



10 of 14 DOCUMENTS

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**HEADLINE:** Wheels of justice grind slowly for families in crisis

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**BODY:**

It's sometimes described as the "kiddie court," but what happens inside is anything but juvenile.

From 8 in the morning until 5 at night, a steady flow of parents and children shuffle into and out of the aging Juvenile Court hall in Riverside. Two courtrooms hear cases of kids accused of crimes.

Two handle cases of sometimes unspeakable child abuse and neglect.

Day in and day out, Juvenile Court can be characterized as much by what doesn't happen in the courtroom as by what does.

Delays are commonplace. Cases regularly drag on past the state-imposed deadlines. Because there is no public children's room, kids play on worn, graying carpet outside the courtrooms. Anxious parents wait for hours in uncomfortable plastic chairs stretched along the hallways. Attorneys speak with clients in an interview room that has no desk or chairs.

"It's like we're a MASH unit," said Phillip Malisos, an attorney who represents both parents and children in Riverside County.

While the court acts quickly to remove a child from what social workers deem to be a dangerous or unhealthy home, it moves much more slowly for parents trying to reunite with their children. State laws require the system to set out a plan for most parents within 60 days. But the county isn't even trying to meet that goal.

Instead, Child Protective Services is working to ensure the court

agrees to plans for the parents within 100 days, but has not quite figured out how.

A county Department of Public Social Services report found that the number of cases over 100 days in western Riverside County rose by 55 percent between January 1995 and October of 1996. The last time the report was done, in the fall of 1996, 28 percent of the cases had languished more than 100 days. Some cases remained in legal limbo for one, even two, years.

"That's way too long," said James Warren, presiding judge at Juvenile Court.

Without specific goals for parents to meet, the children remain in limbo. Kids don't know whether they're going to be going back to their parents, or if they should adjust to life in a foster home.

"It's not good for the kids," Warren said. "It's very unsettling for these children to stay in a shelter home for a long period of time because there's no permanency. "

One major reason cases are delayed is because social workers fail to turn in timely reports, according to a recent court survey.

Social workers regularly submit requests to court requesting more time to investigate a case, a move that leaves parents and children waiting for the system that has turned their lives upside down to set out what they need to do to turn things around.

Despite the pressures, Warren said he is hopeful that a new court facility under construction in southwest Riverside County will alleviate some of the burden - when it opens in three years.

A fledgling mediation program may also reduce some of the courtroom pressure.

Inside the courtroom, children and their troubles become lost in a jumble of letters and numbers. On one side of the building, kids are tagged as 602s: juveniles accused of committing crimes. On the other side, they're known as 300s: kids who have been victims of abuse or neglect.

Over the loudspeaker, sheriff's deputies announce with monotonic voices which cases are being heard in which courtroom: "Jones minors, J-4. Jones minors . . . J-4. "

Parents, social workers, attorneys and relatives associated with the case gather their belongings and hustle into the courtroom.

Because of laws protecting child abuse victims, everyone else is barred from sitting in on the court hearings.

Inside the courtroom, social workers sit before huge stacks of red case files. To begin each hearing, they announce each case number - J46654, J72341, etc. Legal codes are used to identify the reasons parents are in court - 300b, failure to protect, 300g, failure to provide, etc.

Parents and children become almost props in the courtroom, where the regular players speak in a language no one but they can decipher.

Case number J45321, the Smith minors, is called into J-3 where the parents are accused of 300b, c, and g of the Welfare and Institutions Code. The judge then reads required legal language - finding a 319a or 361b2 - that sets things in motion for the family.

Rarely, if ever, do parents understand what is happening inside the courtroom. Most of the time, they get a chance after the hearing to speak with their court-appointed attorney who can translate what the judge has ordered and tell them when they need to return.

Decisions are documented in aptly described minute orders: Decisions on each case are often made in a minute or two.

"It's kind of like a meat market and that's unfortunate because we're dealing with basic human emotions here," said Jan Michaels, an attorney who has handled juvenile cases for 10 years.

Even the human touches have ulterior motives. In the two courtrooms that handle child abuse cases, sheriff's deputies hand out candy to each child that has to sit through the often traumatic experience.

But the candy became a courtroom staple not to soothe scared children. It is a tool used to help keep crying kids quiet during proceedings so that the judge and attorneys can hear each other.

At times, Commissioner Martin Swanson and Judge Erik Michael Kaiser - who handle abuse cases - speak directly to the children.

They ask them how they're doing in school, if they're enjoying the sport they play. When they speak directly to parents, both can be stern. Parents who aren't making progress are warned that their time is running out.

Despite the turmoil, attorneys and judges buried under the paper and responsibility said they love their work.

On the wall of his courtroom, Swanson has a photograph of a young boy in a striped shirt looking out on royal blue waters.

"Priorities," the framed picture reads. "A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived

in, or the kind of car I drove . . . But the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child. "

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Court delays

Rising caseloads have created extensive delays in court cases.

Some cases have been stalled for more than two years.

Cases pending 100 days or more

Jan. '95 18%

Oct. '96 28%

Source: Riverside County Department of Public Social Services

**NOTES:**

    Sidebar to "Earning a fresh start"

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