section 6254(c) that are personnel, medical or similar files, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. The County is prohibited by law from releasing the requested information without the requesting party first having obtained an order of the court.”

The regulation, of course, limited the amount of information available to the Grand Jury in its inquiries. The SSPs we spoke with either refused to answer our questions or claimed no knowledge of the cases. However, the news groups apparently had some sources willing to divulge information, and their reporting provided some insights for further analysis in this study.

In an article published (April 2022) in the Press-Enterprise,¹² Riverside County Supervisor Kevin Jefferies made some very significant statements concerning the lack of transparency and poor

[†] To preserve confidentiality, only approximate numbers are indicated

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coordination between agencies of the County. His comments were in reference to an ongoing independent investigation.[§] However, due to their relevance to this study, his statements are included below, in their entirety:

The Board of Supervisors “expressed frustration at what members said were legal barriers preventing a full accounting...as to how the County protects vulnerable children and adults.” Supervisor Kevin Jeffries: “It is the most frustrating experience in my time I’ve had on the Board of Supervisors is to be told you’re responsible as an elected official to make sure all these things run smoothly and you have the right people in place, but you can’t ask any questions about how they do their job or how effective they are or the problems they face...”

“My experience in our ad-hoc committee and in our closed session to try to get to the root of some of the challenges we face was met with ‘I can’t tell you that, supervisor. I’m sorry; I can’t disclose that, supervisor. I can’t tell you how it happened, supervisor,’” he said.

He later added: “We are asking employees to accomplish a mission that is almost impossible to accomplish under current state rules and regulations, where you cannot ask another agency, within the same family, to help you address a need of a child. One agency can’t ask another agency to help because it’s violating (privacy).”

Riverside County’s experience of incidents related to child abuse, child neglect, and child fatalities resulting from those behaviors, is not unique. Various research reports** on this subject, and several news articles, indicate that it happens recurrently throughout the State of California and the nation.

The SCNG reported that Los Angeles County has had extensive studies of child fatality cases, most notably the Gabriel Fernandez murder. In a 2019 audit report, the California State Auditor’s office concluded “...that the [DPSS] department unnecessarily risks the health and safety of the children in its care because it does not consistently complete child abuse and neglect investigations, and related safety and risk assessments, on time or accurately. As a result, the department leaves some children in unsafe and abusive situations for months.”¹³

In a June 2021 news conference, Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer said that the “initial facts” in the case of Santa Ana parents who were accused of stabbing and beating their 2-year-old daughter were “beyond disturbing.”¹⁴ He added:

“Children should be surrounded by love, not violence, and it is our responsibility as a society to stand up and protect our children when their own parents have abdicated that responsibility.”

The SSPs we interviewed certainly echoed that sentiment in their comments and stated that they work diligently to reflect it in their performance. However, they expressed some frustration over increasingly heavy caseloads, which sometimes hinder their ability to properly conduct their investigations, which we probed further in our interviews.

[§] Investigation by Stephen G. Larson’s law firm in the wake of an ABC “20/20” special on the 13 Turpin children

** These can be found in the Bibliography section of this report

In our interviews with the SSPs, and the managers we spoke with, we engaged them in a conversation about certain focus areas from the 2012-2013 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury Report and the External Review Analysis and Process Improvement Report (2019).

The reports are highly detailed and lengthy. Therefore, only the focus points of this study are discussed in condensed fashion, as follows:

2012-2013 CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORT **FINDINGS and RESPONSES**

The Civil Grand Jury conducted a detailed investigation of the CPS practices and policies. From its findings, the Civil Grand Jury made six recommendations, which are abridged here for brevity (the entire report is available on the Riverside County Civil Grand Jury website).¹⁵

INVESTIGATIONS: The 2012-2013 Civil Grand Jury felt that certain terms and tools, critical to effective investigative work, were not well defined or explained in the policies and procedures, such as:

- Global Assessment
- Collateral Contacts
- Structured Decision Making (SDM)[®]
- Criminal Background Checks
- Referral alerts
- History alerts

[The definitions of the above terms are included in the GLOSSARY section of this report].

DPSS/CSD indicated in their responses that the Grand Jury’s recommendations, with a few exceptions, had been implemented, or would be implemented. This was confirmed during our interviews with the SSPs and managers we spoke with, along with our reading of the applicable policies and procedures in the current *Child Services Division Handbook*, which is extensive.

