

✓ CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES System leaving children at risk

Report details erosion of services

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SANTA CRUZ — They're likely to be poor, living with drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness.

Often only fragments of their families remain intact, if ever there were both a mother and father in the home, if there ever was a home.

These are the kids who are chronically at the threshold of neglect or abuse, kids whose families never really stabilize, kids who don't get enough help from social agencies in Santa Cruz County.

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In a report on the state of child welfare services in the nation and county given to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Tuesday, Human Resources Agency Director Will Lightbourne profiled a system which has eroded over the past decade, leaving more and more children at risk.

At the same time the social fabric supporting families has contin-

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ued to fray and shrink. Homeless families, crack babies, the increase in of mentally ill adults and children, teen pregnancies, school dropout rates and the increasing numbers of single parents struggling to cope all have vastly increased the numbers of children needing help, he said.

State programs for the poor, disabled and children have become so constricted that services once available have been degraded or disappeared in the past decade, he said.

Federal support has simultaneously dried up. For example, in the 1970s, welfare and other low income families were routinely given prevention and early intervention services.

In 1980, 36 percent of the county's social workers were deployed in prevention work. Federal funds have now been redirected to the point where "funding for generic social workers has completely disappeared," said Lightbourne.

As part of the retrenchment of the 1980s, anti-poverty programs disappeared. Traditional programs such as school counselors and attendance officers were reduced.

In the onslaught of need, the county's Child Protective Services agency has become crisis driven,

like a SWAT team, or a hospital emergency room, he said.

In the past decade, child abuse referrals have doubled, while the social work staff in Santa Cruz County has increased at half that rate.

As a result, response and investigation of crisis situations now consume 44 percent of the county's social worker's efforts as opposed to 9 percent in 1980.

Lightbourne noted in his report that between 1985 and 1989, the number of children in foster care and group homes in California increased 65 percent to 80,000 and the costs increased by 75 percent to \$800 million.

Locally, the numbers of children entering foster care doubled from 1980 to an average of 250 children in care in 1990.

During the same period, children who receive help through county Family Maintenance Programs to prevent abuse or neglect decreased from 31,600 to 29,800, he said.

In 1990, Santa Cruz County's CPS workers received 4,283 calls, of which 2,087 were responded to with visits by social workers.

Only one-tenth of those cases received help through family maintenance programs designed to remedy family problems. Typically, those cases include sexual abuse, a

substance-abusing mother whose recovery is unstable, or a chronically neglectful or homeless family, he said.

At least 200 families in the county have children repeatedly in need of emergency intervention, Lightbourne reported.

Besides CPS, such chronic cases get help from other agencies such as mental health or schools.

"However, such intervention is usually brief and is insufficient to meet the family's intensive needs," said Lightbourne. The family never really stabilizes and the children are chronically on the threshold of neglect or abuse.

Ideally, Lightbourne said a child welfare system would rest on a foundation of policies to support families, including such things as affordable housing, health care for all, education, employment, parental leave and child care for working parents.

The ideal system would also include programs for pregnant women and mental health services.

"These are controversial areas of public policy but the reality is that the best way to prevent child abuse is to support families," said Lightbourne.

"No single county child welfare system can substitute for the range of preventive and supportive pro-

grams and services that have eroded over the past 10 to 15 years," he added.

Lightbourne called for "public-private" strategies to rebuild and expand the "safety net for children."

The long-range goal would go far beyond the role of CPS, to create a health and social service system which would follow at-risk families from birth through adolescence. Lightbourne pointed to a nationally recognized model in Hawaii called "Healthy Start," which screens all pregnant women for factors that put them at risk, such as poverty, single parents or substance abuse. The Hawaii model is credited with reducing referrals for abuse and neglect from 20 percent to 2 percent.

Besides state and federal funding, the local community must be willing to shoulder part of the responsibility for meeting needs, said Lightbourne.

Services for homeless and runaway youth beyond the crisis intervention stage need to be developed, he said. These youth have few means of securing shelter, food, health care or income and many have drug abuse problems. They don't qualify for foster or group home care, but are beyond parental control.