

# State: Local CPS not overworked

By ROBIN MUSITELLI  
Sentinel staff writer

8-3-91

SANTA CRUZ — Child Protective Services in Santa Cruz County is not understaffed and overworked compared to the state average, according to Loren Suter, deputy director of the state Department of Social Services.

Refuting claims that a heavy case load led to missed deadlines in the Ruby Pointer child neglect case, Suter raised the possibility that the way cases are assigned priority was a more likely culprit in the mishandling of the Pointer case.

Suter was responding Friday to a defense given by Will Lightbourne, director of the county Human Re-

sources Agency, regarding how the agency handled the Pointer case.

Lightbourne said he has asked his staff to review Suter's statements and findings.

A state investigation ordered by Suter found that local CPS social workers failed to make required in-person evaluations of the Pointer family as required by state regulations. It also took seven weeks instead of the state-mandated five days to move the case from "emergency" program to the follow-up "family maintenance" program, both within CPS.

During that time, Pointer's three children, ages 2, 4 and 6, were living in filth and Pointer's mental

*Please see CPS — A12*

## CPS

### *Continued from Page A1*

condition continued to deteriorate. The children, described as almost feral and unable to speak, were taken from the home by Santa Cruz police on June 19 and Pointer, a chronic schizophrenia, has been declared mentally incompetent to stand trial. The case drew state scrutiny after neighbors charged they had repeatedly called CPS, but their warnings were unheeded.

Lightbourne and CPS Director Janet Reed said 14 new cases assigned to the full-time and part-time social worker in the follow-up program had overwhelmed the department. The higher risk cases took priority, they said.

Suter said that shouldn't have happened. Local CPS social workers had an average case load of 27. "This is well below the state case load standard of 35" per worker, said Suter.

"It seems evident that there were additional factors which may account for the seven-week delay

which occurred," said Suter. "We feel the prioritization process itself may have played a role in this unfortunate delay."

Suter also said a letter sent to Pointer regarding proper supervision of her children was not a substitute for an in-person evaluation. Even if the case was given a "relatively low priority, that does not change the fact that an in-person response should have been made," he said.

Suter noted that the state has moved a scheduled audit of the department up from November to later this summer. The three-week audit will determine if the shortcomings evident in the handling of the Pointer case are "specific to this case or symptomatic of countywide problems which need to be resolved," said Suter.

Lightbourne said the audit would provide valuable insight into how well the Child Protective Services work, even if shortcomings are noted. "Either way, it's information I want," he said.