TRAINING: According to the responses from DPSS/CSD, the recommendations from the 2012-2013 Civil Grand Jury were implemented. CPS uses an “existing core induction training structure” and managers require that newly-hired social workers maintain a “training caseload with mentors” until they develop the required skills. Further, “new staff is teamed with a veteran”, and all workers are supervised and participate in regular case consultations.

CASELOADS: The 2012-2013 Civil Grand Jury suggested that caseloads comply with guidelines set by California Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 18994.4 (3) (c) [“*Caseloads that are balanced in size, not to exceed 25 cases per home visitor, and intensity (service intensity varies with client need)*”]

DPSS/CSD clarified the Grand Jury’s interpretation of WIC 18994.4 (3) (c), explaining that the code only applies to the California Families and Children "Home Visitor" programs. It does not refer to Child Welfare workers (CPS).

EXTERNAL REVIEW ANALYSIS and PROCESS IMPROVEMENT **(October 2019)**¹⁶

This independent review of complaints and claims identified certain categories of “Process Issues” from 2008 to 2018. The issues were placed into five “overarching” categories. For the purposes of this review, we examined the following process issues:

- Wrongful Removal (with and without a warrant) of a child
- Failure to remove and to adequately investigate or respond to referrals

Wrongful Removal of a Child - according to the report, it was the “most common category of claim”, which included “wrongful removal with a warrant”, “wrongful removal without a warrant”, and “unclear” as to with or without a warrant. These claims also included allegations that social workers violated practices, policies or procedures.

A warrant is an order from a Juvenile Court judge that orders CSD and law enforcement to carry out actions in the best interest of a child. As explained in the external report, County Counsel implemented a new warrant process effective January 2015 and the number of wrongful removal claims filed declined. However, apparently the new warrant policy “produced unintended consequences over the next four-year period”, such as:

- a) Duplication of work
- b) Process inefficiencies
- c) Lack of clarity of roles of County Counsel and SSPs in a child removal action

Beginning in May 2019, County Counsel and DPSS/CSD management collaborated on actions needed to correct those issues. Their work led to the following corrective actions:

- a) Roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined
- b) Re-education of SSPs on the tools and the authority needed to make the appropriate decisions to protect children
- c) DPSS/CSD executives and County Counsel to be focused on practice and policy issues
- d) Deliver “integrated training modules” for frontline social workers, supervisors, managers, deputy directors
- e) County Counsel to initiate updated training plans to strengthen the practices in conducting investigations and assessing safety and risk

Failure to remove and to adequately investigate or respond to referrals - the investigator’s analysis of actual cases where these process issues occurred, revealed an immediate need for corrective actions, including “re-education in Structured Decision Making” and for clear, consistent communication between front-line SSPs, the supervisors and County Counsel. The fundamental remedy for these types of process issues was clarification of roles and responsibilities.

Therefore, beginning in May 2019, according to the report, DPSS/CSD began ongoing collaboration with The Casey Family Foundation, a nationally-respected organization in child welfare. An action plan was developed, as follows:

- The CSD Quality Review Team assumed an expanded responsibility for auditing “risk management cases, critical incidences, high risk, very-high risk and other targeted proactive reviews”
- Implemented a process to provide SSPs consistent, meaningful feedback
- Developed a tool to consistently communicate and measure performance
- Working closely with Human Resources on addressing personnel issues in a timely manner

The report concluded that DPSS/CSD made “significant strides” from May to October 2019 in enhancing their work towards the protection of children. The current Assistant CEO of Human Services/Director of Department of Public Social Services and County Counsel worked together to ensure that SSPs have the support and the tools they need in order to make the right decisions.

Based on our investigation, the Grand Jury concurs that the current DPSS/CSD leadership team is effectively promoting a culture of accountability and strong commitment to CSD’s stated values.

In its investigation, the 2021-2022 Grand Jury, through detailed interviews, examined the interfacing relationships with both County Counsel and Human Resources. Our observations are outlined in the following sections, along with an analysis of the caseload management practices of DPSS/CSD.

RIVERSIDE COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY COUNSEL

In this report, reference is made to “County Counsel.” For clarification, it is short-hand to refer to the legal advisors who are members of the formal organization, Riverside County Office of County Counsel, not the individual.

