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Chief orders look into abuse reports

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**BODY:**

The head of Riverside County's social services agency said Tuesday he was surprised to learn that some child abuse reports were closed without investigation and he directed his staff to abandon that practice.

Dennis Boyle, director of the Department of Public Social Services, said all staff should follow existing policy and check all child abuse reports accepted by the agency for investigation before closing a case.

Boyle decided to reaffirm the policy after reports in The Press-Enterprise said that one of his supervisors had decided not to send out a social worker to check on two separate child abuse cases in the past year.

In one instance, the child - 18-month-old Ashley Payne - later died and was only seen by a social worker after being hospitalized with what investigators say was a fatal beating.

"Cases should not be closed simply because time has gone by," Boyle said.

The supervisor decided to close the two cases because he thought social workers in his department had let too much time go by without checking out the abuse reports. It would be unfair to the families to look into allegations that were several months old, he concluded.

On the Payne case, the supervisor closed the file after being told by a social worker that the agency had received only one anonymous abuse report that was three months old.

In fact, the agency had received five other abuse reports over three months that the social worker had failed to find in a computer check. Two days after the case was closed, Payne was hospitalized with severe injuries and later died.

Child Protective Services is still investigating the Payne case, but has already changed computer procedures and training to make sure social workers check all documented abuse reports.

Social worker Paul Gaines said the agency should conduct a larger internal investigation and, if necessary, discipline staff who have made mistakes.

"If you have these people that are problematic, then the department needs to take action," Gaines said.

There was no evidence that the practice of closing cases without sending out a social worker was widespread, Boyle said, but he wanted to make sure department policy is followed by all staff.

The three-part series was the result of an invitation from Boyle to take an inside look at Child Protective Services. Normally, child abuse cases are confidential and social workers are not allowed to discuss their work.

Boyle allowed the newspaper to follow cases through the system and speak with staff, parents and children in an effort to increase public awareness about child abuse and child protection.

The series allowed the public to see both the problems facing the agency and the efforts it has made to create safe homes for kids, Boyle said.

"Where there were problems, we were already working on solutions," Boyle said.

Several county supervisors expressed confidence in Boyle and Jerry Rose, the assistant director in charge of Child Protective Services.

Supervisor John Tavaglione said the two administrators have done a good job in trying to address a critical 1996 report by the Child Welfare League of America. Two years ago, the nonprofit agency concluded that county Child Protective Services was overloaded with cases and created an "illusion of safety" for kids.

"There's some great challenges ahead," Tavaglione said. "They have a difficult mission to fulfill, but all in all I think they're

making great strides in dealing with the recommendations made a few years ago. "

Since the Child Welfare League report came out, Child Protective Services has beefed up staff, but caseloads for many social workers are still on the rise. Because the agency put an emphasis on hiring new social workers to investigate the first reports of abuse, staff who work longer terms with kids have seen their caseloads rise.

Boyle said he is proud of the social workers and foster parents who deal with troubled children trying to escape abuse.

Several foster parents said they were troubled by the story of J.B., an 8-year-old-boy who social workers say was physically abused in two separate Riverside County foster homes and then sexually molested in a group home.

The majority of foster parents are trying to make a difference in the lives of abused children and would never harm someone in their care, said Lin Smith, president of the Riverside County Shelter Parents Association.

"I don't want a parent to be afraid because they've made a mistake that they're going to have to worry about their child," Smith said.

At any one time, about 600 homes in Riverside County are licensed to take in abused children, but the demands far outstrip the needs, said Barbara Norton, a supervisor who oversees foster homes.

Kathy Thompson, a Wildomar foster mother who has adopted two children and still looks after abused children in the county, agreed.

"We desperately, desperately need good foster parents," she said.

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