



**NAPA COUNTY GRAND JURY  
2016-2017**

**June 6, 2017**

**FINAL REPORT**

**NAPA CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE  
(707) 253-4261 or (800) 464-4216**



# **NAPA CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE**

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## **SUMMARY**

In 2014, a three-year-old child in Napa County died as a result of severe child abuse. This rare but devastating event drew the attention of the 2016-2017 Napa Grand Jury, who focused its attention on Napa's Child Abuse Hotline. It is the first place to report suspected child abuse or neglect, and it receives over one thousand calls each year.

The Hotline is staffed 24 hours a day. During regular business hours the Hotline is answered by social workers in the Napa Child Welfare Service (CWS) Emergency Response Unit. After-hours calls have been handled by a contracted off-site answering service and referred to the Napa County social workers on call. In an effort to improve after-hours effectiveness of the Hotline, there is a plan to bring this service into a new Crisis Stabilization Unit (CSU) housed at the Napa Health and Human Services (HHS) campus. The Grand Jury finds it is imperative to evaluate the effectiveness of the new CSU in improving after-hours Hotline function.

Protecting our children requires retaining top quality professionals, as well as providing them the tools they need to carry out their responsibilities. Efforts are in place to improve training and make it more easily accessible. An obstacle to hiring and retaining staff is the high cost of housing in Napa County, an ongoing problem for our area.

Current technology used by the Hotline is insufficient. The Grand Jury recommends updating technology to improve the effectiveness of the Hotline. For example, technology is available that would allow recording calls for training, follow up, and quality assurance.

Public awareness of the Child Abuse Hotline is inadequate. The Hotline is the access point for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect. It is crucial that the community is well informed regarding its function. Timely reporting could result in earlier intervention in situations of potential child endangerment. The Grand Jury recommends that the County increase its efforts to inform the public about the importance of the Hotline and how to access it.

## **GLOSSARY**

CDC – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CEDV – Child Exposed to Domestic Violence

CSU – Crisis Stabilization Unit

CWS – Child Welfare Services

HHS – Health and Human Services

SDM – Structured Decision Making – a variety of tools used to assess child safety

## **BACKGROUND**

It was not the intent of the Grand Jury to investigate the death of one child but rather to examine efforts to protect all children in our community. Investigations of possible child endangerment

often start with a call to the Child Abuse Hotline. Napa County had 6,712 calls regarding suspected child abuse or neglect between 2012 and 2016. After a thorough investigation of these referrals, 482 children were considered to be at such high risk that they were removed from their homes through the court system.

Child welfare in California functions under a state-administered/county-implemented system. Each county manages its own child welfare program while the State, under the California Department of Social Services, monitors, regulates, and supports the programs and policies by which the county operates. County child welfare programs have four major components established under State law:

- Emergency Response
- Family Maintenance
- Family Reunification
- Permanent Placement

Since the Grand Jury wanted to focus on the Child Abuse Hotline, it centered its investigation on the Emergency Response component.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Interviews**

- Director, Napa County Health & Human Services (HHS)
- Senior Management, Child Welfare Services Department, HHS
- Social Worker Supervisors, Emergency Response Division
- Emergency Response Social Workers
- Officer, Napa Police Department

### **Documents**

- Organization charts, HHS Department and Child Welfare Services
- Napa County Comprehensive Assessment Process: Instructional Guidelines and Practice Protocol
- California Structure Decision Making (SDM) Hotline Tools
- SDM Family Risk Reassessment for In-Home Cases
- SDM Family Strengths and Needs Assessment
- SDM Reunification Reassessment
- Napa Initial SDM Assessment Form
- Suspected Child Abuse Report Form
- Napa County Child Abuse Hotline Log October 2016
- Napa County Child Welfare Fact Sheets 2015 and 2016
- Bay Area Academy Regional Core Training Curricula for Child Welfare Workers: July-December 2016 Schedule

- *Abolish Anonymous Reporting to Child Abuse Hotlines* D.J. Cecka, University of Richmond School of Law, Virginia 2014
- *Understanding the Child Welfare System in California*, Diane F. Reed, M.P.H., Kate Karpilow, Ph.D., 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition June 2009

## Videos

- *First Impressions: Exposure to Violence and a Child's Developing Brain*, Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D.
- *How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime*, Nadine Burke Harris, M.D.