The Grand Jury interviewed the Chief Deputy County Counsel (CDCC) who is most familiar with and directly engaged with DPSS/CSD. In our discussion, we learned she was not only the proponent of the warrant process changes and enhancements, she assumed a leadership role in improving the working relationship between County Counsel and DPSS/CSD.

The CDCC we spoke with had been promoted into the role in May 2019. Working in concert with the Assistant CEO, Riverside County Human Services/DPSS, their “brainstorming” efforts served to breakdown “barriers.” The barriers she described included:

- A “time consuming” process
- The “levels of review”, predicated on the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments (U.S. Constitution), which imposes “layers of review” for the protection of parental rights
- No after-hours process, which often stalled the process, and
- Too many hands involved

A significant improvement was in the “quality of work product”, referring to the preparation of Probable Cause Statements (PCS). The documentation must show “legal sufficiency”, along with the evidence that supports each element of the PCS. Every case-carrying SSP III we interviewed

expressed appreciation for the support they are receiving from County Counsel in this very important step towards obtaining a court order for removal of a child.

Through our interviews, it was learned that not all of the SSPs are familiar with this process. Generally, they are the non-case carrying (those not involved in specific cases) SSPs. County Counsel believes that all SSPs need to learn to complete a PCS, as it is important for it to be legally sufficient.

According to the CDCC, in terms of the work done by CPS, “8% is bad press.” Warrant denials are “only 1 in 100”, which reflects a vast improvement. She believes the process is now more streamlined (“freed up”), whereas in the past it was difficult to do successfully. Working collaboratively with DPSS/CSD, the barriers have been removed, and they are now presenting a clear picture for the judge to approve.

County Counsel, specifically the CDCC we spoke with, took the necessary steps to “laydown the deep track” in training. Training that has been developed, and is currently being delivered by County Counsel, includes monthly “Brown Bag” meetings. The topics are selected by County Counsel, which may include “hot issues,” issues in the courts, documentation, and analysis of hypothetical cases with the SSPs. These meetings are mandatory and count towards the SSPs annual mandatory training requirement.

During the “core induction training” phase, County Counsel emphasizes cooperation and team work, fact-finding, and legal issues. It is a full day of training on those subjects.

In the SSP interviews, it was confirmed that “core induction training” of a period of 9 weeks is mandatory. However, the actual training content could not be clearly articulated by the SSPs. Also, while new SSPs are paired with an experienced SSP for a certain period of time, they were unclear as to the prescribed time for the pairing.

The training is currently supplemented by 3 weeks of training conducted internally by DPSS/CSD.

The risk of liability for law enforcement was another concern. She explained that she worked diligently with the courts and the sheriff to reduce some of those hurdles. With their liability concerns addressed, law enforcement now plays a more active role with CPS in the warrant process and, as a result, the SSPs feel more supported and confident with the procedures.

County Counsel described the working relationship with DPSS/CSD as an “in-house counsel”, or an “attorney-client”, relationship. The SSPs we interviewed spoke very highly of this working relationship, expressed appreciation for the improved communication and support, and for the training conducted on a regular, formal basis, by County Counsel in key areas. The Grand Jury also learned that this key individual was in the process of leaving their current role and would be replaced.

HUMAN RESOURCES

The Grand Jury interviewed members of the Riverside County Human Resources Department. We discussed 2019-2021 statistics, along with their analysis, in the following categories:

- SSP Turnover (average rate of turnover and identification of patterns and trends)
- Disciplinary Actions (performance concerns and actions taken)
- Recruiting (number of positions filled and average “time-to-fill”)

The objective for obtaining this information was to ascertain the degree of negative impact on caseloads, as well as the potential for derailing key initiatives taken by DPSS/CSD management to meet their stated mission of protecting children.

An average turnover rate of 32% makes it more challenging for DPSS/CSD managers to effectively reduce the average caseloads. The causes of turnover, as reported to HR, are understood and apparently typical for this type of work. Nothing unusual is evidenced in the data provided.

Performance problems appear to be effectively managed through “pre-disciplinary” actions, such as performance improvement plans. The data showed only one termination related to performance during the period, but there was a large number of “probationary releases.” According to HR the primary reasons were policy violations, interpersonal conflicts, conduct and attendance.

Recruiting statistics reflect a range of 75 to 85 days for the length of time to fill the department’s open positions, which is typical for most County jobs, according to HR. The introduction of a “rolling core induction” process, as described by the head of recruitment, should help in developing new SSPs on a continual basis.

