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# **CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE: UNANSWERED CRIES FOR HELP**

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**GRAND JURY 2014-2015**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 3**

**BACKGROUND ..... 3**

**REASON FOR THE STUDY ..... 4**

**METHODOLOGY ..... 5**

**INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS ..... 5**

**CAR Dropped Calls: Bad—and Getting Worse ..... 5**

**Contributing Factors to Long Wait Times ..... 7**

**Documentation of “Information Only” Calls from All Mandated Reporters .... 7**

**Annual Increase in Volume of Hotline Calls ..... 7**

**Merging APS with CAR ..... 7**

**Duplication of Information on Required Hotline Documentation ..... 8**

**Need for an increase in staffing ..... 8**

**Root Cause: Lack of an Effective Strategy During Peak Call Periods ..... 9**

**FINDINGS ..... 11**

**RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 11**

**REQUIRED RESPONSES ..... 12**

**COMMENDATION ..... 14**

**APPENDIX A - MANDATED REPORTER DEFINITION ..... 15**

**APPENDIX B - LEGAL DEFINITION OF CHILD ABUSE ..... 16**

**APPENDIX C - ADDITIONAL SOURCES FOR INVESTIGATION ..... 17**

**REFERENCES ..... 19**

***Our children are our greatest treasure. They are our future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation. --***

***Nelson Mandela, National Men's March, 1997***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The 2014-2015 Orange County Grand Jury investigated the operations of the Child Abuse Registry (CAR), a division of the Social Services Agency (SSA), and found the rate of dropped calls to its hotline to be alarmingly high. A dropped call means that someone reporting the possibility of a child being abused or neglected hung up before talking to a social worker.

The Grand Jury found that the primary cause for dropped calls was the long waiting time experienced by the caller. There are peak times when the number of calls received in a short period of time exceeds the number of people available to answer them. Some callers choose to hang up rather than continue to remain on hold. Of particular concern are callers, such as neighbors or family acquaintances, who may have mixed feelings about getting involved in the first place. If they hang up in frustration because no one is responding, they may never call again. This could result in a child being left in jeopardy, and ultimately harmed or even suffering fatal injuries.

Many of the SSA and CAR staff interviewed, from upper management to phone answerers, were extremely concerned about the high rate of dropped calls. Several reasons given for the growing dropped call rate were explored by the Grand Jury. Whatever the reason, CAR has an admittedly unacceptable outcome: many reports of child abuse not being heard. This problem will never be solved on a long-term basis until creative strategies are developed and implemented by CAR and SSA. Ultimately, the key to serving call-in reporters is for management to commit to having staff do whatever is reasonably necessary to improve responses to incoming calls.

## **BACKGROUND**

The first child abuse reporting law in California was enacted in 1963. Under the original law, the only people required to report child abuse were physicians. At that, physicians were only required to report *physical* abuse. Over the years, numerous amendments have expanded the definition of child abuse and the persons required to report. Today, a variety of professionals, designated as “mandated reporters” (see Appendix A), are required to call in suspicions of child abuse, including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect (see Appendix B for legal definition of child abuse). Also, members of the public are encouraged to call in suspicions, even if they prefer to remain anonymous.

In 1974, the Orange County Board of Supervisors established CAR to centralize the reporting of child abuse within Orange County. On February 1, 1975, a 24/7 hotline was established to receive reports of child abuse. CAR is often the first point of contact

the community has with SSA, and it is the primary point of entry into Child Protective Services (CPS).

Since that time, there have been at least four separate Grand Jury reports on this topic. Over 20 years ago, a report was issued on CAR stating in part, "According to figures provided by the Registry between January and November of 1993, twenty-five percent of the 46,313 calls placed to the Registry were never answered because callers hung up" (OC Grand Jury, 1993-1994, p. JS/E-3). Regrettably, the dropped call rate remains unacceptably high.

Since its inception, CAR has experienced a steady increase in the number of callers and staff. Today CAR is a sophisticated and critical component of SSA, one of the key organizations responsible for protecting our most vulnerable residents from abuse.

### **REASON FOR THE STUDY**

SSA management informed the Grand Jury that CAR refers for follow-up investigation only about half of the calls it receives. The Grand Jury wanted to know if there were a significant number of cases that were not referred but, based on more thorough information, should have been. After a lengthy initial investigation, the Grand Jury determined that the CAR processes and procedures were effective, and in virtually every case that was reviewed, the Grand Jury found that a reasonable and reliable decision had been made by the social worker.

