

KAUAI CITIZENS REVIEW PANEL
FOR CHILD WELFARE SERVICES
2003 REPORT

Introduction

This is the Kauai Citizen Review Panel's (KCRP) fifth annual report since it became operational in July 1999. In the 2002 Report, the Panel reported on drug babies in foster care and the use of the Risk Matrix used by the Department of Human Services (DHA) for determining the severity of referrals. This year the Panel closely investigated two case studies in order to identify the specific procedures of DHS social workers assigned to Child Welfare Services (CWS) cases to pinpoint the strengths and weakness in the handling of such cases.

Case Studies – Summary, Investigation & Comments

The members of the Citizens Review Panel met several sessions to review two case studies. Case study #1 represented a case where procedures were exemplary, resulting in a positive outcome. Case study #2 represented a case where procedures appeared flawed or mishandled and the process was arduous, taking longer than necessary to reach an acceptable conclusion. Case #1 involved extenuating circumstances that were as complicated, if not more complicated than case #2. Our concern, as is that of DHS, is for the ultimate impact on the children involved when a social worker does not communicate clearly and consistently with all other parties involved in a case. The most notable difference between the two cases concerned the communication skills and protocol of the social workers involved. We do not wish to focus on the individuals involved, but rather on the training, evaluation, investigation following complaints, and follow-up procedures of DHS for social workers.

In case #1, the social worker communicated regularly with all parties involved, including: the foster parents, family members, potential placement families, teachers, school administrators, and the guardian ad litem. The social worker in case #2 did not discuss the special needs of the children, which were extensive and involved extreme sexual abuse, neglect, and subsequent sexual acting out by two of the children involved,

with the foster parents, interested family members, or prospective permanent family. This social worker also frequently failed to return phone calls to other professionals involved in the case. The assigned guardian ad litem contacted DHS to file a formal complaint against the social worker several times. The supervisor did assign a more experienced social work mentor to the social worker and the supervisor came to the subsequent meetings, but these measures did not remedy the social worker's attitude. The supervisors intervention did help lead to an eventual acceptable conclusion, but it took entirely too long. We do not wish to speculate on the circumstances that inhibited appropriate communication and procedures of the specific social worker. However, we wish to raise the following questions that arise from this case.

1. What are the specific qualifications for social workers and do they include practical as well as academic qualifications?
2. How are applicants screened for or trained in the particular culturally sensitive concerns for Kauai or Hawaii?
3. When a social worker experiences difficulty in a case or when a complaint is made against a social worker, what steps does DHS take to investigate, assist, train, or discipline the social worker?
4. How does DHS determine the necessary response to a complaint against a social worker?
5. What workshops or training opportunities are available to social workers and at what point, if any, do they become mandatory?
6. At the end of the six-month probationary period for social workers, what evaluative measures are taken before ending probation?
7. Is there a mentoring program for new social workers before allowing them to handle cases without immediate supervision?

The KCRP 2000 Report

The Citizen's Review Panel expressed similar concerns in the 2000 Report. The following are some of the recommendations in the 2000 report on which the panel wishes to comment:

- *Consideration should be given to broadening CWS orientation and redesigning on-the-job training to follow national guidelines; i.e., Child Welfare League of America*

guidelines or other models of skill building that would upgrade staff investigations and case management.

- *Consideration should be given to establishing a position on the staff working for the Section administrator to look at all aspects of follow-through of court orders, program policies and procedures and Section memos. The Panel commends the overall improvement in this area since the 2000 report.*
- *Consideration should be given to reworking the Department's policies and procedures manual to provide much better indexing and clearer direction regarding the State law and procedures and providing less room for individual interpretations. The Panel continues to look forward to the revised, computer accessible manual.*
- *Consideration should be given to developing policies that assure that service providers and users are consistently informed in writing of available benefits and how to access them.*
- *The policies of the DHS foster parent program need to be fully reassessed toward developing consistent support and access to services, including notification of Court hearings and the ongoing planning for their foster charges. This is still a concern. Social workers should ensure that all foster parents receive a Family Service Plan.*
- *The Panel believes that the Department should more aggressively recruit skilled professionals into open positions. This issue is again addressed in the 2003 report.*
- *The Panel recommends that the Director of DHS make it her priority to be an advocate for improved salaries and working conditions for social workers and foster parents. The Panel recommends that the Director continue to be that advocate.*
- *There is some evidence that police procedures are not fully understood by the staff. In-service educations should be developed to provide continuing education in this area, particularly in high risk and reunification cases. The Panel notes that this is an area greatly improved since the 2000 report.*

The two recent cases we reviewed for this report indicate that many of the concerns in the 2000 Report are related to the lack of timely communication and have not been adequately remedied. Susan Chandler, former Director of DHS,

informed us that pressure from the Union representing the social workers sometimes prevented DHS from adequately addressing such problems with social workers. If this is the case, perhaps preventative measures could be taken in the form of mentoring programs and mandatory investigative/retraining sessions when a problem becomes evident, whether through complaints, or when a case is obviously not going well. Social workers may also need help in obtaining and/or accessing resources or in handling overload.