In the opinion of the Grand Jury, the Riverside County Human Resources team we interviewed reflects a positive business partner relationship with DPSS/CSD management in “addressing personnel issues in a timely manner,” as prescribed by the 2019 external report. They appear to maintain a proactive stance to support CPS’s growing challenges.

Following are some of the recruitment and retention strategies implemented by DPSS/CSD management for the SSP III. This classification is responsible for complex and sophisticated tasks, including investigations, adoption assessments, continuing services, and court-related functions.

- Hired additional entry-level SSPs (I/II) to help the SSP III with managing their workload by supporting parental/child visitations, arranging home visits, and providing transportation to parents and their children
- Increased the number of supervisors to decrease the staff to supervisory ratio and increase the time spent on coaching and employee development
- Collaborated with Human Resources, DPSS Staff Development, and the Academy for Professional Excellence through San Diego State University to support Continuous Staff Hiring, On-Boarding, and Induction Training for Mission Critical Work
- Partnered with the Academy for Professional Excellence at San Diego State University School of Social Work (Child Welfare Development Services) to provide coaching and promote retention of SSPs. Professional coaches’ team with SSPs and supervisors to help strengthen their child welfare practice skills and promote professional development

- Implemented Continuous Quality Improvement Processes to analyze and develop a more efficient means to reduce work task duplication and streamline social worker processes

CASELOADS

Probably the most perplexing and challenging function faced by DPSS/CSD management, and the case-carrying SSPs, is driving down the ever-increasing caseloads. The numbers expressed by SSP III interviews varied from 38-40 per SSP, with 12-15 additional referrals on average, per month, every month.

This Grand Jury could not identify any state or federal statute prescribing specific caseload limits for CPS workers. According to DPSS/CSD management, there is “no legal statute or government code” in California that dictates the number of cases managed by a CPS social worker. However, there are several research studies on this subject, one of which is referenced below:

“RESEARCH SUMMARY: CASELOAD STANDARDS and WEIGHTING METHODOLOGIES” published by the San Diego State University School of Social Work in 2019 refers to maximum caseload range of 13 to 24 cases per worker, which aligns with certain national standards. The Council on Accreditation (COA) recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 children per caseworker according to the study. Other studies report caseloads ranging from 10 to 110 children and an average of 24 to 31 per workers.¹⁷

According to interviews we conducted, the estimated “front end” (Investigative Services) workers carry approximately 18-20 cases, with 12 new referrals. The “back end” (Continuing Services) workers carry approximately 25-30 cases, with up to 40-45 referrals. In one region, the average caseload was reported to be approximately 37 (39 the highest).

According to CSD management, the average caseload for Investigative Services was 29 as of February 2022. Based on data provided to the Grand Jury, the number of cases each month fluctuate, showing a definite increase in last the 12 months.

The Central Intake Center (CIC) responds to all calls from the Riverside County child abuse hotline. In 2021, the total number of hotline calls was 63,475, or approximately 5,290 calls per month. Suspected child abuse referrals are received, evaluated, and processed in accordance with department protocols. In 2021, a total of 3,867 of those calls were “substantiated” through investigation as child abuse or neglect. Eighty percent of the calls are identified as “general neglect.” Data for 2022 (only January and February were provided) indicates the same level of activity.

In one region, according to the interviewees, it is felt that the ideal caseload would be around 30 per case-carrying SSP. In another region, a “goal of 25 would be ideal.” It was interesting to note how caseload numbers varied and were inconsistent between all interviews. What was a common perception, however, is that caseloads, which are already challenging, continue to increase. None of the SSPs, or managers, displayed any indication of dissatisfaction or disillusionment that CPS management was not taking necessary steps to address this workload problem.

An interesting observation, as reported by a few of the interviewees, is that calls into Central Intake “spike” during March, which is referred to as “March Madness.” A possible cause for the spike is the number of children returning from spring break and possible cases of abuse are noted by “mandated reporters”, such as teachers, school administrators, teacher’s aides, etc. Another spike occurs in October, a probable cause could not be clearly identified. Staff turnover was also cited as a contributing factor in the higher caseloads per SSP.

