

CHILD ABUSE SERVICES TEAM (CAST)

SUMMARY

Orange County can be justly proud of its personnel and facilities for conducting child sexual-abuse investigations. The Child Abuse Services Team (CAST) is responsible and effective. Investigations are conducted at two facilities—both a central and a southern site. The organization conducts child sexual-abuse investigations, determines custody needs, assesses whether criminal prosecution is necessary, and provides crisis intervention therapy when needed. In addition, CAST educates the community in all aspects of child abuse and has received national and international recognition for its work. This multi-disciplinary team program relies upon strong community involvement from volunteers and corporations as well as County personnel.

To some extent, however, the very success of CAST has caused problems to be overlooked. The personnel are excellent, but there is no one being trained for the future in several of the very specialized areas of work. In addition, the 1999-2000 Orange County Grand Jury has found that the south CAST facility has been underutilized, and of the over 700 children assessed each year less than 10 percent are interviewed at the south site. With the 1999 opening of the new, larger central CAST facility, further analysis of the cost benefit for the south CAST facility should be undertaken.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In the fall of 1999, members of the Orange County Grand Jury visited the facilities for CAST in central Orange County. Encouraged by the new facilities and the enthusiasm of CAST personnel, the Grand Jury decided to undertake a study of CAST to determine whether this specialized program is indeed serving the citizens of Orange County and whether any improvements are needed.

METHOD OF STUDY

CAST is a public/private partnership made up of the Office of the District Attorney (DA), the Orange County Health Care Agency, the Social Services Agency, law enforcement agencies, non-profit Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), and the non-profit Prevent Child

Abuse Orange County (PCA-OC) organization. As part of this study, the Grand Jury interviewed personnel from these groups, attended meetings, visited both the central and south CAST facilities, and reviewed written information.

BACKGROUND

In 1987 the Orange County Board of Supervisors appointed a blue-ribbon task force to develop a multi-disciplinary team program for conducting child sexual-abuse investigations. The mission of the task force was to design a program to decrease the trauma children experienced during investigations of child sexual abuse. Instead of many interviews over many days, the program was designed to allow law enforcement and child protective personnel to complete their forensic investigations in a more timely, thorough, and consistent manner.

After a year of study, the blue-ribbon task force recommended the project now known as the Child Abuse Services Team (CAST). It began operating in March 1989. It has since increased its efforts to include child physical-abuse and witness-to-violence cases.

THE PROCESS

Once police or social workers receive a sexual-abuse allegation, the child is brought to the CAST facility where he or she is supported throughout the investigation, interviews, and examinations by a CASA volunteer who provides emotional support. An interview is conducted by a senior social worker who is an interview specialist. Other professionals (including the deputy DA, therapist, detective, and nurse practitioner) observe the interview through a two-way mirror and are able to contact the interview specialist when necessary by a connecting telephone. The interview is video-taped and audio-taped for later use. The professionals then determine protective custody needs, assess whether criminal prosecution is necessary, and provide crisis intervention therapy when needed.

This process enables CAST to substantially reduce the number of interviews for a child, resulting in reduced trauma. Because of the success of the CAST methods, it is very rare for children to be required to give live testimony about sexual abuse in court in Orange County. This multi-disciplinary team approach makes the difficult process as painless as possible.

THE CENTRAL CAST FACILITY

Originally, the central CAST site was at Orangewood Children's Home. Late in 1999 these offices were moved to a new site in central Orange County. The new facility is much larger and attractively decorated. Many of the beautiful murals and other interior decorations were the result of hours of work by staff members and outside volunteers. There are two interview rooms, each with a two-way mirror for the observers. There is a large reception room with inviting play areas and quiet meeting rooms for families. There is a medical examination room with attractive artwork and offices for members of the multi-disciplinary team.

THE SOUTH CAST FACILITY

The CAST facility in south Orange County was opened in 1992. It is a smaller facility with one interview room, a small reception area, and several offices. Although it has been open nearly as long as the central CAST facility, it has never reached a proportionate level of use—less than 10 percent of the interviews each year are conducted at the south county facility. As medical equipment has broken down at the central facility, replacements have been made by cannibalizing the south facility equipment. At the time of this investigation, all of the equipment in south county had been removed so that medical examinations now must be conducted elsewhere. The interview specialists, therapists, and DA personnel travel to this site from their central offices when interviews are scheduled. The only permanent on-site personnel are eight social workers, a supervisor, and clerical staff.

Because of the expense involved with this site (over \$6,600 per month in rent alone), the 1999–2000 Grand Jury began this study questioning whether this site was still necessary after the opening of the larger central facility.

The following reasons have been given by county personnel for retaining the site:

- It is closer for south county families receiving therapy and therefore less of a burden to them financially.
- It allows south county children receiving therapy to miss less school time because it is closer to home.
- It allows for backup in case the systems at the central facility are down.
- It serves as a waiting room for children awaiting home assessments for placements with relatives.
- The facility is used occasionally for high-profile cases.
- Future plans include forensic interviews in cases of physical abuse as well as sexual abuse, possibly leading to an increased interview load at both sites.

