

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES SJM 7-17-91 1B

Program for abused children advocated

By Paul Rogers
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A widely acclaimed child advocacy program that provides independent monitors to follow the cases of abused children and protect their rights during court proceedings is long overdue in Santa Cruz County, supporters say.

Because of opposition from local child welfare administrators — in particular Child Protective Services director Janet Reed — Santa Cruz is the only county in the Bay Area without a child advocacy program. However, amid increasing calls for reform following the Ruby Pointer child-neglect case, the idea is getting renewed attention.

Reed has argued that Santa Cruz doesn't need a child advocates program, and that creating one could

Pointer case brings calls for reform in Santa Cruz County

sap resources from other areas of Child Protective Services.

"I have a really hard time with that," said Shelly Kidwell, a Felton mother who has volunteered as a children's advocate in Santa Clara County for two years.

"She doesn't want to admit that her department needs additional help," Kidwell said. "But the system is so overburdened."

The privately funded programs, most of which are members of a national non-profit network known as

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), in many cases provide the only independent liaison between county social workers, judges and abused children.

"We're the voice of the child for the judge," Kidwell said. "Advocates get to know the kids and fight for what really is best for them."

A year ago, Santa Cruz Superior Court Judge Bill Kelsay held a meeting to investigate creating a similar program in Santa Cruz. According to participants, the idea was dismissed as unnecessary by CPS director Reed during the meeting.

Contacted this week, Reed said she is not fundamentally opposed to child advocates, but believes Santa Cruz should spend its money on other areas of the child welfare system, such as abuse prevention and early intervention.

Under most advocate programs, a trained volunteer meets with an abused child on a weekly basis after the youth enters the juvenile court system. After becoming acquainted with parents, teachers and doctors, the volunteer listens to the child's concerns and makes recommendations to the judge responsible for determining his or her future.

Volunteers can often spend more time with individual children than government social workers who may be juggling dozens of cases a month.

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Support grows for plan to help abused children

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The program would not have directly affected Pointer's three girls — ages 2, 4 and 6 — because until a month ago, social workers had not removed them from their house. On June 19, the girls were found living in filth and unable to speak. Pointer remains jailed on felony child endangerment charges.

According to Kidwell, an advocate program could better represent the girls during juvenile custody hearings. It also could have freed up social workers' time earlier, possibly enabling them to follow up on complaints from Pointer's neighbors months ago, she said.

The program exists in 14 California counties and more than 300 counties nationwide.

In San Jose, Child Advocates Inc. has operated since 1986, training 386 volunteers and intervening on behalf of more than 400 children. Last November, the program was awarded a "Point of Light" commendation from President Bush.

Although advocate programs are funded primarily with private grants and donations rather than tax money, Reed said she worried that most grants only last a year or two, and a program could come begging for county handouts down the line.

"It's probably not the wisest policy," Reed said. "After the grants go away, eventually it becomes a county program."

But according to Reed's counterpart in San Jose, Santa Clara County's child advocacy program has not become a county burden.

"To the best of my recollection, they have never asked us for any money," said Jim Fare, director of Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children's Services.

Fare said the program receives no money from the child welfare budget. According to its records, the program operates on an annual budget of \$236,000 — \$50,000 of which comes from Santa Clara County's juvenile court system and the rest from private donations.

At first, San Jose social workers were suspicious of outsiders entering their turf, Fare said. But "once relationships got established, positive things began to happen."

The advocacy idea is included among recommendations in a petition being circulated by Sherry Sheard, a Ben Lomond woman who phoned Santa Cruz social workers repeatedly for four years with concerns about Ruby Pointer.

The idea has gained momentum this week with the endorsement of Judge Kelsay and County Human Resources administrator Will Lightbourne.