DPSS/CSD managers monitor caseloads on a weekly basis and redistribute workload and resources across the regions, especially for Investigative Services. The meetings are called “**Monday Work Group**” meetings. These weekly meetings include supervisors and managers of Intake, Investigative Services and Continuing Services to look at and determine the best approach to balance workloads.

Other strategies being employed by CPS to drive down the average caseloads of SSPs are:

- “Strike Teams” that are generally comprised of 14-16 people (SSP IIIs, two managers, two supervisors). Their goal is to address and resolve cases that are 45 days old or longer in phases. As a result of this plan, “aged-referrals have gone down.” Strike Teams will become a permanent operating unit and its members may be eligible for additional compensation, according to CSD management
- SSPs I and II can do “follow ups” after the SSP III has stabilized the case. They follow-up with continuing services providers
- A new policy, enacted in January 2022, is the “5-Day Referrals”, which is in addition to the “10-day Referral” program. The “5-day Referral” plan is to identify and act on “High Risk Referrals”, similar to the Immediate Referral (IR) actions, which are handled by the Command Post. The Command Post is staffed by a special team of SSP IIIs
- Addition of two “Sexual Abuse Units” for handling of those types of cases
- Partnering with Human Resources on recruitment and retention strategies as listed on pages 12 and 13 of this report

The managers we spoke with expressed confidence that these combined efforts are helping, but there is no doubt that the workloads will continue to be heavy.

Supervisor Kevin Jeffries, Riverside County Board of Supervisors, recently commented in March, 2022...

” CPS caseloads are at “bone-crushing levels,””...adding that state funding to care for vulnerable children and adults is “grossly inadequate” and available housing and treatment facilities “are significantly limited and at times nonexistent.”¹⁸

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FINDINGS

In this section, the 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury outlines “findings”, or observations, derived from our in-person interviews with SSPs, Regional Managers, and Deputy Directors.

F1: ROLES and RESPONSIBILITIES: The Grand Jury found that roles and responsibilities have been clearly defined in accordance with the recommendation from the 2019 External Review Analysis and Process Improvement report. We also found that there is clear and consistent communication between supervisors and County Counsel. CPS and County Counsel are working together to provide the support and the tools they need for making timely decisions that will protect the children.

SSPs and managers reported that the working relationship with County Counsel has had the “biggest impact.” Executive management promotes a “Strict Structure” approach and a “line of sight” management philosophy, which includes supervisors meeting with their SSPs daily, and supervisors meeting with regional managers. As described in an interview, this is “more work, but better efficiency.”

F2: WARRANT FOR REMOVAL PROCESS: While the Probable Cause Statements may seem “cumbersome, tedious and time consuming”, according to only a few of SSPs interviewed, most reported that they feel comfortable with the process, especially with help from County Counsel. Policies and procedures for both daytime and afterhours processing were current as of 2020 and 2021, respectively. Several of those interviewed felt that the requirement to clearly articulate “preventable services to maintain the family unit”, and having “dedicated law enforcement specifically working with CPS”, have enhanced the process. The procedures for obtaining warrants, as written, specifically outline the roles and responsibilities of the SSPs, supervisors, and County Counsel. We found that current procedures for obtaining a warrant from the court for removal are working well.

F3: STAFFING PROCEDURES: This is a critical step in the process of investigating and determining what interventions may be required by the circumstances. The SSPs know they are required to keep their supervisors informed throughout the investigation and how decisions are made to “promote” or to close an investigation. This is termed “staffing a referral.” The SSP is responsible for documenting the conversations, explaining the directives given, and the rationale for the decisions. The documentation is recorded into the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS).

The Grand Jury did not identify any significant process issues with the “staffing a referral” process.

F4: THE REMOVAL PROCESS: SSPs who have undertaken actions to remove a child from a home due to safety factors feel that better support and communication with their supervisors, and/or regional managers, has made these kinds of actions less daunting than before. While these actions may never be an easy task, they expressed some relief that it can be accomplished in a less stressful and more confident manner.

The most common issue described by the SSPs is in the timing of the removals. Delays in placement or availability invariably create issues with the timing for the removal, and in providing a safe environment for a child at a critical time. In accordance with one of the recommendations cited in the 2019 External Review Analysis and Process Improvement report, a “Specialized Placement” extended its service hours to accommodate placement needs. However, some of the SSPs felt that “the placement unit could work quicker.”

