

June 7, 2006

Honorable Nancy Wieben Stock
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Dear Judge Stock:

RE: Response and recommendations to "Improving Child Abuse Response."

The Orange County Grand Jury produced a report entitled, "Improving Child Abuse Response." In the Grand Jury report, the La Palma Police Department was specifically requested, pursuant to Penal Code 933.05(a) and (b), to respond to two findings (findings 6.2 and 6.3) and two recommendations (recommendations 7.1 and 7.2). Below are the responses to the findings and recommendations mentioned in the Grand Jury report.

FINDINGS:

- *Expansion of the enhanced protocol is planned. Once social worker capacity is increased, SSA will propose to expand the use of protocol to La Palma (Finding 6.2).*
- *Law Enforcement agency procedures and training on child abuse response: OCSD and other law enforcement agencies that have not been approached by SSA on the enhanced protocol, have not included protocol in their procedures nor trained its officers of its use (Finding 6.3).*

RESPONSE: (For both Findings 6.2 and 6.3)

Currently, the La Palma Police Department has a Policy (Number 330) which describes how officers are to report and respond to suspected child abuse. The policy provides guidelines and procedures for reporting suspected child abuse and the taking of minors into protective custody, if necessary. The policy states that a child may be taken into protective custody if they are the victim of suspected child abuse. The policy does not give "in field" options for placement of the child or children, leaving Oranewood as the only option.

The La Palma Police Department would welcome an enhanced protocol for improving the way we respond to victims of child abuse. To develop a working relationship with a Social Worker specifically assigned to our city would be a benefit and an added resource when dealing with potentially difficult and complex child abuse investigations.

RECOMMENDATION:

- *Law enforcement agency acceptance of SSA Field Response Protocol: All Orange County law enforcement agencies should consider agreeing to the SSA enhanced protocol as social worker capacity is increased to support law enforcement needs (Recommendation 7.1)*

RESPONSE:

The La Palma Police Department has received a draft of the Field Response Protocol, tailored specifically to the City of La Palma. A formalized agreement between the La Palma Police Department and Orange County Social Services to implement the Field Response Protocol will be in place on August 1, 2006. During February of 2007, members from the La Palma Police Department and Orange County Social Services will conduct an assessment of the protocol, for analysis and modifications as needed. A copy of the agreement is attached.

RECOMMENDATION:

- *Law enforcement training on the enhanced protocol: After a law enforcement agency agrees to the protocol, it should become part of the agency's procedure and line officers should be trained on the revised procedure (Recommendation 7.2).*

RESPONSE:

Internal training of all officers and communications personnel will be conducted during briefings. The protocol will be reviewed and explained during briefing training, advising all personnel the protocol will become our policy effective August 1, 2006. The anticipated completion of training La Palma Police personnel is July 28, 2006, prior to August 1, 2006 when the formalized agreement is in place.

Respectfully submitted,

Edward O. Ethell
CHIEF OF POLICE

Field Response Protocol
for the protection of children



A collaborative project of the
ORANGE COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY
and the
LA PALMA POLICE DEPARTMENT

June 2006

Objective

Reduce the number of protective custody placements at Orangewood to reduce potential trauma to children and to expedite the process of alternative placement where appropriate.

Providing for the welfare and protection of children is the fundamental responsibility and the mutual concern of the La Palma Police Department and the Orange County Social Services Agency. Together, the agencies are responding to the needs of children exposed to a wide variety of actual or threatened harm arising from domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, abandonment, exploitation and others actions that place children at risk.

The number of children requiring rapid response and protection is staggering and represents a significant threat to community wellness. Consider the following:

- The Child Abuse Registry receives over 27,000 reports of suspected child abuse annually. This includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse, caregiver incapacity, neglect, abandonment and exploitation of children
- Orangewood Children's Home and Emergency Shelter Foster Homes provide temporary shelter for over 2,571 victimized children per year
- On an average, 3,600 children in Orange County are in out-of-home care receiving family reunification or permanent placement services monthly, approximately 35% reside in homes with relatives, 37% reside in licensed foster homes and 18% are in group homes

One of the basic obligations of police and social workers is to ensure a child is not left in an environment that poses a risk of harm. Sadly, this often includes removing a child from his or her own home. Although removing a child from home is often the best decision for the long-term well-being of the child, it does not mean a child will not be negatively affected or even traumatized by the event. Children, even those suffering from abuse, have strong emotional ties to their family and home and the destabilizing effect of being taken from familiar surroundings should not be overlooked.