What was discovered during the course of the initial investigation, however, was that a disturbing number of callers hung up before a report could be made. Consequently, the Grand Jury changed the focus of the investigation to the causes of, and potential remedies for, the dropped calls.

The purpose of any 24/7 hotline is to give immediate attention to something that is dangerously wrong and cannot wait or go unanswered. The most obvious example of such a hotline is the 9-1-1 emergency lines manned by law enforcement or fire departments. Though every call may not be a true emergency, every call has the potential of averting or rectifying a situation that could result in the injury or death of an innocent victim. For this reason, a near-zero percent dropped call rate is the only acceptable level for 9-1-1 managers.

CAR also deals with potential crisis situations. People call CAR to report children or dependent adults who are being beaten, isolated, constrained, starved, sexually abused, or neglected. Both children and elders are vulnerable to emotional harassment, disparagement, or bullying at the hands of those expected to protect them. If unchecked, these abusive situations can lead to injuries, illness or death. In addition, emotional trauma could lead to long-term mental illness or suicide. On the other hand, if every phone call were answered as it was in the case described below, these physical or emotional scars might be avoided.

In July of 2013, an unidentified member of the public called CAR and reported his suspicions that a child might be confined in a cage in a family home in Anaheim. The

available CAR worker answered the phone and handled the call according to policy. A social worker was sent to the home to verify this, and within 24 hours, the police removed the child and his siblings (and the cage) from the home. The parents were charged with child abuse and put into the justice system (Schwebke, 2014).

The above described outcome was accomplished because a concerned person called CAR and someone answered the phone. The Grand Jury questions what would have happened if this caller had been one of those people who got frustrated with a long wait and hung up. The Grand Jury decided to further investigate and analyze the Child Abuse hotline operations based on the background facts and initial investigations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

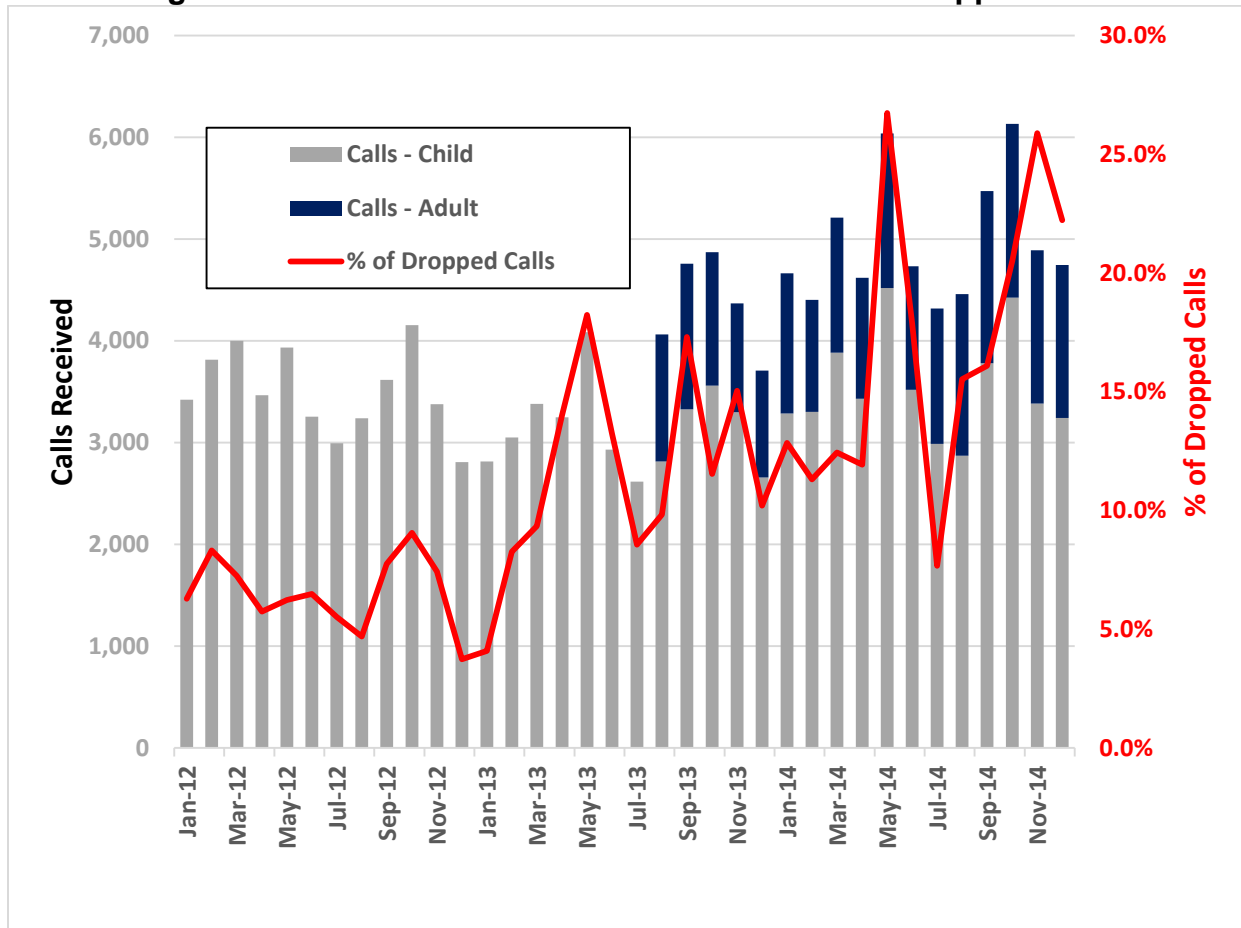
For this investigation, the Grand Jury obtained copies of the Child and Family Services (CFS) Operations Manual, specifically as it relates to CAR; interviewed hotline Senior Social Workers, Supervising Senior Social Workers, and managers; visited the CAR facility on numerous occasions; and sat with hotline social workers to observe them answer calls. The Grand Jury also interviewed supervisors and managers from Child Protective Services CPS of adjacent Southern California counties. Many of the information sources for this investigation are listed in Appendix C, at the end of this report.

