

# **ABANDONED CALLS AT THE CHILD ABUSE REGISTRY**

---

## **SUMMARY**

The Orange County Child Abuse Registry (CAR) is an organization within the Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services. CAR has the vital responsibility to provide a 24 hours per day, seven days per week, hot line to receive reports of suspected child abuse and to provide emergency responses as necessary to protect children of Orange County. Occasionally all incoming phone lines are in use. The Automated Call Distribution system, currently in operation, essentially places the caller on hold until the next available Social Worker can answer an incoming call.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to review the procedures being used by CAR with regard to incoming abuse calls and non-abuse inquiries and to identify functions at the CAR for improvement in response to incoming calls. The objective is to make constructive recommendations to improve hot line phone services.

## **BACKGROUND**

CAR is one of the primary points of entry into the Orange County Social Services Agency (OCSSA) for reporting alleged child abuse incidents. The CAR hot line is manned by Senior Social Workers, 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

The OCSSA reported that CAR received an average of 3,738 calls each month during 2001. Of these calls, 2,072 resulted in child abuse investigations. Other calls are for information and referral. The average wait time before a caller hangs up (abandons) without speaking with a Social Worker during the same period is two minutes, six

seconds. The average speed of answer is 1 minute 9 seconds. Between March through November 2001, 15% of incoming calls were abandoned (See Table 1). Each call that is answered, regardless of its nature, is answered by a CAR Social Worker. Each caller receives a human response to their concern whatever it may be, child abuse or not.

Once an abuse call has been received and evaluated, a determination is made whether an immediate or deferred response is required. In the event that an immediate response is required, an emergency response Social Worker, often accompanied by a sworn law enforcement officer is immediately dispatched to investigate and assess the risk to the child from a potential or real abusive environment and remove the child if the circumstances warrant. On routine abuse reports, assessments are made and an appropriate response is initiated within mandated time frames.

The time of a CAR Social Worker is also allocated to other responsibilities. In some instances, information provided by the reporting party can be incomplete or inaccurate. The information must be verified, such as correct location and address of the minor, and name of the minor's school, when applicable. The same would apply to hospitals, medical information and criminal checks of reported perpetrators. This advance verification serves to maximize the field Social Worker's time as well as the worker's safety.

A duplication of effort that included child abuse entry reports that were processed by both paper forms and electronic data entry has been largely eliminated with the advent of electronic entry of abuse reports. However, the percentage of abandoned calls has not significantly decreased.

**TABLE 1**  
**Data Provided by Social Services Agency of Orange County for 2001**

| <b>Month</b> | <b>Total Calls Answered</b> | <b>Average Speed of Answer</b> | <b>Longest Wait Time Before Being Answered</b> | <b>Average Wait Time Before Abandonment</b> | <b>Total Calls</b> | <b>Calls Lost</b> |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|--------------------|-------------------|
| March        | 3,103                       | 2.52 min/sec                   | 47.10 min/sec                                  | 2.59 min/sec                                | 4,278              | 1,175             |
| April        | 2,821                       | 1.26 min/sec                   | 30.56 min/sec                                  | 2.11 min/sec                                | 3,464              | 643               |
| May          | 3,460                       | 1.11 min/sec                   | 24.56 min/sec                                  | 2.02 min/sec                                | 4,052              | 592               |
| June         | 3,014                       | 0.47 min/sec                   | 36.44 min/sec                                  | 2.10 min/sec                                | 3,416              | 402               |
| July         | 2,756                       | 0.39 min/sec                   | 44.30 min/sec                                  | 1.46 min/sec                                | 3,090              | 334               |
| Aug.         | 2,877                       | 0.35 min/sec                   | 22.58 min/sec                                  | 1.39 min/sec                                | 3,281              | 404               |
| Sept.        | 2,758                       | 0.48 min/sec                   | 20.08 min/sec                                  | 2.00 min/sec                                | 3,130              | 372               |
| Oct.         | 3,389                       | 0.55 min/sec                   | 21.08 min/sec                                  | 2.02 min/sec                                | 3,958              | 569               |
| Nov.         | 2,928                       | 1.06 min/sec                   | 28.38 min/sec                                  | 2.04 min/sec                                | 3,426              | 498               |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>27,106</b>               |                                |  |   | <b>32,095</b>      | <b>4,989</b>      |

**METHOD OF STUDY**

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with staff and supervisors in Orange County and San Diego County Social Services Agencies, Child Abuse Registry and Emergency Response Services to obtain comparative analyses of incoming call operations and procedures. The Grand Jury has reviewed data provided by the OCSSA regarding abandoned calls, time on hold and volume and nature of in-coming calls.

**FINDINGS**

Under California Penal Code Section 933 and Section 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The Orange County 2001-2002 Grand Jury arrived at six findings.

1. The existing configuration of the telephone equipment at the CAR hot-line abuse call in facility cannot accommodate certain upgrades necessary for improving efficiency.
2. The CAR Automated Call Distribution System places unanswered incoming calls in a chronological queue. The calls are answered in order by the next available Social Worker.

3. The CAR Automated Call Distribution System cannot accommodate an Automated Attendant Feature in its present configuration.
4. Present CAR Automated Call Distribution System does not have the capability to accept voice mail messages. The caller either must wait for a Social Worker to answer or must abandon the call.
5. No CAR phones have real time capability to indicate that there has been a call abandoned or that there is a voice mail that needs a response.
6. Presently there are no clerical or administrative personnel whose responsibility is solely to respond to non-abuse calls.

**Responses to Findings 1-6 are required from the Orange County Board of Supervisors and requested from the Orange County Social Services Agency.**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Under California Penal Code Section 933 and Section 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 2001-2002 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that CAR:

1. Acquire new telephone equipment or upgrade and program existing telephone equipment to improve the efficiency of the CAR abuse call in system.
2. Retain feature that directs unanswered calls in chronological order to the next available Social Worker.
3. Install Automated Attendant Feature – with options to include a language selection, non-abuse calls, social worker direct calls and child abuse calls.
4. Install Voice Mail Feature – to leave abuse messages as an option to remaining on hold to speak with a Social Worker.
5. Install on each telephone instrument a device to indicate there is a child abuse voice mail message that needs a response.
6. Provide clerical or administrative personnel to respond to non-abuse calls.

**Responses are required to Recommendations 1-6 from the Orange County Board of Supervisors and requested from the Orange County Social Services Agency.**

## **COMMENDATIONS**

The 2001-2002 Orange County Grand Jury commends the Orange County Social Services Agency CAR for the great progress noted in transitioning from paper to electronic child abuse file entry.

The Grand Jury, while interviewing the CAR staff and supervision, was impressed by the level of professionalism and dedication displayed toward being well informed and involved in child abuse cases.