

RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY REPORT

Report Title: Responding in Time to Help Our "At Risk" Children

Report Date: 06/16/2017

Response by: Connie Beck, Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services
Director

FINDINGS

1. DHHS-CWS agrees with the findings numbered: F1, F7, F8, F9, F13 and F15.
2. DHHS-CWS disagrees wholly or partially with the findings numbered: F2, F10, F11, F12, and F14.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recommendations numbered R7 and R10 have been implemented.
2. Recommendation numbered R6 has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.
3. Recommendation numbered R5 requires further analysis.
4. Recommendations numbered R8, R9 and R11 will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.

Date: 7-25-17

Signed:  _____

Number of pages attached: _____

RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY REPORT – FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY STATEMENT

Findings

F2. School Districts that do not follow the correct process for filing Mandated Reports are making it impossible for CWS and Law Enforcement personnel to address the needs of their ‘at risk’ students.

Disagree

Prior to February 2017, DHHS-CWS had a practice of triaging calls that involved asking reporters to provide substantial information about an occurrence before an investigation could commence. That practice was inconsistent with the department’s mandate to investigate all reports of child abuse and neglect.

Since February 2017, the only requirement for making a report to DHHS-CWS is to telephone the Hotline number. All calls are answered immediately by a screener/social worker.

F7. Many of the individuals within CWS whom we interviewed complained of the long and complicated hiring process for Social Workers, delaying much needed services.

Agree

The hiring process is long and cumbersome, and DHHS-CWS will continue to work with Merit Systems, the union, and county personnel to find the most efficient way to meet our obligation to hire qualified staff.

F8. Many of the Social Workers we interviewed stated the need for a better mentoring process for training new Social Workers to effectively work in the field.

Agree

DHHS-CWS has been working over the last several months to strengthen local training and mentoring for social workers and supervisors. Social workers and supervisors receive basic state-required training through University of California, (UC) Davis; however, DHHS-CWS has contracted with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) to provide more in-depth training on the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tools. This process includes a redesign of the local training program for new hires and the yearly refresher trainings. DHHS-CWS also contracts with cultural coaches and with the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) to provide training.

F9. There is an urgent need for more Social Workers. We have been told there are between 10 and 22 vacancies.

Agree

DHHS-CWS has an urgent need for more social workers. DHHS-CWS will continue to work on strategies to recruit, and will continue to work with county Human Resources and the union on the hiring

process. The biggest barrier to staffing positions is the lack of applicants. DHHS-CWS is exploring strategies to attract and retain staff.

F10. CWS staff is contracting with a program from University of California, Davis for advice regarding policies and procedures which are expected to increase service efficiencies.

Disagree

As part of the on-going investigation by the California Attorney General, DHHS-CWS has contracted with NCCD for assistance and support in reviewing and revising local DHHS-CWS policies and procedures.

F11. CWS often does not communicate with School Districts and Law Enforcement on the ongoing status of a case under investigation.

Agree

DHHS-CWS communicates with law enforcement on the ongoing status cases under investigation, but the reporting and collaboration is not always timely. It is often difficult for mandated reporters to obtain information regarding the status of their reports.

With the assistance of the California Attorney General, DHHS-CWS is working with the Sheriff's Office to implement an electronic cross-reporting and tracking process that will ensure timely reporting and will allow staff to provide accurate follow-up information.

F12. CWS frequently does not handle allegations in a timely manner as dictated by their own policy and procedures as well as state law.

Disagree partially

DHHS-CWS acknowledges that the community conveyed to the Humboldt County Grand Jury their concerns regarding delays and inefficiencies in the DHHS-CWS Emergency Response (ER) procedure. It is understandable that these issues generated mistrust of DHHS-CWS among some of our system partners and community members. The department is committed to making significant changes to correct these problems. In February 2017, screeners/social workers started answering all calls received by the Hotline, instead of having those calls answered by clerical staff who then took a message for screener/social worker to call the reporter back. As a result there are no callbacks to any reporters (mandated or non-mandated). This process applies to all calls received during business hours and after hours. A call tree was also put in place to assist DHHS-CWS in triaging and assigning Hotline calls during business hours, and there is an on-call team consisting of three social workers who respond to calls after hours. With the changes to the system implemented in February 2017, the department began using an electronic spreadsheet as an interim tracking tool. More recently, the DHHS Information Services (IS) unit developed and implemented call-tracking software to assist social worker screeners in tracking all calls that are received and processed. This procedure ensures that DHHS-CWS provides efficient supervision and oversight in regards to Hotline activity and follow through.

F13. CWS often does not follow up on cases that are "evaluated out."

Agree

Not all reports require family services or interventions. Reports are “evaluated out” when the allegation does not meet criteria to investigate. In fact, there is no legal mechanism that allows DHHS-CWS to be involved with families in this situation.

Instead, DHHS-CWS works with community partners so that families that have been evaluated out can be referred and connected to resources and services. Evaluated-out referrals are tracked in the statewide database Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS).

F14. Humboldt County has an urgent need to improve how it addresses the needs of our American Indian ‘at risk’ children, including a more comprehensive orientation for incoming staff on local American Indian culture.