## DISCUSSION

The Napa County Child Welfare Services website states, “Child Welfare’s primary goal is to prevent or remedy neglect, abuse, or exploitation of children while preserving, rehabilitating, or reuniting families.” The Napa Child Abuse Hotline is the main access point between the community and CWS regarding child safety. The Hotline is the critical piece for social workers to screen incoming calls accurately. The Grand Jury decided to concentrate on this important service.

The children of Napa County represent our community's future. While the family is the primary unit responsible for raising children to become healthy and productive adult citizens, the community must also recognize the need to step in and protect the basic rights of children when necessary.

The Grand Jury’s main questions to be addressed were as follows:

- What is the Child Abuse Hotline?
- How is it staffed?
- What is the training for staff members?
- What is the protocol for receiving calls, and what type of follow-up occurs?
- How does Child Welfare Services assure no child “falls through the cracks”?

## Hotline

The Child Abuse Hotline is the primary mechanism for people in Napa County to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. Calls can come from mandated reporters<sup>1</sup> as well as members of the general public. Community members can report to the Hotline anonymously. In 2016, CWS received 1,307 calls to the Hotline. Of these, 127 calls resulted in immediate investigation within 24 hours and an additional 346 calls were investigated within 10 days as required by state law. These investigations lead to the confirmation of 113 cases of abuse or neglect. The outcome of these substantiated referrals resulted in 72 children being removed from their homes and placed in the homes of other relatives, foster care homes, or other out-of-home placement options. During this same time period, 46 children were reunified with their families and 22 adoptions were finalized.

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<sup>1</sup> Mandated reporters, including teachers, physicians, law enforcement, and others, are legally required to report known or suspected cases of child abuse.

From 2012 through 2016, these numbers remained essentially stable, with 6,712 calls to the Hotline and the removal of 402 children from their homes due to severe abuse or neglect. Of the total removed, 243 children were reunited with their families and 72 were adopted.

## **Staffing**

The Napa County Child Abuse Hotline is staffed during regular business hours from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday by eight social workers, approximately half of whom are bilingual. During regular working hours, the Hotline has one full-time person designated to answer calls and a rolling backup of other qualified social workers. Backing up the Hotline requires some social workers to remain in the office, therefore often unable to complete their investigations of child safety issues in the field in a timely manner. Several staff members expressed a need for scheduling an additional full-time screener for the Hotline so caseworkers would have adequate time for their responsibilities in the community.

Approximately 25% of calls are received after regular business hours. Calls at night, on weekends, and on holidays have been handled by an off-site answering service, which refers callers to the CWS social worker on call. This after-hours duty is rotated among all the social workers and supervisors in the Department. There is an effort to bring the Hotline after-hours answering service back in-house through the new Crisis Stabilization Unit. Exodus, a third party contractor, is staffing the CSU with qualified mental health professionals and will be under the direction of the HHS Department of Mental Health. Part of their responsibilities will be answering after-hours Hotline calls and referring callers to the CWS staff. This will result in better screening and triage of calls to the CWS social worker on call, thereby helping to reduce burnout by establishing more effective work scheduling.

When an after-hours call comes in, it can take up to two hours for the on-call social worker to arrive at the scene to evaluate cases of suspected child abuse, neglect, or of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence (CEDV). These cases may require a police officer to remain on the scene until the social worker arrives. Most of the long response times are because many of the workers live outside Napa County. On-call workers living in Napa County would be able to respond more quickly.<sup>2</sup>

## **Back to Basics Training**

Core training and continuing education has been insufficient. Several staff members stated it was difficult to get necessary training and to meet requirements for licensing as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (L.C.S.W.). This demonstrated the need for formulation of a new set of key training goals. Recently, the Department has been focusing on “Back to Basics Training”, relying on the Bay Area Academy<sup>3</sup> to expand present training options. It has four major components:

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<sup>2</sup> The Board of Supervisors established the Affordable Housing Fund in 1992 to ensure the development and preservation of affordable housing to low and moderate income Napa County residents. The purpose of the Proximity Housing Homebuyer’s Assistance Program is to promote affordable workforce housing, while reducing greenhouse gasses and commutes for people who work in Napa County. Based on their pay scale, social workers working in Napa County might qualify for this program.