## **INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **CAR Dropped Calls: Bad—and Getting Worse**

The number of dropped calls has long been a concern of CAR and prior Grand Juries. The 2014-2015 Grand Jury found that the percentage of dropped calls has increased significantly during the last couple of years. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1: 3 Year Trend in Calls Received and % of Dropped Calls**

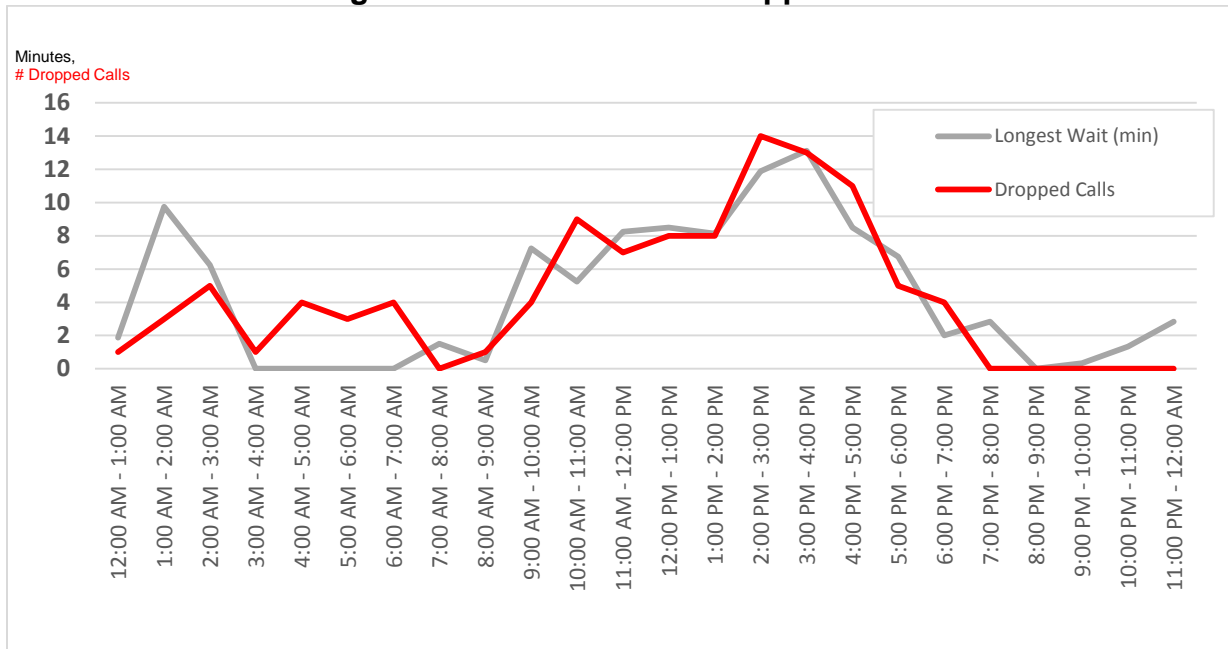


Data supplied by CAR

The data indicates that, prior to 2013, the monthly dropped call rates were in a range of 5% to 8%. Interviews with CAR staff confirmed that those rates were typical in prior years. This report discusses a number of possible causes for the dramatic increase in dropped call rates during 2013 and 2014, and recommends some short-term and long-term remedies. The Grand Jury believes that a reasonable immediate goal for these efforts would be to return to the pre-2013 levels of under 5%. An unknown percentage of callers hang up immediately after the call registers, which is recorded as a dropped call. Once the CAR understands the percentage of calls in that category, the ultimate goal should be a drop rate only nominally higher than the immediate hang-up calls rate.

Almost every social worker and manager at CAR cited dropped calls as a major problem. Executive management at SSA expressed great concern that a caller into the abuse hotline would have to wait for an extended period. They also confirmed the belief that long wait times lead directly to dropped calls, as the data provided confirmed (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Wait Times and Dropped Calls**



Data supplied by CAR

