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HEADLINE: Troubled road to recovery;
The death of little Ashley Payne spotlights the problems of a child protection agency trying to rebound from a critical 1996 report.

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BODY:

Had Ashley Payne lived long enough to form a sentence, she might have spoken volumes about problems in Riverside County's child protection agency.

The fact that she didn't tells even more.

Six times in three months, concerned residents called Child Protective Services to report possible abuse of the infant. Bite marks. Bruises. Drug use in the home.

But it wasn't until Christmas Eve, when the seventh hot-line call came from Loma Linda University Medical Center, where Ashley lay badly bruised and unconscious, that the social worker checked on her well-being. By then, 106 days had gone by without any social work to help Ashley.

Four weeks later, 18-month-old Ashley Payne was dead, and the social service agency stood accused even by some of its own of standing by and letting it happen.

To social workers, the little girl's death was a painful reminder of how easily something can go wrong in a system overloaded with more reports of child abuse than they can investigate.

For Child Protective Services, the case cast a tragic spotlight on a struggling two-year effort that was supposed to make it easier for social workers to protect children by reducing the number of

cases they have to juggle.

Instead, many social workers have seen their workloads increase.

Because the department has emphasized putting new workers into emergency response to handle initial investigations of possible abuse, other social workers who work on a longer term with families have seen their caseloads rise.

Even in emergency response, caseloads continued to climb until recently, despite an intensive recruiting campaign that has brought in 93 workers in the past 18 months.

Those social workers have finally begun to see their workload shrink, not only because they have more help, but also because the department is doing fewer investigations of child abuse allegations.

That trend has some outside observers concerned that the agency is failing to check on some abused children in danger. Children like Ashley Payne.

Other problems in Child Protective Services remain:

Despite a state mandate that all reports of child abuse be checked out within 10 days and an initial investigation be completed within 30 days, Riverside County social workers often take longer.

Occasionally, reports of abuse sit untouched on desks for so long that they are tossed out without being investigated at all.

Low salaries and stressful working conditions also have hampered a nationwide effort to attract qualified social workers, even though the agency has received all the funding it has requested to bolster staff.

Last summer, the systemic problems prompted more than a third of the child protection social workers to sign an open letter to Jerry Rose, who directs the agency on a day-to-day basis. The letter warned that social workers could not "adequately insure the safety of children" under such "extreme conditions. "

While acknowledging the concerns of staff, Rose and his boss, Dennis Boyle, director of the county Department of Public Social Services, said their ongoing changes have increased safety for children in the past two years.

"I believe - where we are today - kids are much safer," Rose said.

Tragedies led to reform
Efforts to overhaul Riverside County Child Protective Services are rooted in the tragedies of 1994. That year, in a span of five

months, 11 Riverside County children were killed, allegedly by their parents, most of whom are still awaiting trial. County supervisors brought in an outside agency to find out what was going wrong.

Two years later the Child Welfare League of America concluded in a 171-page report that the program created a "dangerous environment for both children and social workers" and proposed sweeping changes.

A follow-up report from the group nine months later stated that the overburdened system created an "illusion of safety" for children.

The death of Ashley Payne in January was an ominous echo of 1994.

"If we didn't have high caseloads, the probability of Ashley being alive would be much better," said Chris Economon, a veteran social worker who investigated the case after Ashley died.

Supervisor Honi Pavlovich said the social worker handling the Payne case, Lisa Faust, was carrying 23 new abuse cases at the time, well above the desired limit of 14. Faust wasn't even supposed to be carrying a full caseload because of personnel issues that Pavlovich declined to discuss.

Linda Jewell Morgan, a senior consultant with the league who worked on the original reports and has monitored the county since then, said much has changed for the better in Riverside County in the past two years.

"I think under Dennis and Jerry's leadership, there has been a good deal of progress," Morgan said.

Since the league reports were released, Boyle has made child protection a top priority. The documents contained 127 recommendations that Boyle and his department embraced.

At the top of the list was reducing caseloads so that social workers would have more time to oversee children in their care. The goal has been to reduce the average to 14 new cases a month.

Social workers say it is impossible to do quality work when they are overloaded with cases. Too many children to track means that none gets the attention he or she deserves.

Rose said recently that the "number one priority" was "to focus, no holds barred, on recruitment efforts and getting people on board. "

To that end, the department has made some significant gains. More than 74 new social workers have been brought on board in the past 18 months, boosting the staff by about 20 percent. Another 19 social workers began training this month.

Even with the influx, even as the number of county child abuse reports fell, caseloads remained high. The agency threw new staff into emergency response, the area that had been the focus of the critical 171-page study. Between 1995 and 1996, staff in the area rose by 17 percent, from 54 to 63.

The following year, though, the number of emergency response workers fell from 63 to 60. Because of the drop in social workers, their average caseloads rose slightly, from 19 to 19.5 new cases a month.

Emergency response workloads only began to fall in the last half of 1997, when average caseloads stood at 14.3, close to the goal.

That figure, however, can be deceiving. New workers are not expected to carry heavy caseloads until they learn the ropes. At the same time, many veteran workers say their caseloads remain well above the average. Eventually, Rose said, the new staff will be able to handle a heavier load and ease the burden for more seasoned workers. It just takes time.