<sup>3</sup> The Bay Area Academy is a government funded agency providing a wide range of programs to **CWS** groups in Northern California. In addition to numerous other sessions, Napa CWS staff attend “core training” for newer social workers as well as specific “hotline tools” training for personnel answering incoming referral calls. See [www.bayareaacademy.org](http://www.bayareaacademy.org)

- Core Training – basic California training requirements
- Structured Decision Making (SDM) Training – assessment tools
- Safety Organized Practice - looks for “signs of safety” and fosters family engagement and team working
- “Nuts and Bolts” - focuses on orienting social workers to the specific resources of Napa County

Previously most of the Bay Area Academy training sessions took place in Oakland. Now many courses are being conducted in Napa, Sonoma, and Marin Counties, requiring less travel time and allowing Napa CWS workers more time to work with children and families. Also, in an effort to improve staff training, a supervisor has been assigned to assess social worker training needs and quality assurance.

### **Call Screening and Assessment**

Hotline workers in Emergency Response (ER) receive referrals from mandated reporters and others through the Hotline. For each referral, the ER Hotline worker conducts a safety assessment to evaluate the nature of the risk to the child. In the assessment, ER Hotline workers determine whether the referral should be closed (“screened out”) or investigated (“screened in”). Depending on the seriousness and risk to child safety, the most urgent “screened in” investigations must begin within 24 hours. Less urgent investigations will occur within 10 days.

An example of urgent investigation for high risk of child endangerment is in cases of domestic violence. When a 911 call comes in to law enforcement regarding possible domestic violence and there are child witnesses, it is required by law that CWS be informed. This is done via the Hotline. A situation where there is CEDV is considered child abuse and must be investigated. Most experts believe children raised in abusive homes learn that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts and problems. They may replicate the violence they witnessed as children in their teen and adult relationships, and in parenting experiences.

Fortunately, our community benefits from a multi-year grant given to a Napa police officer, allowing him to devote 20 hours a week solely to CEDV cases. He works closely with CWS and other agencies involved in these issues. In 2013 and 2014, the average number of CEDV cases was 77. Subsequent to the training and specific requirements initiated due to the CEDV grant, there was an increase in reporting from the Napa Police Department of these cases. This resulted in 193 children in 2015 and 246 children in 2016 being referred to CWS for having been exposed to domestic violence.

The Child Welfare Services Department uses State recognized tools and best practices to determine the level of urgency of calls to the Hotline and to manage resolution of investigations resulting from these calls. Structured Decision Making Tools (SDM) assist the Hotline staff in determining when to respond and if an immediate response is needed. They are used in conjunction with the recently adopted Napa Intake Assessment instrument. This comprises the “screen in/screen out” process, from a phone script package to a narrative summation. Although the majority of CWS staff believes this new procedure has its advantages, there is no question the intake process takes longer than before, sometimes up to an hour.

Questions CWS investigators must ask themselves are:

- Is the child safe?
- Who and/or what is making it an unsafe situation?
- What steps should be taken?
- Who can be counted on and what assistance will they need?

A complex series of events takes place when a call is made to the Hotline. The decision on whether to remove a child from their home involves multiple steps. (See Appendix 1.) If it becomes necessary to remove children from their homes for any length of time, the ultimate decision is in the hands of a judge. Petitions to the court must be submitted by the social worker within 48 hours of removal.