### Contributing Factors to Long Wait Times

CAR social workers and managers provided various explanations for long wait times. These included the following contributing causes:

#### Documentation of “Information Only” Calls from All Mandated Reporters

An Information Only (I/O) call is one where the hotline social worker determines that the situation reported does not rise to the level of abuse, and makes no referral for investigation. Prior to 2013, CAR policy did not require I/O calls to be recorded in the client data. However, the policy was changed in the spring of 2013. Now hotline workers are required to document all calls from mandated reporters. According to the hotline workers, this change in policy required more time to document the I/O calls, taking time away from responding to waiting callers.

#### Annual Increase in Volume of Hotline Calls

The total number of calls coming into CAR increased from 43,888 in 2013 to 59,676 in 2014 (see Figure 1). While staffing levels also increased, the training needed to prepare new staff made it impossible to increase staff at the same rate as the increase in call volume.

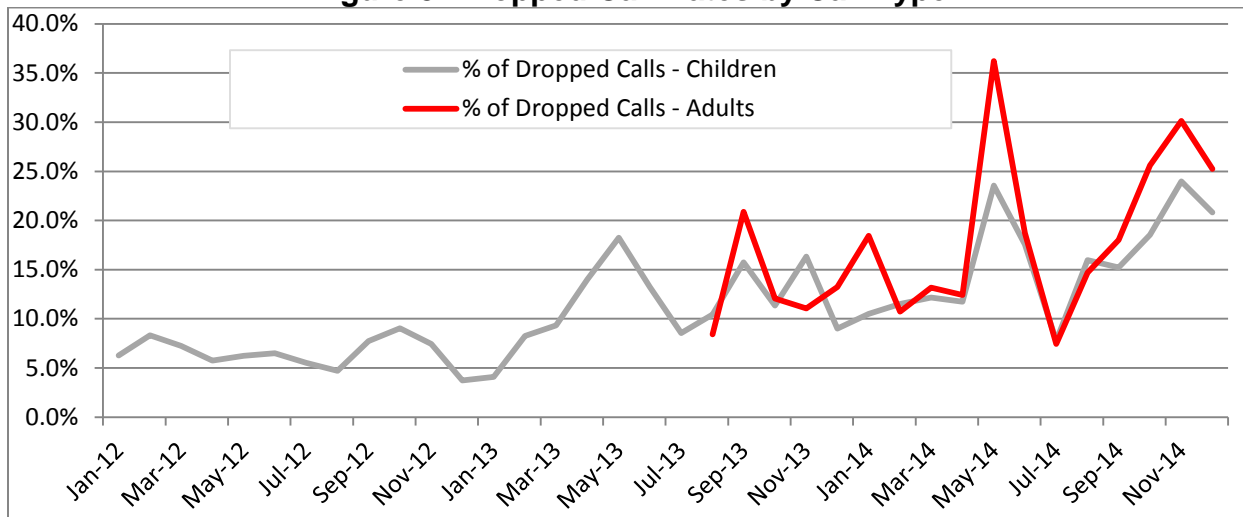
#### Merging APS with CAR

A major cause of the increase in volume was the merging of the Adult Protective Services (APS) hotline into the CAR hotline. Furthermore, the fact that both APS and CAR hotline workers take both adult and child abuse calls meant that both sets of hotline workers needed extensive cross training. Several social workers indicated that

combining APS with CAR was like mixing apples and oranges, with each job requiring a different set of skills. The training occurred from July 2013 through September 2014. During this period, workers were taken off-line for training, which put further demands on the remaining hotline workers.

