

Grand Jury urges reforms in child services

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Children are sometimes left in homes where they could be abused or neglected because social workers are reluctant to break up the family and don't see a better alternative, the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury said in a report yesterday.

The county's Child Protective Services Agency "generally functions as intended," but needs to review evaluation procedures, reduce staff turnover and improve "haphazard" record-keeping, said the report, prepared by the 19-member jury that took office in July.

The report does not cite specific cases, but it was prompted by the case of Ruby Pointer, the woman arrested in June when police found her living in squalid conditions with her three small daughters, who were unable to speak. Pointer was convicted of child neglect nine years ago and successfully fought a court order barring her from having more children.

Pointer's case attracted widespread attention, and questions and criticism of Child Protective Services. CPS drew more criticism in August when a week-old baby, Cedric Blan, died when he was left in a closed van at a Felton foster home.

Grand Jury forewoman Linda Gilcrest emphasized that the investigation was of the entire CPS operation, and not just the Blan and Pointer cases. She said jurors did not blame CPS for the Blan death.

The investigation showed CPS "handles a lot of cases so well" but botched the Pointer case, Gilcrest said. She said the Grand Jury put out an interim report to draw attention to the CPS issue, rather than burying it in its annual report.

Grand jurors, who reviewed more than 100 cases, said CPS workers sometimes leave a child in a risky situation because there

is confusion between state standards for preserving family unity and "perceived community standards for removing children from the home." CPS should seek recommendations from agencies that deal with children on what the standards should be, jurors recommended.

Children are also left in risky situations because there is a lack of foster care and intensive home-support services, jurors said.

The county received a grant for such home-support services last year, but state funding was cut and the program has not been implemented, county Human Resources Agency Administrator Will Lightbourne said in a prepared response to the Grand Jury report.

Lightbourne said CPS expects to get funding by the 1992-93 fiscal year. The county now contracts with the Parents Center, a non-profit agency, for "many of the services suggested by the Grand Jury," Lightbourne said.

Lack of in-home services is "one of the major shortcomings in the child-welfare system nationally," Lightbourne said. Although his agency expects to make recommendations to improve the situation, major policy changes and funding are needed from the state and federal governments for substantial change, Lightbourne said.

CPS has been hampered by a 50 percent turnover rate in the last year and does not have a pool of part-time social workers to fill in, the Grand Jury said.

Lightbourne acknowledged the turnover rate has been a problem, and said he will address the issue in a report to county supervisors next week. Gail Groves, public information officer for CPS, said it is hard to find trained social workers who are available for part-time work.

The CPS workload has increased dramatically as reporting laws and public awareness of child abuse have changed, the Grand Jury said. The CPS case load rose from 2,993 in 1987 to 4,268 this year, while foster-care placements rose from 93 to 161. CPS has 30 social workers.

Grand jurors said CPS has begun to address the problem of haphazard record-keeping, but has not rectified the situation.

CPS "should flag high-risk cases for prominent visibility" said the report in an apparent reference to the Pointer case.