The traditional police response that required taking a child into protective custody included lodging the child at the Orangewood Children's Home. Operated by Social Services, Orangewood is nearly always at capacity and is subject to mandates that limit both placement and the amount of time a child can remain at the facility. Frequently, Orangewood staff must work quickly and under pressure to identify other placement alternatives for children taken to the facility by police.

Although alternative placements are quickly made where appropriate, they nevertheless expose the child to a potentially frightening and confusing process of being taken from their home by strangers via a process they are unlikely to understand. A better practice is one where placement alternatives are explored in the field and community placement with extended family or other less formal options are utilized where appropriate.

Strategy

Utilize a rapid response process that brings social workers to the police officer in the field for a mutual exploration of placement alternatives.

The La Palma Police Department and the Orange County Social Services Agency agree to collaborate on a pilot project to determine the effectiveness of a field assessment procedure to minimize the number of formal placements at the Orangewood Children's Home. A protocol has been developed to streamline the process of identifying placement alternatives for children requiring protective custody.

- This protocol is in effect from Monday to Friday, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. (after hours are handled per current practice)
- As soon as an officer is faced with a situation that may lead to the removal of a child from his/her home, the officer will call the CAR Police Response Line (714-679-7765) and request a SSW to participate in a joint assessment. The officer should provide the following basic information:
 - Name of officer
 - Address where to meet the officer
 - Officer's call back number
 - Name of child(ren), gender and age
 - Name of parents and DOB if known
 - Language need

If more details are known at the time of the initial call, the officer should also provide this information to assist in the creation of a child abuse report.

- Staff covering the CAR Police Response Line will provide this information immediately to the ER Services Coordinator, Backup OD or On-Call Supervisor for assignment and determination of ETA for the ER social worker to arrive at the given address.
- Staff covering the CAR Police Response Line will contact the officer back and provide the name of the assigned social worker and an ETA.
- A 30-minute or less response time is the goal of the program and officers shall wait this period for the social worker to arrive. If this time frame cannot be met, the officer will be provided with an ETA. The officer decides whether he/she will wait or will advise SSA and transport the child (ren) to the First Step Assessment Center at Orangewood. The assigned ER social worker will then proceed to First Step to coordinate placement options.
- If the officer can wait for the social worker, a joint assessment will be conducted in the field to determine if the child (ren) can remain in the home safely or a community placement can be identified.
- If necessary, the Child Abuse Report will be generated by the ER social worker after conducting the joint assessment with the police officer.

- If the child (ren) need to be placed into protective custody, the responding social worker completes the Application for Petition (Blue Apps.) and the officer signs it.

Program Advantages to law enforcement

The responding social worker provides a number of advantages to the patrol officer starting with the initial call for assistance, which also serves as the initial notification to the Child Abuse Registry, thus eliminating the need for an additional call to comply with the legal mandate requiring telephonic reporting of a suspected child abuse incident. Other advantages include:

- A one-number, central point of contact to request a social worker for field assessment (714-679-7765)
- The contact number is a priority number that advances the officer's call to the front of the line
- A target response time of 30-minutes or less
- The responding social worker completes the Application for Petition (Blue Apps.) and other required paperwork as necessary.
- Assistance with the evaluation of alternative placement options, social service records, on-site interviews and other tasks designed to determine the best course of action when assessing the need for protective custody or community placement.

Implementation Plan

- Formalize agreement between LPPD and Orange County Social Services to implement Field Response Protocol as a pilot project with a target date of August 1, 2006
- By July 28, 2006, provide briefing training for officers at LPPD and advise Patrol and Dispatch that effective August 1, 2006, this protocol will be followed
- Monitor program effectiveness for 90-days and if necessary convene a meeting of LPPD and CPS representatives for analysis and modification as needed
- Conduct a six-month assessment of the protocol efficacy with LPPD and CPS staff
- Modify LPPD's policy to reflect final program protocols and adopt as standard operating procedure

Summary

When a police officer conducts an investigation that may involve the need to take a child into protective custody, the officer requests a social worker to assist with a field placement assessment. This real-time collaborative effort should reduce the number of formal placements at Orangewood by instead placing children in alternative custody with family members and/or alternate locations. This results in a less stressful and traumatic event for the children involved, while streamlining the investigative and reporting process for officers and social workers.