

SJM 6/13/92 BL

GRAND JURY

Grand jury: Santa Cruz County child welfare better

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
AND PAUL ROGERS
Mercury News Staff Writers

One year after the infamous Ruby Pointer child neglect case exposed significant failures in the Santa Cruz County child welfare



Pointer

system, many problems have been corrected, but work remains to be done. So concluded the Santa Cruz County grand jury in the results of a year-long investigation made public Friday as part of the group's 1991-'92 report.

"The wake-up call has been sounded," wrote the grand jury.

Pointer was arrested at her townhouse June 19, 1991. A police officer responding to a noise complaint found her three young daughters hiding in piles of garbage and unable to communicate beyond grunts.

The agency has hired three new social workers.

Public outrage ensued. State investigators concluded that social workers ignored neighbors' complaints and should have responded earlier, especially since Pointer had been convicted of nearly starving to death two sons a decade before.

The grand jury report noted that the agency's files, described last October as "haphazard" binders of loose paper and personal notes, have been replaced by color-coded forms, new filing cabinets and a system that contains records of family history and strict time lines for action.

"The sorts of weaknesses that led to Ruby Pointer have been averted," said Will Lightbourne,

county human resources director. "We're working toward other things now."

In addition, the agency has hired three new social workers to ease case loads, an analyst to review records, and a new program manager for better overall coordination.

But the report noted that it still needs to provide better training for teachers, day care workers, and doctors about reporting child abuse. And the agency should provide written responses after concerned citizens report abuse, to show the system has listened, the report recommended.

In perhaps the biggest disappointment, the report noted that a much-praised Court Appointed Special Advocates program for children "is still struggling to get off the ground."

The grand jury also addressed 31 other controversial issues in Santa Cruz County.

The Pajaro Valley Unified School District — its administra-

tors and its trustees — came in for criticism.

The school district, according to the report, suffers "from many crises: a budget deficit, low employee morale and a lack of public confidence." These "pose a threat to the district's commitment to improve classroom instruction."

Trustees "have been politically divided and lacking the skills to resolve their legitimate differences," according to the grand jury, and have adopted confusing, inaccurate budget documents.

Grand jurors also took county planners to task for unwieldy procedures in issuing permits to mountain dwellers wishing to repair or rebuild homes damaged by the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Geological hazard reports required by planners "had the effect of essentially preventing repair and rebuilding" until policies were changed, according to the grand jury report.