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HEADLINE: Living a social worker's worst nightmare;
'You do the best you can and hope something doesn't blow up in your face'

BYLINE: Dion Nissenbaum, The Press-Enterprise

BODY:

Social worker Deb Tjaarda is sitting in her office when the phone rings. It is a troubled mom who is furious with Tjaarda for taking away her two children. She has a gun, the woman tells Tjaarda, and the kids. After a few anxious minutes, Tjaarda convinces the woman to send the children out into the yard to play. Then, she hears a loud bang. The woman has turned the gun on herself.

The dream plagues Deb Tjaarda. The worst fear of every social worker has just happened. One of her cases has "blown up. "

In reality, Tjaarda's nightmare is not far from the truth. The woman has kidnapped her two children and their whereabouts are unknown. But Tjaarda does not believe the worst of her nightmare will come true. She suspects the mother may have psychological problems, but does not think she is a danger to her children.

After days of searching, Tjaarda finally locates the woman and her children. They are in Maryland - safe - with a relative.

Every day, Riverside County social workers make life and death decisions. At any moment, a case they think is stable can explode.

"I think a social worker's worst nightmare is to wake up and read in the newspaper about a dead baby," said Chris Economon, a veteran Riverside County social worker. "You do the best you can and hope something doesn't blow up in your face. "

It was a series of deaths in Riverside County that led to an

outside probe of Child Protective Services and an ongoing reorganization of the agency.

In the 1996 report, the Child Welfare League of America concluded that county social workers were saddled with high caseloads that created "a dangerous environment for both children and social workers. "

"The result is a child protection agency stretched too thin, diminished in its capacity to protect those children truly requiring its protection and the protection of law enforcement," the non-profit agency concluded.

Tjaarda can still remember the days when her caseloads made it almost impossible to function. One day in 1996, when her caseload was 185 percent above average, she broke down in tears outside her office.

"When you have 160 cases, you just put out fires," Tjaarda said.

Larry Kramer, a social worker who goes out to investigate emergency calls, said even with caseloads falling as they are now in Riverside County, it is still impossible to save every child from abuse.

"The current situation is this: We can't handle everything we get," he said. "We have to be realistic. We can't investigate the city. Where do you draw the line and feel good about it? It's like triage. That's what we're doing. "

Who to save and how to do it is what social workers grapple with on a daily basis.

Even with years of college courses and professional training, social workers can't always predict when children are in danger and should be removed and when they can safely remain with their parents.

The challenge provides a rush for social worker David Dahl.

"I like to live on the edge," said Dahl.

Living on the edge for Dahl means making risky decisions about the child abuse cases he investigates.

Recently, Dahl decided to leave a 5-year-old in the home with a woman who is facing felony child abuse charges for allegedly beating three other children with hammers, sticks and brooms so hard it left indentations in their heads.

To an outsider, it might sound like a dangerous place for any child. But to Dahl, the Juvenile Court and an attorney for the

youngster, the home was the best place for the boy.

Dahl determined that the woman treated the boy as a favorite and that taking him out of the home would create more trauma. In fact, when he had been temporarily placed in a foster home, he became depressed, Dahl said.

Time appeared to bear out Dahl's judgment. In school and at court hearings over the subsequent months, the child appeared happy and content, even if he was puzzled by all the attention from strangers.

Even though Dahl made the decision to keep the child in the home, another social worker might have done just the opposite.

Social workers bring more than their training to their job. They bring their different backgrounds, their on-the-job experiences, and what some call their "gut instinct. "

The nebulous and sometimes volatile nature of the profession means that two different social workers can look at the same set of facts and reach opposite conclusions.

Every Riverside County social worker is taught to use a risk assessment model when they judge cases. It is supposed to provide a common tool to help assess when a child is in danger.

At a recent risk assessment training, two dozen social workers from the Inland area were given 10 different scenarios and asked to determine which ones they would investigate immediately and which ones were less urgent.

Social workers varied widely in their decisions. One case three social workers might put at the top of their list was the lowest priority for three others.

Because social workers can, and do, disagree on what action to take in cases, it leaves them - and their profession - open to criticism. They are accused of taking kids when it's unnecessary.

And they are criticized when they leave a child in a home where they later come to harm.

Paula Kosnotti, who works locally with a nationwide group known as Victims Of Child Abuse Laws, or VOCAL, echoed such frustrations.

"I feel they're going about investigating things the wrong way," Kosnotti said. "They jump on some things that literally have no basis and they're ripping these kids out. Yet, when people are really needing help, it seems like they're not there. "

Evelyn Corder, who handled child abuse cases in the Juvenile Court for years before moving onto special projects in 1997,

conceded that the staff does not always have the necessary skills and that the process can be frustrating for parents and children drawn into the system.

"Sometimes our social workers are not as well trained as they need to be," Cordner said. "The system is a behemoth. It moves incredibly slow. We have a staff that is overwhelmed and understaffed. "

Social workers have recently been forced to tackle a new obstacle in their field: A massive computer system that many complain has made their lives more difficult.

Riverside staff have found themselves spending hours in front of their computer performing tasks they used to complete in half the time. That takes away from hours in the field spent checking on clients.

Social workers also say information in the system is unreliable.

Files listing available beds in foster homes are routinely out-of-date and there are unexplainable gaps in programs that are supposed to list all previous reports of child abuse and neglect.

"The safety of children is being compromised," said Juvenile Court attorney Dawn Shipley. "There has to be a better way than this. "

Dennis Boyle, director of the county Department of Public Social Services, vows to jettison the computer program if he reaches the same conclusion. For now, however, he is confident that the system will be a benefit in the long run.

In the meantime, Boyle and Jerry Rose, the deputy director in charge of Child Protective Services, have given the staff permission to ignore the computer if they feel it will compromise a child's safety.

"Kids are not going to be put in jeopardy by this thing and we'll pull the plug if there's any doubt about it," Rose said.

NOTES:

Sidebar to "Earning a fresh start"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO [Caption] Kurt Miller; The Press-Enterprise; Deb Tjaarda, a social worker for Riverside County, talks with a ward at a foster home in Perris.

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