### **Update the Call Center**

Using their current technology, it is not possible for CWS to record calls to the Hotline. There is no mechanism for tracking data from calls that are received. One of the biggest challenges in collecting substantial and relevant information of calls is effectively managing the data. An enhanced call center with improved technology could help the social workers in several ways in their efforts to keep children safe. For example, several members of the staff and management felt the ability to record calls would be beneficial for training of new staff. This would also allow supervisors to analyze decisions that were made and review them with the social worker who took the call. Better tracking of data could result in improved quality assurance efforts.

Several social workers said that a “white board” in the office showing daily responsibilities of each staff member would improve efficiency. A visual staff schedule would make sure everyone knows who is responsible to back up the Hotline, as well as showing who is in court, investigating cases in the field, or otherwise out of the office. These enhancements would improve efficient operation within the office, facilitating proper, timely, and effective child welfare decisions.

### **Public Awareness**

Public awareness of the Hotline is inadequate. In order to protect children, Napa County residents must be better informed about the existence of the Hotline. It is important to ensure everyone reports concerns of child safety to the Hotline without hesitation. Efforts should be made to help the community recognize that the County’s Child Welfare Services focuses on child safety.

A goal of CWS is to preserve the family by providing tools to successfully deal with issues or problems. The Family Preservation Program works with families who are motivated and moving toward reunification with their children, or who are maintaining their children at home and can benefit from additional support. These services are voluntary and are provided for a period of three to six months, depending on the number of children being referred and any unique circumstances.

Currently, the CWS literature is incomplete and needs updating. Public awareness of the Napa County Child Abuse Hotline would be improved by putting the Hotline number on all appropriate CWS literature. Promoting the services of the Hotline on Napa’s English and Spanish radio stations with public service announcements would improve community awareness. Another method to increase public awareness is through PTA Meetings, religious groups, and



other public forums that could address child safety and the Child Abuse Hotline. Advertisements on Vine buses and at bus stops could increase the Hotline's visibility in the community.

## **No Child “Falling Through the Cracks”**

Ultimately, the basic rights of our children will be protected if our public agencies and the community both fulfill their rightful and obligated responsibilities to that goal. To prevent children from falling through the cracks, the Grand Jury recommends Child Welfare Services focus on the following:

- Hiring and retaining qualified CWS staff.
- Providing staff with appropriate and on-going training.
- Effectively monitoring the Department’s procedures and practices.

### **Hiring and Retaining Qualified Staff**

Turnover of CWS staff is an ongoing issue and has been critical over the past several years. Much of this has been due to changes in leadership and assessment protocols, resulting in numerous alterations to the forms and tools used by CWS to assess cases. So many changes in a short period of time resulted in many of the social workers feeling stressed and frustrated. During this time period, the Department saw a significant number of resignations. The recent hiring of an Acting Director with extensive experience in the Napa Child Welfare Department is showing signs of stabilizing the Department.

The departure of veteran staff members and replacement with new, inexperienced, workers has highlighted the importance of suitable training for newer employees as well as encouraging and supporting professional development of experienced staff.

The high cost of housing remains a well-known and on-going factor in recruiting and retaining qualified staff to Napa County.

Social work is a difficult job. The goal of providing safe and nurturing environments for neglected and abused children falls on the proficiency of social workers performing their required tasks. They must determine what services are appropriate for a given situation, ranging from providing programs that support the family to removing the child from the home when evidence is found of severe abuse or neglect. These decisions are not made lightly. In the rare circumstance when a child “falls through the cracks”, social workers express being “haunted” by that memory throughout their careers. CWS has Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to support staff in these situations. Department supervisors are expected to be sensitive as to how the work is impacting the staff and to recommend EAP or other alternatives as needed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> EAP may also be suggested if any staff member displays symptoms of Secondary Trauma. National Child Traumatic Stress Network states, “...(it) is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic-stress-disorder.”

## **Providing Staff with Appropriate Training**

It takes special training to attain the expertise to receive information, accurately record responses, and follow up with pertinent questions from what are often emotionally charged phone calls.