Interviews Conducted on September 8, 2003

On September 8, 2003 the Kauai Citizen Review Panel met with Elaine Sandobal and Gail Takasaki-Ignacio from the Department of Human Services, Social Services Office to learn about their hiring, training, and staff development procedures. Elaine provided an overview of the training schedule and content and both Elaine and Gail answered the questions we raised earlier in our report. The following outlines the information they provided concerning hiring procedures:

- The Personnel Office generates a civil service eligible list. The qualifications and education of applicants are considered when selecting for the interviews. The hiring panel, (at least three people) evaluate the applicant for reading, communication and problem-solving skills and the interview is scored by each panel member.
- Social Service Assistants (SSA) must have a high school degree. They must maintain computer records for all contacts, conduct visits, and help place children when needed. They must be able to discern when to end a visit if the child is unsafe, or an adult appears to be losing control. They assist social workers, although they often work alone. SSA 1 and 2 levels do not need prior experience to be hired. SSA 3 and 4 levels might have a BA and experience is required.
- Social Workers (SW) must have a BA, but not necessarily in Social Science. No mentoring program exists, and there are no caseload caps. Each worker does investigation and case management. DHS generally

doesn't hire at the SW 1 level because the cases are too complex. They hire at the SW 2 level, requiring a BA plus six months experience or a BA in social work, or the SW 3 level, requiring a MSW or BA with one and one-half year's experience. They are journey level workers and handle complex cases with close supervision. A Masters in Social Work with one years' experience or a BA with four years progressively responsible experience is required at the SW 4 level.

- Supervisors meet the SW 4 requirements with two years' progressively responsible experience, and have demonstrated the ability to supervise with good organizational skills and sound judgment. Every supervisor now has an assistant.
- Training is mandated if an employee has had one year or more of absence. Training is offered four times a year. New hires train for five weeks, with the introduction to the Social Service Division during the first three weeks. On the job training is done by island.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION BY THE KAUAI CITIZENS REVIEW PANEL

1. Since no experience is required at the SS 1 and 2 levels, the qualifications appear weak. The interview questions and procedure should be scrutinized for standardization and objectivity. The interview questions have not been disclosed to us, so we cannot discern whether or not applicants are adequately screened for cultural sensitivity and the training manual does not appear to address the issue. Motivation for the applicants must also be scrutinized to discern whether they have certain social and/or political agendas that could bias their work. Since Social Service Assistants often have much of the actual contact and interaction with families, their qualifications are very important.
2. We identified a number of problems for the Social Workers and recommend that all Social Workers be required to work as Social Service Assistants during the six month probationary period, therefore guaranteeing direct involvement with actual families. Both Gail and Elaine verified that they experience major difficulty in disciplining, firing, or even requiring further training when a Social Worker has been found inadequate. In part, they say, this is due to Union protection.

3. A primary weakness our panel has often noted, which was confirmed again in our investigation, is that Social Workers often fail to communicate adequately with all parties involved in cases; i.e., foster parents, Social Service Assistants, school personnel, guardian ad litem, etc. Communication is crucial between all involved parties.
4. Another weakness we identified is that training does not address child development issues adequately. Social workers should attend foster parent training for child development and DHS should pay for on-going in-service training in child development and parenting skills for special needs kids. In previous years, such training was provided so that social workers could help foster parents with issues relating to special needs children. If social workers and foster parents network to become more educated in the processes of normal child development, trust will be fostered between the two.
5. The Panel has also identified problems in disseminating information regarding training opportunities and ensuring that those social workers that need training, receive it. We make two recommendations in response:
 - a. That all interacting agencies network to regularly publish notification of all pertinent meetings, in-service training, and workshops so that supervisors can send appropriate bulletins or memos to employees. A website established through the Mayor's office would serve as an effective "bulletin board" for such notices.
 - b. Once the information is made readily available, training should become mandated for all probationary social workers or social workers identified as problematic.

Conclusion

Our concerns and recommendations echo the 2002 Federal recommendations as well as our reports written in previous years. The volunteers for the Kauai Citizens Review Panel need to know the concerns of these reports are read and addressed, so we end this report urging DHS-CWS to comply with the recent Federally mandated policy of responding to our reports in writing within six months. Our hope, as advocates of DHS-CWS, is to establish reciprocal communication to better protect the children of Hawaii.

The Kauai Citizens Review Panel respectfully submits this report.

Nancy Peterson for KCRP

Date