F5: STRUCTURED DECISION MAKING (SDM)[®]: Safety and risk assessments are the primary functions of this system:

- a) Safety: a child is likely to be in immediate danger of serious harm/maltreatment, which requires a protective intervention, and
- b) Risk: characteristics associated with a greater likelihood of future system involvement. Risk Assessment identifies families with “Low, Moderate, High, or Very High” probabilities of future abuse or neglect.

In our interviews with SSPs regarding this process, and the SDM tool, they reported they are comfortable with the tool, believe it is effective and have confidence in the guidance it provides. It is the Grand Jury’s opinion that no further “re-education” on the SDM is needed, but periodic refresher course should be required.

F6: CASELOAD MANAGEMENT: The average caseloads, as reported by the SSPs we interviewed, were inconsistent throughout the interviews. What was consistent is that the number of cases a SSP is normally carrying is felt to be a too high, especially with the additional referrals assigned.

As noted earlier in this report, a Riverside County Board supervisor recognizes the “bone-crushing” caseloads on CPS.

The current strategies (Strike teams, Monday Workgroup meetings, “5-Day Referral” actions, etc.) are encouraging to the SSPs and may in the long run help to reduce, or at least contain their caseload at manageable levels.

The Grand Jury agrees with DPSS/CSD management that an increase in the number of additional positions in Investigative Services and Continuing Services would have significant impact on the reduction of caseload numbers per SSP.

F7: TURNOVER RATE: The current average turnover rate of 32% makes it additionally challenging for DPSS/CSD management to effectively reduce the average caseloads for SSPs.



RECOMMENDATIONS

While we have only a few policy or practice recommendations, we hope that the overall observations and comments in this report will contribute in a constructive way. We believe that the appropriate stakeholders, some referred to in the analysis, are better equipped to evaluate and make necessary modifications to the policies and procedures that will protect children from abuse, neglect, or loss of life.

The 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury presents the following recommendations, which we trust will be positively received and considered:

R1: County Counsel to continue to support, guide and to stay actively involved with ongoing training of SSPs, such as the monthly “Brown Bag” meetings. Continue monitoring court processes and law enforcement engagement with CPS.

Based on Finding 1

Financial Impact: None

R2: DPSS/CSD management to ensure all SSPs, not only those that are case carrying, are familiarized and educated with the process of writing/completing a Probable Cause Statement. Implementation to be completed by end of fiscal year 2022-2023.

Based on Finding 2

Financial Impact: No incremental cost

R3: DPSS/CSD to evaluate the expansion of placement unit locations for children removed from the home due to safety factors. This would greatly assist SSPs in timely removals and provide a child a safe environment at a critical time. Implementation to be completed by end of fiscal year 2022-2023.

Based on Finding 4

Financials Impact: Moderate to Significant dependent upon additional facilities

R4: Human Resources to develop a plan to address and reduce SSP voluntary turnover and number of losses during the probationary period in order to significantly reduce overall turnover. Plan should include recommendations related to compensation, health care packages and career development, as well as other retention strategies. Plan to be submitted to the Executive Office not later than December 31, 2022.

Based on Finding 7

Financial Impact: Moderate to Significant

R5: Board of Supervisors create an Ad Hoc committee to study and propose an action plan for CPS staffing levels in order to drive down the average caseloads, including approval of additional approved positions for Investigative Services and Continuing Services for fiscal year 2023-2024 as follows:

- a) Investigative Services SSP III: 70-75 new positions
- b) Continuing Services SSP I and II: 20-25 new positions

Based on Finding 6

Financial Impact: Approximately \$7M annually, including cost of benefits

R6: DPSS/CSD to prepare a summary report on caseload management that illustrates how the actions they have taken have been successful or not. This summary report is to be submitted to the Executive Office not later than June 30, 2024.

Based on Finding 6

Financial Impact: No incremental cost



EPILOGUE

The topic of Child Abuse and Neglect is multifaceted and cannot be adequately studied in a relatively short period of time. And a thorough, judicious analysis of the seemingly enormous service performed by this agency cannot be distilled into one brief report.

Preventing child abuse and neglect was not specifically discussed in the SSP interviews as it would have required an extensive amount of time. However, this Grand Jury report would be remiss if it did not reflect on the importance of CPS’s role in protecting children from abuse and neglect, children who are suffering physical, psychological and emotional damage. It is their mission.

