

# Local

## ✓CF Child Protective Services RP 10/8/91 p.11 New program to help neglected children unveiled

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Although it won't prevent another Ruby Pointer case or the tragic death of a baby in foster care, Santa Cruz County officials hope neglected kids will get a boost from a group of volunteers.

It took the two highly publicized cases this summer to galvanize Santa Cruz County officials, judges, social workers and volunteers to examine afresh the way the "system" handles the county's 300 annual cases involving abused or neglected children.

The child-welfare system was

minutely examined by the state Department of Social Services, the county Grand Jury, several county advisory committees and commissions, a group of psychologists and psychiatrists who work with children, and the county's Human Services Agency — the department that runs the Child Protective Services agency.

The studies concluded that the children, who are not criminals or delinquents, can find themselves enmeshed in a bewildering system of legal maneuvers without anyone to speak for them, to voice their hopes and desires, or to fight for their best interests.

The county wants to form a corps of volunteers — Court-Appointed Special Advocates — who will befriend the neglected and abused children and, in time, speak for them when their fate is decided by a juvenile court judge.

The concept was unveiled yesterday afternoon on the steps of the Santa Cruz County Courthouse by a plethora of officials, social workers and volunteers.

"The advocates will not be the solution to all the problems of these kids but they will be a wonderful step toward helping them

along the path," said Superior Court Judge Tom Black, who is also the presiding Juvenile Court Judge.

Modeled after highly successful programs in Santa Clara, San Mateo, Marin and San Bernardino counties, the CASA program recruits volunteers, who are appointed by the juvenile court, to work directly with the children. They serve for weeks, months or even years while a case wends its way through the courts.

Fred Keeley, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors, said program organizers' goal is to at-

tract enough public interest that the program will be supported by donations from individuals, foundations and corporations.

The Santa Cruz County Community Foundation has already promised \$5,000 in start-up money, Keeley said.

Nora Manchester, who runs the CASA program in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, said it costs about \$500 per child to operate the program in those two counties.

Keeley conceded under questioning that the CASA program would not have prevented the Ruby Pointer care or the baby

death this summer. Those types of cases will be addressed by other changes being made in the day-to-day operations of the county's Child Protective Services, he said.

The CASA advocates don't become active in a case until they are assigned by the Juvenile Court system, long after a social worker intervenes in a poor-home or abuse case.

The advocate, said Diane Siri, the county superintendent of schools, makes sure a child's needs are met by the child-welfare system.