

# Child Abuse Working on the system

The Sentinel today begins a look at how local agencies are trying to protect the victims of child abuse or neglect; and about how divorced parents are now having to face up to what can happen to their children.

Monday, the Sentinel looks at how one local program is trying to stop the cycle of child abuse by treating child molesters, plus reports on how plans to give children an advocate in the labyrinths of local government have failed to get off the ground.

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**T**HE SHOCK of what happened to Ruby Pointer's children was not just the neglect.

The shock was: "How?"

How could a system designed to protect children fail the three young girls so badly?

At the ages of 2, 4, and 6, they were found filthy, unable to speak beyond grunts, virtually feral.

Almost 10 months after her children were taken from Pointer, who had a history of mental illness and child neglect, many of the answers to "how" have been translated into changes in the county's child welfare system.

"The Pointer case was the catalyst," said Graham Wright, executive director of Future Families, a Santa Cruz agency that specializes in early intervention and prevention for children who are at risk. "A fire got lit."

Among the changes precipitated

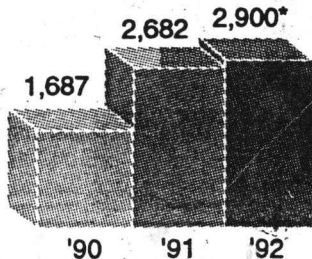
## Protecting the



Could the Pointer case happen today?

## Child abuse on the rise

Cases of abused or neglected children in Santa Cruz County.



\*projected

Source: Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency

# Child abuse and the system

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by the plight of Pointer's children:

- A child sexual-abuse investigation team is likely.

- Volunteers are being used more in the child welfare system to augment government services.

- The judicial process, when it involves children, is being streamlined.

- The Santa Cruz Coalition for the Protection of Children was started, professionals who have pressed for mandatory educational requirements for those who provide child victim services.

- More social workers and a case manager for the county's Child Protective Services were hired.

The press for reform has been led by the Coalition for the Protection of Children, professionals who work with children. The coalition formed last August in the wake of the Pointer case.

Since then, coalition members have mapped the complex labyrinths of the child-welfare system and compiled long lists of gaps in services for children.

Damning the current system, coalition members said among the most urgently needed reform was how sexual abuse cases are investigated.

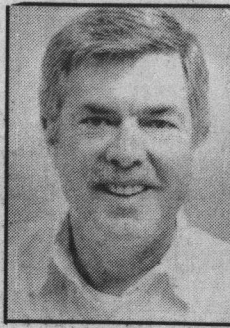
The cases are "inadequately investigated" and managed, charged Hila Michaelsen, chairwoman of the Santa Cruz Area Licensed Clinical Social Work Society in a letter to the Board of Supervisors last fall. "We have repeatedly worked with children where sexual abuse has been substantiated, yet the current system has not been able to protect them from further abuse," she said.

Mismanagement of the cases has resulted "not only in re-abuse of the children who have already entered the system, but also in psychological trauma and excessive court costs related to legal, expert witness and therapy costs."

Since sending the letter, members divided into study committees to work on solving the problems.

Investigation of child-abuse cases currently involves multiple interviews of children, with CPS and law enforcement officers conducting them separately.

It is extremely difficult for many children to tell their story at said Dan Reid, a clinical social



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— Dan Reid, clinical social worker

worker and a key person in the coalition. "Once told, they don't want to tell it to a second separate person. They think, 'Didn't this person believe me?'"

"Kids get real chewed up in it," said Jon Girvetz, a Santa Cruz psychologist. "The process of investigation can be real traumatic, even surpassing the incident."

The team, as proposed by the coalition, would include CPS and law enforcement officials who would collaborate interviewing children using specific protocol.

The proposal has been endorsed by District Attorney Art Danner as a way to minimize the number of interviews and to improve prosecution of child-abuse cases by ensuring that the questioning is done properly.

"Those interviews can be the deciding factor," in swinging a jury verdict, said Danner.

Joint investigation has been done to a limited extent, said Danner. The new protocol, to be presented at a meeting of police chiefs this week, would expand joint investigations to all child abuse cases, with city police working with sheriff's deputies. "It's well within our grasp," said Danner.

While that's a good start, Reid said he would eventually like the sexual-abuse investigation team to have countywide jurisdiction and to include attorneys, counselors and other specialists, all of whom are trained in child development.

The team should also have separate quarters, where children can be interviewed and counseled under one roof, instead of going from one agency to another, said Reid.

Increasing use of volunteers to plug gaps in services left by the erosion of public funding consti-

tutes another major reform platform by coalition members.