Cases fall through cracks

Out in the field, the steady flow of child abuse reports means that social workers sometimes can't meet state deadlines for investigating cases. California requires social workers to make their first contact with a family within 10 days and decide whether to take further action within 30 days.

In Riverside County, hundreds of cases at any one time miss those deadlines. Last month, more than 500 cases - one-quarter of the reports - had been sitting on social workers' desks more than 30 days.

Occasionally, cases fall right through the cracks.

Last year, a call came in to the child abuse hot line with a report that a 10-year-old girl had been left alone for a night.

Allegations of abuse and neglect of the girl have been documented by the county since she was 3 years old. The first social worker assigned to investigate the new call took medical leave without checking on the girl, and the case was sent to another worker.

More than three months later, the report remained unchecked.

In early May, supervisor Rich Moskowitz closed the case without sending anyone to investigate.

"Since the referral came in on 1-28-97 and, as of 5-6-97, there had been no social work investigation done on the case, I am closing the case," Moskowitz wrote in the file. "It would be foolish to intervene with this family after all this time has gone by. "

Four months later, the hot line rang again to report that the child hadn't seen her mother in three weeks.

Rose and Boyle questioned the decision not to investigate the January call and said the case raised concerns in their minds.

"There's no appropriate reason not to go out," Boyle said.

"I question why it took so long and I also question the decision . . . (to) close it," Rose said.

Shifting caseload burden

The emphasis on hiring emergency response workers has also had a negative impact on the agency: The focus came at the expense of other child protection social workers who have seen their workloads rise.

Social workers who spend their days trying to keep families together after the parents have been accused of abuse or neglect saw their average caseloads rise from 37 to 39. Staff assigned to find permanent homes for children after they have been removed from dangerous situations have watched their average caseloads climb from 58 to 76.

Child protection staff say they can't do their jobs well under those circumstances.

Rose conceded that the focus on emergency response had hurt other social workers. But, he said, as more staff is hired, they will be directed to those neglected areas.

"Did the other areas suffer?" Rose asked. "It depends what side of the glass you want to look through. Yeah, but not suffer like they had before. We're giving them some relief."

Like many child protection agencies in the state, Riverside has had a hard time attracting social workers to the stressful field.

Each year, about 8 percent of the staff leave the agency, creating more open positions.

Rose said the department is now very close to full staffing and predicted all 270 available slots would be filled by the summer.

Currently, 9 percent of the positions are empty.

Low salaries also make it difficult to attract social workers. A study by San Bernardino County of 10 California counties found that Riverside County ranked second to last in starting social work salaries. Social workers and other county staff have been working without a contract for eight months as union leaders try to negotiate a new deal for their members.

More staffing is not the only reason caseloads have fallen: The department is also doing fewer investigations.

In 1994, the agency investigated 79 percent of the child abuse reports it received. Last year it looked into 69.7 percent. At the same time, social workers have documented fewer cases of child abuse or neglect.

Four years ago, the department found evidence of abuse or neglect in 34 percent of the allegations it investigated. Last year, the figure was down to 26.4 percent.

The shift mirrors a statewide trend that Deborah Daro, research director for the Chicago-based National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, said can create a dangerous environment for children. Because it is often impossible to know from a phone call whether a child is in danger, she said, it is important for social workers to look into as many cases as they can.

"When you start saying 'I won't take a child,' I think you're playing Russian roulette with the lives of children," Daro said.

Boyle disputed suggestions that the drop in investigations and proven abuse was a sign of a problem. The statistics cannot show the quality of work being done by staff, he said.

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Child abuse investigations

Since 1994 Riverside County has done fewer investigations of child abuse and sbstantiated fewer of the cases social workers did investigate.

Percent of child abuse reports county social workers investigate
1994 79%
1995 76%
1996 73%
1997 70%

Percent of reports when social workers conclude a child ahs been abused or neglected.

1994 34%
1995 26%
1996 28%
1997 26%

Source: Riverside County Department of Public Social Services

Social worker salaries

Starting salaries of social workers in Riverside County rank near

the bottom among major California counties.

	Rank	County	Starting salary
1.		San Francisco	\$ 48,180
2.		Marin	41,205
3.		Santa Clara	40,800
4.		Contra Costa	39,990
5.		San Mateo	39,732
6.		San Bernardino	35,820
7.		Orange	35,760
8.		Los Angeles	35,396
9.		Riverside	35,196
10.		San Diego	32,160

Source: San Bernardino County Department of Public Social Services

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The series

o Today: Despite a two-year effort, Riverside County still struggles to protect abused and neglected children. Reorganization and a hiring campaign make many optimistic about the future, but tragic breakdowns still occur.

o Monday: Social workers do succeed, as shown in the case of a drug abusing mother and father who turned their lives around with their help. The couple will soon be reunited with their seven children.

o Tuesday: JB has spent most of his life in Riverside County's child protection system. It has failed to protect him from violence in a series of foster homes. JB's story shows some of the most troubling weaknesses in the system.

NOTES:

See sidebars "Turning the agency around" and "When it came to preventing Ashley's death, the system failed"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO; CHART [Caption] This photograph of Ashley Payne was found by Hemet police after her death.

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