To this day, APS workers reported preferring to take adult calls, while CAR workers reported preferring to take child abuse calls. Even after months of training, most social workers felt comfortable and competent when handling the type of calls they were used to handling, but slower and less sure when handling the other type of calls. By September 2014, management expected social workers to handle both types of calls. As Figure 3 demonstrates, since that time the dropped calls rate for adults is even higher than that for children. The Grand Jury concluded that when the CAR social workers are fully comfortable with handling the APS calls, and vice versa, the percent of dropped calls will be lower.

**Figure 3: Dropped Call Rates by Call Type**



Data provided by CAR

**Duplication of Information on Required Hotline Documentation**

A majority of hotline social workers interviewed by the Grand Jury reported that unnecessary additional time is required to fill out the intake forms with duplicate information. Some CAR managers indicated that investing in technology to reduce input duplication would allow more time to answer waiting calls. The fact that the information entered is documentation for a combination of mandated forms may complicate the ability to eliminate this duplication.

**Need for an increase in staffing**

CAR management and CAR social workers alike frequently cited understaffing as a major reason for dropped calls. During this investigation, CAR received additional funding and was in the process of hiring seven additional hotline workers and two additional supervisors. Some CAR managers expect the increased staff to have a major impact in addressing the high level of dropped calls.

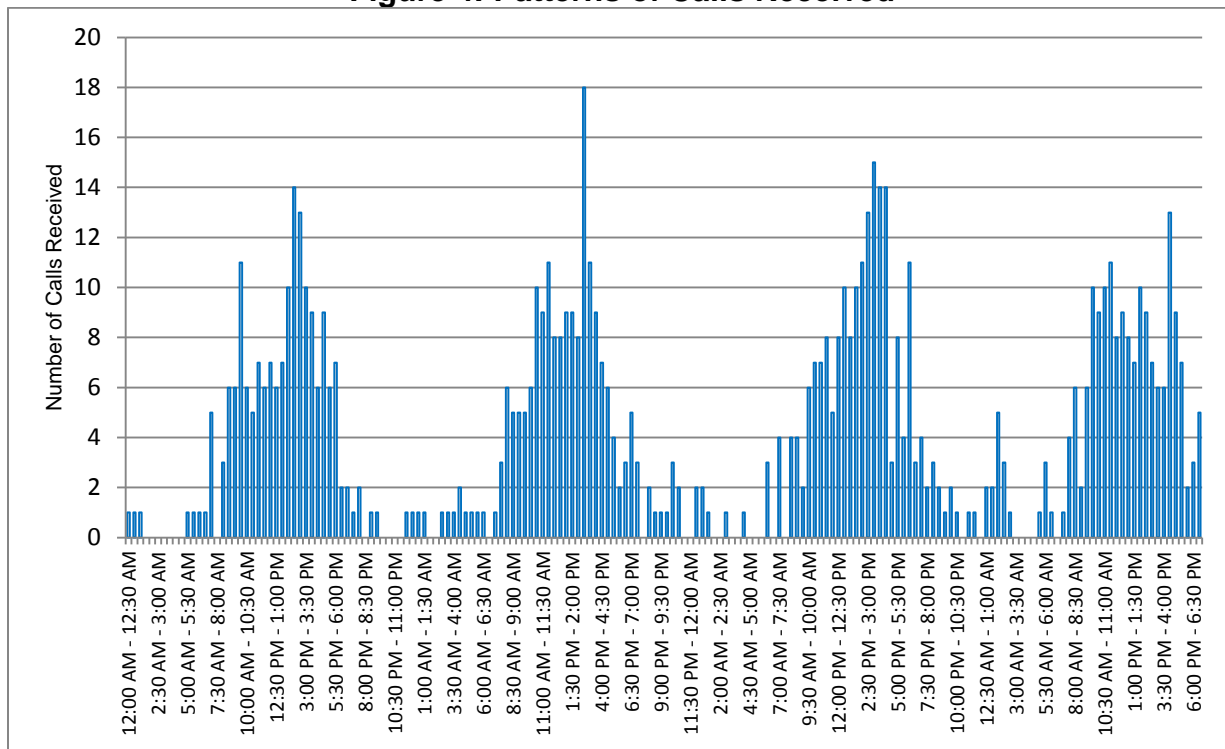


**Root Cause: Lack of an Effective Strategy During Peak Call Periods**

All of the above contributing factors are possible reasons for the dramatic increase in dropped calls during the most recent period from 2012 to 2014. However, the Grand Jury noted that the problem of high numbers of dropped calls dates back to at least 1994 when that Grand Jury issued a report dealing with the same issue. Since the 1994 report, CAR has installed a sophisticated new telephone system and hired additional staff. The percentage of dropped calls ebbs and flows, but the problem persists.

Like all call centers, CAR phones are quiet for long periods, and then numerous calls will come in at the same time and overwhelm the system. Data from CAR’s automated phone system shows this feast-or-famine pattern. Figure 4 reflects data provided by CAR, which they indicated reflected a typical four-day period. Staffing levels increase during predictable busy times between 9AM and 5PM. However within the busy times there are half-hour periods when CAR receives anywhere from zero to almost twenty calls. When there is no one available to answer the calls as they come in, wait times develop. If staff fails to immediately deal with the calls waiting, a high percentage of callers experience a wait even after the peak phone activity has subsided.

**Figure 4: Patterns of Calls Received**



Data provided by CAR

The Grand Jury discussed the challenge of reacting quickly to a spike in calls with the County 9-1-1 call center. The strategies they employ include the following methods:

