



8 of 14 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: Mother battles addiction to keep child;
But a county social worker is worried that her speed habit won't stop

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BODY:

Chris Economon stands before the hospital bed with the frown of a disappointed father.

Holding a yellow notepad, the social worker hardly has to explain his presence to the young mother.

Four hours earlier, Hemet Valley Medical Center had called Riverside County's child abuse hot line to report that the woman in the bed, R.B., had given birth to a baby she carried while taking drugs. After picking up a toddler car seat in case he decided to take the newborn child, Economon drove out to interview the mother.

R.B. - who agreed to tell her story as long her identity would not be revealed - offers no excuses, but makes a tearful plea for understanding.

"I'll do anything you ask me to," she implores the social worker.

"I love my daughter and I don't want to lose her. "

Mulling his decision in the hospital cafeteria after the interview, Economon wrestles with one of the most pervasive problems facing Riverside County social workers: drugs.

By some estimates, nearly half of child abuse cases statewide are drug or alcohol related. The drug of choice in Riverside County: speed.

In such cases, social workers have no clear-cut answers. Illegal drug use, by itself, is not enough for the county to take children from their parents. Instead, social workers must try to determine how much danger a child may face because a parent is using drugs.

This afternoon, Economon is torn. R.B. has a history of failure.

She lost her two oldest girls after admitting that she couldn't take care of them while living a life dominated by speed. And she had just admitted to using speed right before giving birth to an 8-pound, 14-ounce girl who now had the illegal drug surging through her blood.

But the young mother has been straightforward and seems sincere.

Doctors say the newborn shows no signs of withdrawal. The mother has already called drug treatment programs. And she has vowed to do anything to keep her baby.

Relying on 'gut instinct'

It is more than just 20 years of social work that has taught Economon how to handle clients like R.B., who are grappling with poverty and stress. It is his life.

When Economon meets struggling families, he can recall the years his life resembled theirs.

He can remember the one-room tar-paper shack with no running water, no electricity and no phone that served as the home for Economon, his parents and five siblings.

By current standards, Economon said, social workers might have viewed the house as uninhabitable and taken the children away. But Economon remembers those years living on open land near Escondido as some of the best of his youth.

Because of his training, his "gut instinct" and his background, Economon gives R.B. plenty of leeway. More than other social workers might give the young mother.

"She's saying all the magic words, but I don't think she means them," Economon says. "My basic philosophy is to allow families to operate on their own. CPS is an entity of the state and I don't think it's a good thing for the state to be involved in family decision-making. " Upstairs, R.B. sits in a rocking chair with a bottle, feeding her daughter.

R.B. looks up expectantly at her social worker, who gives her the chance to prove herself and leaves the child with her mom.

"In the next few days, I'm going to be watching what you do," Economon tells the mother before he leaves. "I do not like taking kids away, believe me. "

"I hate that this happened and I am so sorry for her and I hope she understands that," she says.

Working the system

With her social worker out of her hair, R.B. begins to quietly work the system.

R.B. calls Economon regularly to report on her efforts to enter a drug treatment program, but finds excuses to avoid testing. She has no transportation. She is too modest to go to the bathroom in front of the drug counselor who makes sure no one tries to cheat. She's too busy.

Within a few days - unbeknownst to Economon - R.B. is back using speed to deal with the stress in her life.

After three weeks, Economon makes another visit to the San Jacinto home R.B. shares with her mother. His patience is wearing thin.

R.B. looks weary and confesses that she wasn't prepared to be a mother again.

With Economon sitting on one side and her mother on the other, R.B. defends herself and makes another plea for leniency.

"I can't lose this little girl," R.B. says through tears, a cracked stain of mascara running down her cheek. "She's all I have. "

R.B. receives no sympathy from Economon or her mother.

Economon gently tries to find a way to deal with R.B.'s transportation problems and her unwillingness to provide a urine sample in front of a drug counselor. But he is adamant that she must test.

With her baby sleeping on her lap, R.B. unleashes her exasperation.

"This is ridiculous," she fumes. "People that shouldn't have their baby taken away do, and those that do their best you want to take their baby.

"I'm not Super Mom. I'm not God and I can't make things happen like that," she says with a snap of the fingers.

Economon leaves the child with R.B., but decides to ask the court to give the county control of the child. Even though the infant will

stay with her mother, the order will give the county a legal hammer to hold over R.B.'s head: if she doesn't look after her daughter, the court will take the child away.

To convince a judge and social workers that she is a good mom, R.B. has to follow a plan set out by the agency. But she finds it hard to juggle the demands: four-hour parenting classes three times a week; Narcotics Anonymous meetings three days a week; random drug testing. At first, she manages to attend many of the parenting classes and none of the NA meetings.

"I just don't have the time," she says.

She has been clean in her drug tests, but admits to occasionally using speed. Because it only takes a few days to work the drug out of the human body and testing is infrequent, R.B. can evade detection.

"Just because once in a while I do dabble in my speed, I'm not a bad mother," she says. "I'm making sure my baby is fed, she's bathed, she's clothed, she's loved. "

Road to recovery

R.B. follows the path of many drug users into occasional relapse.

Because speed is easy to find in places like Riverside County, even addicts who successfully complete in-patient recovery programs have a difficult time staying away from the drug when they return to their community, said Dr. S. Alex Stalcup, medical director of the New Leaf Treatment Center in Concord.

Within the first 100 days, Stalcup said, most addicts will use the drug two or three times in an effort to combat their depression.

Riverside County relies on a variety of in-patient and out-patient treatment programs that have had mixed success.

In 1997, just 35 percent of the people referred by social workers to county drug programs successfully completed their treatment, said Larry Ogilvie, program chief for the Riverside County Department of Mental Health.

Getting into the most successful in-patient programs can sometimes be difficult. Clients sometimes have to wait three to four weeks for spaces. Sometimes, the wait can be up to two months.

Attorneys in juvenile court complain that such long waiting lists create a huge hurdle for parents faced with losing their kids. State laws require parents to quickly turn their lives around and show that they have made progress in kicking their addictions.

But if they can't get into treatment programs, they can't show

the judge they are making any headway.

Soon, an in-patient program becomes an option of last resort for R.B. In February, R.B. is arrested and charged with felony child abuse for allegedly striking one of her nieces with a paddle.

Police and Child Protective Services step in and R.B. spends two days in jail. The court takes away R.B.'s daughter, but, for all practical purposes, the two remain together. The baby is given to R.B.'s mom, who is already looking after four other grandchildren from another daughter battling speed addiction. Since R.B. lives with her mother, little changes in the real world for the family.

But R.B. agrees to check into an in-patient program with her daughter and finds herself on a long waiting list.

She's frustrated, weary and wants the breaks to go her way.

"I can't win for losing," she says.

NOTES:

Sidebar to " A system breakdown"

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS [Caption] 1. Peter Phun; The Press-Enterprise; Social worker Chris Economon talks with one of his clients.

2. Tracy Lee Silveria; The Press-Enterprise; Rick G. spends time with his children on the day he was released from a drug detoxification program.

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