Using volunteers is a ticklish subject legally, since child abuse and neglect cases are confidential and highly volatile, and could expose volunteers to liability, said Wright. Nevertheless, Wright said volunteers could help prevent neglect by helping parents on the edge.

A stressed-out, mentally ill single mother with two children from belting her children, said Wright. A volunteer could babysit.

"Transportation and babysitting are probably the main issues," said Wright.

Wright has suggested a pilot program to link church members with families through CPS referrals. "What we're looking at on this point are the big issues of confidentiality, liability, and training for that kind of volunteer pool," said Wright.

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In the Pointer case, the bank could have provided a physical assessment of the children, or an independent therapists' evaluation of the risks the children faced, said Wright.

## Volunteers could help

**T**HE MOST widely-touted effort, post-Pointer, has been CASA, the Court-Appointed Special Advocate program. Attorneys, therapists, judges, and supervisors lined up to support the program, which uses volunteers to bird-dog cases and advocate for children when they become part of the legal system.

CASA is a nationwide program that, because of funding problems, is not yet off the ground locally.

Volunteers for the Santa Cruz CASA program are expected to begin training in October, according to Jane Stevens, president of the local CASA board of directors.

To help quickly resolve cases involving children through the courts, Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Bill Kelsay has proposed addition of family court services, perhaps next year if funding is available.

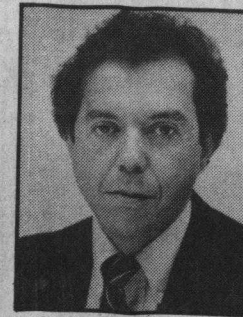
Family court therapists would be available to help evaluate cases, such as those where custody is disputed, when "there are declarations on both sides criticizing each other and each other's parenting."

"I have a difficult time figuring out what to do on the spot," said Kelsay. "A clinician down the hall privately (talking to the parties) might better assess the situation and make a quick recommendation," pending a more in-depth evaluation, he said.

That person could also provide an answer to another criticism from coalition members: lack of case management.

"In the absence of a case manager, roles become blurred and unclear. There is confusion as to who has responsibility for what and what the lines of communication should be," said Michaelsen to the supervisors.

Kelsay's answer: "If family court services are part of a family court, I could have a clinician case manage a particular file. Otherwise, cases get lost."



**'... we have to rebuild. Now it's a matter of rewinning the community's confidence'**

— Will Lightbourne, county HSA administrator

Attorneys appointed to represent children sometimes have little, if any experience working with children, Michaelsen told supervisors. They often, too, lack expertise in child-abuse allegations, she said.

For all professionals who investigate or evaluate children, including attorneys, coalition members have proposed minimum qualifications be required.

Reid said this goal remains unfulfilled. "Really, nothing has come out of that at this point," he said, adding that the coalition will continue to press for educational requirements and qualifications.

## Tremors at CPS

**I**N CPS OFFICES, the Pointer case was the equivalent of an earthquake. It was Child Protective Services that took calls from neighbors and others about the welfare of the Pointer kids. While the case languished between divisions within CPS, the Pointer family's situation deteriorated into desperation.

The aftershocks included a review of CPS by the Santa Cruz County Citizens Grand Jury, the state Department of Social Services

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and the county Juvenile Justice Commission.

As a result, CPS has changed the way cases are handled internally and has changed its "culture," said Will Lightbourne, administrator of the county Health Services Agency. CPS is under that agency's umbrella.

CPS was criticized by grand jurors for lacking a standard method of evaluating whether a case constituted an emergency. That's changed. A risk assessment checklist is in place, said Lightbourne. "We should not be getting significant differences in judgment calls," said Lightbourne.

At the end of January, out of the blue, a surge of emergency cases hit CPS, setting up conditions similar to those in place when the Pointer case languished, said Lightbourne.

"It was the first test of whether we have a system that works," said Lightbourne. Unlike last year, however, staff was shuffled, a case manager shepherded cases, and cases were prioritized using the evaluation checklist.

Review of the department's systems will be ongoing, said Lightbourne. Otherwise, "if we do a fix, it's a one-time thing and we're frozen again."

Lightbourne acknowledges it will take "months, years" to restore the credibility lost in the Pointer case.

"The goal for the long haul is we have to rebuild. Now it's a matter of rewinning the community's confidence."

Could the Pointer case happen today? "It couldn't happen that way," says Lightbourne. Hopefully, not at all. But, he adds, absolute protection of children is "not a field you can ever feel completely confident in."