- 1) Training call operators who are not on the phone to interrupt the work they are doing (including filling out forms) to take any waiting calls;
- 2) Having supervisors take any waiting calls if all operators are occupied on the phone; and
- 3) Sending waiting calls to clerical staff for the sole purpose of determining the level of urgency of the call, and taking appropriate steps based on that evaluation.

In many organizations, when work groups identify chronic areas of concern, it is common to see charts on the wall reflecting the data on the issue and the progress toward improvement. When upper management has concerns about a critical work issue, they insist on regular updates on the strategies that supervisors are trying and the results of the improvement efforts. The Grand Jury found no evidence of these management activities in addressing CAR dropped calls and long wait times.

A picture of the work environment in CAR was consistently reported during the interviews. In rough numbers, the productive social worker takes approximately one call per hour. The average call varies greatly in length but averages around 15 minutes. The amount of time required to complete the history investigation, decision-making process, documentation, and referral to the appropriate agency, takes about 40 minutes per call. Given those approximations, about 1/3 of the available staff would be on the phone and about 2/3 of the staff would be off the phone doing the post-call work at any given time. Supervisors spend most of their time off the phone, often in consultation with a social worker.

Understandably, people who are focused on the work at hand do not like to be interrupted to handle another responsibility. If supervisors do not insist that lower priority tasks be interrupted for higher priority tasks, most employees will opt to continue the work they are doing. The County 9-1-1 call center overcomes this phenomenon with intensive training to successfully prioritize and multitask during those peak times when it is needed. This strategy does not work if some individuals take waiting calls while others do not. If a small group of workers decided to take the waiting calls whenever they occurred, they would soon be swamped. If everyone is organized to be equally tasked with taking the waiting calls even if they are already occupied, it works, and nobody's workload is dramatically impacted. But this approach requires active orchestration and supervision.

CAR management is concerned that having a social worker interrupt his or her work to take a waiting call will compromise the quality of the report. However, social workers have the ability to replay the original call if needed to ensure the accuracy of the facts. Some supervisors expressed concern that some of the social workers were poorly equipped to handle the level of multitasking needed and that only those who "felt comfortable" doing it should try. Supervisors are rarely asked to put aside their current task, no matter how mundane it might be, to answer a call from the waiting list.

If the caller hangs up, CAR will never know what type of call it was. The call could have been only an I/O call, but then it very well could have been a call warranting immediate action. It is hard to reconcile the lack of aggressive management action to fix

the root cause of dropped calls with the purported level of concern expressed about their high occurrence.