At this point it is too early to determine whether the Department's "Back to the Basics" training approach will succeed as planned. It will need time to be implemented, and adjustments will likely be necessary before a valid assessment can be completed. The Grand Jury acknowledges the Department's effort to foster up-to-date training practices to align with current challenges in the community.

## **Monitoring Procedures and Practices**

Decisions made regarding child safety are not made in isolation. The Department needs to have procedures in place for follow-up of judgments made regarding safety of the child and reassess these when appropriate. Social workers must look at every family situation clearly and objectively. Families often have multiple contacts with HHS/CWS over time. For the past 20 years, Napa has participated in the CWS Case Management System (CWS/CMS), a statewide database of child abuse and neglect cases mandatory for all 58 counties. This enables CWS to determine if there is a prior history of issues regarding a family that is currently being reported. However, the record of a family's past history should not be the only factor in formulating the support plan. A clear perception of current conditions in the home is equally significant in protecting children and supporting families. It is critical that supervisors continually review all casework decisions and conduct thorough on-going discussions with staff regarding the decisions and actions taken. Determinations based on initial evaluations are altered when appropriate.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Grand Jury inquiry has found a dedicated well-trained CWS staff that strives to fulfill its responsibilities in protecting children and rendering support to families. Given the multitude of issues that family and children face today, the Jury recognizes Napa County's Child Welfare Services, including the Hotline, is poised to meet the challenges necessary to insure the health and safety of our children. The Grand Jury respectfully submits the Findings and Recommendations below for consideration and implementation.

## **FINDINGS**

The Grand Jury finds that:

- F1.** The on-call duty rotated among all social workers and supervisors requires answering calls overnight, on holidays, and on weekends, which contributes to burnout.
- F2.** Implementation of the new Crisis Stabilization Unit should result in a higher level of screening after-hours incoming calls, resulting in fewer non-appropriate calls being referred to on-call social workers and supervisors.
- F3.** A full and proficient staff at Child Welfare Services contributes to handling referrals sooner and promotes opportunities for staff to have more effective interactions with families.

- F4.** The public is often hesitant to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the Hotline for fear children will be removed from their families, and therefore may not call in to voice their concerns for child safety.
- F5.** Napa Health and Human Services is not active enough in informing the public regarding all aspects of the Hotline.
- F6.** Technology capable of recording calls would be useful to CWS for training purposes and quality assurance.
- F7.** Introducing technology allowing greater flexibility for CWS staff to work off-site would improve job efficiency and satisfaction.
- F8.** After-hour calls regarding urgent child safety matters to Napa Child Welfare Workers living outside the County often result in longer response times.
- F9.** The high cost of housing is a major factor resulting in many Napa Child Welfare Workers living outside the county.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1.** During its initial six months of operation, the Department of Health and Human Services conduct a performance review of the Crisis Stabilization Unit regarding its effectiveness in handling after-hour calls to the Hotline. Results of the review to be reported to the Board of Supervisors no later than June 30, 2018.
- R2.** Department of Health and Human Services develop a detailed plan of outreach to increase public awareness of the Hotline. This will include, but not be limited to, presentations to schools and places of worship, articles for local newspapers, and public service messages on local radio and TV stations, as well as updated written and online materials. Plan to be completed by January 31, 2018, with implementation within six months thereafter.
- R3.** Department of Health and Human Services evaluate technology currently in use, including the ability to record calls, track staff schedules, and accommodate off-site staffing. Upgrades determined to be worthwhile and cost effective are to be included in budget requests to the Board of Supervisors for Fiscal year 2018.
- R4.** Napa County Board of Supervisors continue efforts to promote development of affordable housing within Napa County and show evidence of such action by means of public notice and/or documents by December 31, 2017.

## **COMMENDATION**

The Grand Jury commends Napa County Child Welfare Services for providing a culture of protection and support to the children and families of Napa.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSES**

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

From the following individuals:

- Director, Napa County Department of Health and Human Services Agency: **F1 through F9, and R1 through R3**

From the following governing bodies:

- Board of Supervisors: **R1, R3, and R4**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 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.
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## Appendix 1

**Figure 2: Going Through the Child Welfare System**