Throughout our investigation, we were pleased with the level of cooperation and assistance from DPSS management, Child Services Division management, and particularly the Social Services Practitioners we met with. We trust that this report adequately expresses our appreciation for the work they do.



REQUIRED RESPONSES

The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Code §933 and §933.05:

- Assistant CEO, Riverside County Human Services and Director, Department of Public Social Services (DPSS): F1 – F7; R1 – R7
- Assistant Director, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), Children's Services Division: F1- F7; R1 – R7
- Assistant CEO/Director of Human Resources Riverside County Human Resources Director: F7; R4
- Riverside County Office of County Counsel: F1; R1
- Riverside County Board of Supervisors: R5



GLOSSARY

- **Abuse:** intentionally or recklessly causing or attempting to cause bodily injury or causing reasonable apprehension of imminent serious bodily injury to himself, herself, or another.
- **Alert Development and Approval:** an Alert is the CSD method of providing policy directives quickly to staff which requires immediate implementation. The trigger for an Alert can be the receipt of an All County Letter or similar document from the California Department of Social Services, a directive from DPSS or CSD administration, etc.
- **Caseload:** The number of cases (children or families) assigned to an individual worker in a given time period. Caseload reflects a ratio of cases (or clients) to staff members and

may be measured for an individual worker, all workers assigned to a specific type of case, or all workers in a specified area (e.g., agency or region).

- **Child:** a person under the age of 18 years.
- **Child abuse or neglect includes:** sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and other physical or emotional abuse, severe or general neglect of the child's needs (food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and willful cruelty or unjustifiable punishment of a child).
- **Collateral Contacts:** Collateral contacts are made with an individual identified in the investigation that has information relevant to the completion of the investigation and its findings (example: babysitters, medical staff, law enforcement officers, family members, etc.)
- **Command Post:** Due to the emergent nature of the referrals, it is mandatory for Command Post social workers to document all activities within 24 hours. All consultations, directives, and investigative activities must be entered into Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) before rolling over any referral to an operational region for further investigation.
- **Confidentiality:** The identity of persons filing reports is confidential, but may be made known to appropriate licensing, law enforcement, and protective service agencies.
- **Fourth Amendment (annotated):** The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.
- **Fourteenth Amendment (annotated):** All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.
- **General Neglect:** failure of a parent/guardian to provide care and protection necessary for a child's mental and physical development. This would include, but is not limited to, unsanitary conditions, lack of food, clean water, or household utilities, controlled substance abuse, inadequate supervision.
- **Global Assessment:** A comprehensive evaluation of information collected through assessments such as the SDM Safety and Risk tools, family function and criminal history available through public records. This inclusive assessment addresses the broader needs of a child and family which impact a child's safety, permanency and well-being. The Global Assessment looks at the big picture and not just a set of symptoms.
- **Probable Cause Statement:** Probable Cause Statement is an affidavit, prepared by the SSP, under penalty of perjury, submitted to the court as evidence supporting the issuance of a protective custody warrant.
- **Referral History Alert:** Referral History Alerts highlight concerns of a family's prior involvement with CSD. A family's prior child welfare history gives insight into a family's dynamics, elevated safety and risk factors, and prior interventions and services offered. It allows the Investigative Services (IS) social worker to effectively prepare for their investigation.

- **Referral Information:** the Intake Specialist receives reports of alleged abuse, neglect and/or exploitation at the Central Intake Center (CIC). The allegations are documented on the Emergency Response Referral Information document.
- **Removal Warrants:** A child cannot be removed from parental custody without parental consent, exigent circumstances, or a warrant issued by a court.
- **Structured Decision Making:** Children’s Services Division (CSD) utilizes the Structured Decision Making® (SDM) model in making critical assessments and decisions regarding the ongoing safety and well-being of children. This project was initiated in 1998 by The California Department of Social Services, contracting with the Children’s Research Center.



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- Job Descriptions (Social Services Practitioners I, II, dated Dec 20, 2018 and III, dated Mar 9, 2020)
 - SSP I: Entry level classification in the SSP series. Incumbents are not expected to remain in this class for more than 12 months as experience is gained; selected caseload where consequence of error is minimal.
 - SSP II: First professional level classification in SSP series. Emphasis is on learning casework methods, procedures and policies, carrying of a limited, non-complex caseload under close supervision.
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DISCLAIMER

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

One Grand Jury member was recused during the investigation and preparation of this report.