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HEADLINE: Turning the agency around;
New team winning praise from one-time critics, staff

BYLINE: Dion Nissenbaum, The Press-Enterprise

BODY:

RIVERSIDE

Help Wanted: Growing Southern California county seeks proven leader to turn child protection agency around in short order. Staff morale low. Public criticism high. Must be willing to implement more than 100 changes called for by an outside review of our operation.

Faint of heart need not apply. Contact: Dennis Boyle, director, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services.

That wasn't the ad Jerry Rose answered in 1996, but it was the reality he faced when he was tapped to oversee an overhaul of the county's Child Protective Services.

In the 17 months since he became assistant director of the county Department of Public Social Services, Rose has worked with Boyle to implement sweeping changes that have won praise from county supervisors, former critics and staff.

Supervisor Tom Mullen, who has led the Board of Supervisors committee charged with overseeing protective service's efforts, said he has been pleased with the progress and direction the agency has taken since it was hit with the scathing 1996 Child Welfare League of America reports.

"Everybody truly acting as one is driving toward progress so in that sense I and the board couldn't be more pleased and more grateful," Mullen said. "I think what we are striving for is

progress and we'll never reach perfection, but we have got to constantly move towards progress and I believe we are doing that. "

One major initiative has been decentralization. Last fall, the department created six new regions in Riverside County, appointed new managers, and shuffled staff around to create more comprehensive services in each area.

Despite the upheaval, most staff came away pleased with their new assignments.

Significant wrinkles still remain to be ironed out. Some regions have found themselves with higher caseloads than others, and the agency is still trying to find a building to house the Perris staff.

Agency leaders have also been trying to establish closer links with nonprofit organizations, schools and other groups that regularly deal with children.

The overall goal, Boyle said, is to create a more community-based child protection system.

"When you've got everybody involved and the community is looking after the safety of kids, that's when kids are going to be safer," Boyle said. "Not just because a social worker knows better how to do their job. "

Many social workers offered everything from measured praise to strong support for Rose and Boyle. Several said they have been cautiously optimistic about the open-door, speak-your-mind policies adopted by the two administrators.

"There's more of a dialogue going on rather than a monologue," said Paul Gaines, a social worker and union representative for the staff. "There's a lot of good intentions out there, but as far as follow-through, that's what we're concerned about. "

The bottom line for most social workers, though, is caseloads.

In that regard, despite a concerted effort to hire more staff, many veteran social workers say they are still carrying more cases than they can handle.

Even Rose admits that high-caseloads make it difficult for social workers to do quality work.

"If you're a worker and you're carrying well over the caseload standard and (we're) expecting you to do the same as someone who's at standard, that's not fair," Rose said.

In other areas, Boyle and Rose have both been working to improve their department's relationships with Juvenile Court and law

enforcement. The agency has crafted new guidelines for dealing with police and prosecutors. Communication between social workers and the court has also improved, Boyle said.

A major component of the ongoing effort has been a reorganization committee that has brought together social workers, supervisors and managers to implement various proposals from the Child Welfare League.

The group crafted a variety of paper changes for the department, including new mission and vision statements that highlight the broad goals of Child Protective Services.

While such efforts may not have a direct impact on the lives of children, Rose said they are part of a cultural shift in the agency.

"The process that we went through was almost more important than the product," Rose said.

NOTES:

Sidebar to "Troubled road to recovery"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO [Caption] Greg Vojtko; The Press-Enterprise; The two men who have reorganized Child Protective Services are Jerry Rose, left, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services assistant director, and Dennis Boyle, the department's director. Rose joined the department in 1996.

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