## **FINDINGS**

In accordance with California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the 2014-2015 Grand Jury requires responses from each agency affected by the findings presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Based on its investigation titled “Child Abuse Hotline – Unanswered Cries for Help,” the 2014-2015 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at seven findings, as follows:

- F.1.** Since 2012, the percentage of dropped calls has increased significantly to an unacceptable level.
- F.2.** Significant improvement in dropped call rates is a reasonable expectation because during the last three years, there have been months when the Child Abuse Registry achieved dropped call rates in the range of 5%-7%.
- F.3.** The new requirement to document all Information-Only calls from mandated reporters contributed to increased waiting time on Child Abuse Registry calls because most social workers do not answer waiting calls while doing the additional documentation.
- F.4.** The volume of child abuse calls coming into the Child Abuse Registry has significantly increased, which necessitates changing management strategies for dealing with the increased amount and complexity of the activity.
- F.5.** The Adult Protective Services hotline was absorbed into the Child Abuse Registry. Most social workers interviewed reported that they felt competent and enjoyed taking the calls for the agency from which they came (child or adult), but still felt unsure, slower, and less confident taking calls for the other agency.
- F.6.** Hotline social workers are required to input the same repeated data on multiple forms for the same call. Manual data entry is duplicated, which requires additional time away from being available to take waiting calls.
- F.7.** CAR management does not appear to have specific policies or strategies for dealing with peak periods when there are long wait times and high dropped call rates.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In accordance with California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the 2014-2015 Grand Jury requires responses from each agency affected by the recommendations presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Based on its investigation titled “Child Abuse Hotline – Unanswered Cries for Help,” the 2014-2015 Orange County Grand Jury makes the following four recommendations:

- R.1.** The Child Abuse Registry should examine the feasibility of utilizing an abbreviated report for mandated Information-Only calls to expedite completion of these reports, thus freeing up the hotline worker to take waiting calls. **(F.3.)**
- R.2.** Additional training of all Child Abuse Registry social workers should continue until all workers feel equally competent taking both adult and child calls. While training is disruptive and time consuming, the formal training should continue as a priority. **(F.5.)**
- R.3.** All documentation completed by hotline social workers should be examined with the goal of eliminating redundancies in order to allow quicker completion of the paperwork, thus freeing up social workers for waiting calls. **(F.6.)**
- R.4.** The Social Services Agency and the Child Abuse Registry should become more proactive in addressing the excessive number of dropped calls and establish strategies and policies to reduce the dropped-call rate with an initial goal of returning to less than 5%. A partial list of strategies that could be considered for dealing with spike volume periods include:
  - a) training and requiring staff to multitask (taking a waiting call prior to completing the post-call work on the previous call);
  - b) designating supervisors to answer waiting calls; and
  - c) specifying staff members to triage calls to determine the level of urgency and potentially taking a message for call-back.

**(F.1., F.2., F.4., F.7)**

### **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

The California Penal Code section 933 requires the governing body of any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the governing body. Such comment shall be made no later than 90 days after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court). Additionally, in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such elected official shall comment on the findings and recommendations pertaining to the matters under that elected official’s control within 60 days to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code section 933.05, subdivisions (a), (b), and (c), provides as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

(a) As to each Grand Jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:

(1) The respondent agrees with the finding

(2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.

(b) As to each Grand Jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:

(1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.

(2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.

(3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.

(4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefore.

(c) If a finding or recommendation of the Grand Jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the Grand Jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary /or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with Penal Code section 933.05 are required from:

Responses Required

Orange County Board of Supervisors: F.1., F.2., F.3., F.4., F.5., F.6., F.7., R.1., R.2., R.3., R.4.

Responses Requested:

Social Services Agency: F.1., F.2., F.3., F.4., F.5., F.6., F.7., R.1., R.2., R.3., R.4.

**COMMENDATION**

The Grand Jury wishes to commend all of the CAR managers and social workers who were interviewed during the course of this investigation. Their responsiveness to requests for information and coordination of interviews facilitated the work of the Grand Jury. The commitment to their work in addressing the difficult task of preventing child abuse was most notable.

## **APPENDIX A - MANDATED REPORTER DEFINITION**

“A mandated reporter is a person who is required to report knowledge or reasonable suspicion of child abuse which is obtained while acting in a professional capacity or within the scope of his or her employment.” (CFS Operations Manual, 2014, p. 4).