Disagree partially

DHHS-CWS has made significant efforts to address the needs of American Indian children and has been recognized for these efforts. Most recently, DHHS-CWS contracted with the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) to obtain a systems analysis and review in an effort to identify and address gaps in the system including training for staff. The department is in the process of implementing NICWA’s recommendations.

Additionally, DHHS-CWS has hired local cultural and practice coaches to train staff to work with cultural understanding and family and tribal engagement. DHHS-CWS also requires all CWS staff to participate in a 3-day local Tribal cultural training provided by local Tribal cultural practitioners.

All DHHS-CWS reports are cross-reported to the child’s Tribe to ensure the Tribe is involved in investigations and the development of court-supervised case plans. DHHS-CWS has also worked to identify and obtain additional funding to expand services to American Indian families in Humboldt County. In addition, DHHS-CWS has contracted with Tribal service providers to provide culturally appropriate intervention services.

F15. In the course of our investigation we discovered evidence of a disproportionate number of American Indian children removed from their homes.

Agree

See response for F14. DHHS-CWS leadership will continue to work with Tribal leaders to address the disproportionality and is working to develop services and tools that address historical and generational trauma.

Recommendations

R1. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Office of Education instruct all School District personnel of the importance of filing a written report of allegations after making the initial call or FAX of allegations of abuse or neglect. CWS cannot or will not follow through if a written report is not filed.

Should not be implemented as it is misleading

There is no requirement that school employees or any other reporters file a written report with DHHS-CWS.

With the changes to the system implemented in February 2017, the department began using an electronic spreadsheet as an interim tracking tool. More recently, IS developed and implemented call-tracking software to assist social worker screeners in tracking all calls that are received and processed. This procedure ensures that DHHS-CWS provides efficient supervision and oversight in regards to Hotline activity and follow through.

R5. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Department of Health & Human Services streamline its lengthy hiring process of new Social Workers.

Requires further analysis

DHHS agrees that it would be helpful to streamline the hiring process. However, change would require participation from the union, from Merit Systems and from the county Human Resources Department.

To address the immediate staff shortages, the department will explore ways to recruit applicants for available positions and to retain their current staff.

R6. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Child Welfare Services provide a more in-depth mentoring program for new Social Workers.

Has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future

With feedback from the California Attorney General and assistance from NCCD, the department is revising its policies, procedures, and training programs to ensure staff have access to tools that will help them use SDM tools effectively. The training process will begin in late June and will continue through September. The department expects updated desk guides to be available to staff by the end of 2017. In addition, DHHS-CWS is exploring with staff a revision of the training plan and peer mentoring program.

R7. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Child Welfare Services take immediate steps to fill the many vacancies in their Department.

Has been implemented

DHHS-CWS has taken numerous steps to fill social worker positions. These include continuous recruitment, working with the Humboldt State University Social Work Department, and hiring of social worker I, II, and III's and hiring of the Social Services Aid (SSA) and Vocational Assistant (VA) support positions.

Currently, the unemployment rate in Humboldt County is 3.9 percent. It is difficult to fill vacancies as there are few applicants for the positions. DHHS will continue to work to develop ways to recruit and retain staff.

R8. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Child Welfare Services work closely with the University of California at Davis program for improvement of services.

Will not be implemented

With approval and oversight from the California Attorney General, DHHS-CWS has contracted with NCCD and NICWA to address these issues. DHHS-CWS is also working with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) on strategies to address these areas. It is unnecessary to seek additional assistance from UC Davis.

R9. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Child Welfare Services continue to work with their newly developing task force (not to be confused with the Department of Health and Human Services Blue Ribbon Task Force) to improve relationships with School Districts and Law Enforcement in order to deal more effectively with the problem of ‘at risk’ children within Humboldt County.

Will not be implemented

With assistance from the Attorney General, DHHS will identify an existing multi-agency workgroup that can (1) monitor the County’s implementation of new policies and procedures, and (2) help build collaborative relationships. The department expects this process to be in place by the end of 2017.

R10. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Child Welfare Services leadership continue to work collaboratively with all local American Indian Tribes in both coordinating County services as well as following the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

Recommendations are being implemented

DHHS-CWS contracted with NICWA to undertake a comprehensive systems review and is moving forward on adopting the recommendations from that review. DHHS-CWS will continue to work collaboratively with all local Tribes. DHHS and CWS leadership will continue to meet with local Tribal leadership to coordinate services and get feedback on practice.

R11. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Department of Health and Human Services reexamine all cases within the last five years involving American Indian children who have been removed from their homes, to ensure compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

Recommendations will not be implemented because they are not reasonable

DHHS-CWS contracted with the NICWA in 2015-2016 to do a study to review Tribal cases. DHHS-CWS is currently working to implement the recommendations from that review and has contracted with NICWA to assist them to make changes.

In addition, the California Attorney General has retained the services of NCCD to conduct a comprehensive system review of all Humboldt County Child Welfare cases during the past five years. That investigation is nearing its conclusion and the department fully intends to adopt all of the resulting recommendations.