THE PERSONNEL

Many child-abuse specialties are represented at the CAST facilities. The Social Services Agency is responsible for one full-time program manager, three half-time supervisors, three senior social workers, clerical and reception staff, and one office technician. The non-profit Prevent Child Abuse Orange County (PCA-OC) organization pays for one full-time and two part-time therapists to perform short-term therapy. The Health Care Agency pays for one pediatric nurse practitioner, one information processing technician, and a pediatrician who works four hours per week. The Office of the District Attorney pays for one full-time Deputy DA for sexual-abuse cases and one full-time Deputy DA and an investigator for physical-

abuse cases. The non-profit Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) organization pays for three part-time workers and has 70 volunteers.

THE WORK

The services provided at CAST are very specialized, and staff expertise takes many hours of on-the-job training. Medical and DA personnel need to testify as expert witnesses in court as well as become adept at their particular specialties. This court expertise takes a background of many hours of work in the field to be successful. For this reason, both training of personnel and length of time in the position become extremely important.

In addition to being quite specialized, the work is by its very nature most stressful. For this reason, there appears to be a strong sense of teamwork among the various specialties and significant time spent in the planning and debriefing processes.

CAST also reaches out to the wider community to educate in all aspects of child abuse. The organization has received national recognition for its work and has become a model for other counties. There is a one-week program at the central site, which trains pediatric residents from the University of California, Irvine, Miller Children's Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, and Children's Hospital of Orange County. The CAST pediatrician consults with other physicians in detecting accidental vs. inflicted trauma. This is an important part of the work of CAST, and additional training of physicians would allow for better detection of child sexual abuse in Orange County.

LANGUAGE

More than half of the children interviewed at CAST are Hispanic. Although most of these children speak English well, CAST personnel have found that often when children are highly stressed they are more comfortable speaking their first language. These children often have difficulty when discussing private body parts or explaining complicated events. Frequently they will switch languages in the middle of an interview session, necessitating a quick roundup of translators for the taping and interview rooms. This sudden requirement is a reason why the central CAST site, with its larger employee group, can often be more effective.

Of course, with the many languages spoken in Orange County today, other language difficulties can occur during the interview process. Social workers often call on known co-workers from their agency to translate. There are no formal procedures in place for obtaining translators.

CONCERNS

During its investigation, the Grand Jury found several problems with CAST:

- As the number of children served has grown, the number of medical personnel, DA interviewers, and interview specialists has not grown correspondingly.

- Because personnel at the facilities are extremely dedicated, the workload for the nurse practitioner, the Deputy DA in charge of sexual abuse, and the central facility supervisor has often resulted in many extra hours per week.
- Although half of the children receiving services are Hispanic, there is only one Spanish-speaking interview specialist on the staff.
- Not only is there a problem of overwork with possible burnout, there is also little provision for backup should one of these workers become ill or leave the job. These positions are not ones that can be filled easily—the length of time for gaining expertise in this field is a significant factor in employment and in the continuing success of CAST.

FINDINGS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at the following findings:

1. There is only one nurse practitioner assigned full-time to CAST and one physician assigned for four hours per week.

A response to Finding 1 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Health Care Agency**.

2. There is only one Deputy District Attorney assigned full-time to CAST to handle child sexual-abuse cases.

A response to Finding 2 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and from the **District Attorney**.

3. There is only one Spanish-speaking interview specialist out of the three specialists assigned to CAST, even though half of the children interviewed are Hispanic and many have Spanish as their first language.

A response to Finding 3 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Social Services Agency**.

4. There are problems, at times, with adequate translation services for interviews in languages other than English or Spanish.

A response to Finding 4 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Social Services Agency**.

5. The south CAST facility has not been fully staffed and equipped, as personnel and equipment have been concentrated at the central CAST facility.

A response to Finding 5 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Social Services Agency**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. Based on the findings, the 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that:

1. Both an additional nurse practitioner and a physician should be assigned at least half time to CAST.

A response to Recommendation 1 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Health Care Agency**.

2. One additional Deputy District Attorney cases should be assigned to CAST at least half time to handle child sexual-abuse cases.

A response to Recommendation 2 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and from the **District Attorney**.

3. One additional full-time Spanish-speaking interview specialist should be assigned to CAST.

A response to Recommendation 3 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Social Services Agency**.

4. Coordination with the Superior Court translator services should be initiated in order that translators can be more quickly and easily employed when necessary.

A response to Recommendation 4 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Social Services Agency**.

5. The Social Services Agency should complete a study to determine whether the south CAST facility is cost-justified based upon current usage and future needs. The study should be completed by December 31, 2000, so that a decision for retention or closure can be made prior to expiration of the lease in December 2001.

A response to Recommendation 5 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Social Services Agency**.

COMMENDATIONS

The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury commends:

- The personnel of CAST for their dedication to the children of Orange County. They perform very stressful work with great empathy and sensitivity. In addition to the County-employed personnel, there is wonderful support from community volunteers through the CASA organization.
- Three Orange County artists for their donations of time and talent in designing murals and other decorative items for the central CAST facility. The artists are:
Carol A. Cole of *Art Designs*
Laurel Dahlen of *Divine Design*
Patrick Reilly of *Mixed Media*
- The Orange County Woodworker’s Association for donations of time and materials for the design and building of cabinets and play equipment for the central CAST facility.