Pursuant to the California penal code, mandated reporters include:

- teachers and school staff
- social workers, psychologists and therapists
- child (day) care workers
- peace officers, firefighters, and emergency management staff
- physicians, nurses, and hospital personnel
- clergy and religious organization workers
- alcohol or drug rehabilitation counselors
- Staff/volunteers for private organizations having direct contact with children.

*(for a complete listing, see Penal Code section 11165.7)*

## **APPENDIX B - LEGAL DEFINITION OF CHILD ABUSE**

Under the law, when the victim is a child (a person under the age of 18) and the perpetrator is any person (including a child), the following types of abuse must be reported by all legally mandated reporters:

- A physical injury inflicted by other than accidental means on a child. (P.C. 11165.6).
- Child sexual abuse including both sexual assault and sexual exploitation. Sexual assault includes sex acts with children, intentional masturbation in the presence of children and child molestation. Sexual exploitation includes preparing, selling or distributing pornographic materials involving children, performances involving obscene sexual conduct and child prostitution. (P.C. 11165.1)
- Willful cruelty or unjustified punishment, including inflicting or permitting unjustifiable physical pain or mental suffering, or the endangerment of the child's person or health. (P.C. 11165.3). "Mental suffering" in and of itself is not required to be reported. However, it may be reported. (P.C. 11166[b]).
- Unlawful corporal punishment or injury, willfully inflicted, resulting in a traumatic condition (P.C. 11165.4) .
- Neglect of a child, whether "severe" or "general," must also be reported if the perpetrator is a person responsible for the child's welfare. It includes acts or omissions harming or threatening to harm the child's health or welfare. (P.C. 11165.2) (CA codes).
- Any of the above types of abuse or neglect occurring in out-of-home care. (P.C. 11165.5).



## APPENDIX C - ADDITIONAL SOURCES FOR INVESTIGATION

1. Interviews of managers from:
  - LA County Department of Children & Family Services
  - Ventura County Child Protective Services
  - Riverside County Children Services Division
  - San Bernardino County Children and Family Services
  - San Diego County Child Protective Services
  - Santa Barbara County Child Protective Services
2. Documents: CA Department of Social Services; Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) pp. 1-3.
3. Child and Family Services Operations Manual: Child Abuse Registry, Number M0109.
4. Review of random sample of 100 cases of the 2203 that were initially not referred for investigation but at a subsequent hotline call, were referred, mostly as a 10-day referral (a referral where the social worker must visit home within 10 days).
5. CAR graph presenting total number of calls, number of reports, number of dropped calls, and number of reports for the period from January 2013 to July, 2014.
6. Child Abuse Registry Interval Report from October 6, 2014 to October 9, 2014 indicating calls answered, longest waiting times, number of dropped calls, and total calls answered.
7. Summary of California Child Welfare Services: Report 2013-110 Summary-April 2014. (Audit of Butte, Orange, and San Francisco County.)
8. California State Auditor's Report: Child Welfare Services. Report #2013-110 (Full Report.). April, 2014.
9. Interviews with staff members at all levels of the Child Abuse Registry and the Social Services Agency.
10. Interviews with child and adult abuse hotline social workers.
11. Review of Structured Decision Making (SDM) assessment tools (documents).
12. Interview of supervisors/managers of Child Protective Services Divisions of Los Angeles, San Diego, Riverside, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Bernardino.
13. Review of OC CAR website discussion on "Abuse Report." Retrieved from <http://ssa.ocgov.com/abuse/>.
14. Review of CFS Operations Manual Sections on:
  - Sexual Abuse Allegations-Child Abuse Registry (CAR) Number: A-0205
  - Structured Decision-Making, Number:D-0311 (SDM).
  - Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), Number: B-0216
  - SOP: Required forms
  - Team Decision-Making, Number: 0308
  - Abuse Investigations-Practice Guidelines, Number, A-0412
15. Human Services Committee members sat in with Senior Social Workers to observe as calls came into the hotline.
16. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau (2003). *Decision-making in Unsubstantiated Child Protective Services Cases*. Washington, DC.

17. Virginia Board of Social Sciences (June, 2009). *Adult Protective Services Minimum Training Standards*.
18. Review of past Grand Jury Reports
  - 1993-1994, Child Abuse Registry
  - 2003-2004, A Child At Risk: Missed Opportunities To Save a Life
  - 2005-2006, Improving Child Abuse Response
  - 2006-2007, Death By Abuse: One Death is Too Many

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- CFS Operations Manual, 2014 M-0109, Child Abuse Registry (CAR).
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