

City of Alexandria, Virginia

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1-22-02

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JANUARY 15, 2002

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: SECOND STATUS REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF
AMERICA

ISSUE: Receipt of the second status report on implementation of the recommendations of the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA).

RECOMMENDATION: That the City Council receive this report.

BACKGROUND: On June 12, 2001, City Council received the CWLA report that reviewed the death of Katelynn Frazier who had been in the custody of the Department of Human Services. The CWLA had been asked to review the tragic death of Katelynn in order to assist the City in examining the policies and practices of its child welfare system, and to recommend improvements that would help the City protect its vulnerable children. The League's report contained a number of recommended improvements in the areas of policy, practice and procedure. At the June 12 meeting, Council asked that staff return in the fall with a status report on the implementation of these improvements. On September 15, 2001, the first status report was reviewed, and Council requested continued progress reports.

DISCUSSION: The Department of Human Services has made significant progress in its implementation of the recommendations made by the CWLA. The major areas of change are discussed below. A statement of all the League's recommendations and the implementation status of each is attached (Attachment I).

Structured Risk Assessments. The Department of Human Services has completed the design of Alexandria's structured risk assessment tools and completed training of all child welfare staff on the new tools. The risk assessment tools are based on the Washington State model, and were refined to meet Virginia policy and the needs and focus of the City. The Department gained the assistance of the National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment and the Child Welfare Institute in this process. The effort to develop these tools has been extensive and has resulted in a series of risk and safety assessment tools that will be used throughout our child welfare cases. This continuous assessment process will begin with the child protective service investigation, will continue throughout the time a child is in foster care, and will end only when successful

reunification or other permanency plans are achieved. A specific assessment tool has been developed for use before any child in a reunification case is returned to a natural parent.

The State Department of Social Services has been involved in the development of the assessment tools, and has assisted with some of the funding of the effort. More importantly, they have indicated that Alexandria can use our new risk and safety tools in place of the State assessment tool that is limited only to child protective investigations. This will allow Alexandria to have a consistent process throughout the life of a child welfare case. Use of the new tools will begin on January 22. Further training is also planned in February for all interested stakeholders, including Court Appointed Special Advocates, guardians ad litem, mental health professionals, the Alexandria Juvenile Judges and court personnel.

This is a major and extensive change that will help to secure the safety of the City's children. Refinements may need to be made as experience is gained through the use of the tools. The Child Welfare Institute will continue to assist us in achieving a state of the art structured safety and risk assessment process, and will provide for quality assurance and evaluation.

"New Eyes" Policy. As you know, DHS has implemented a "New Eyes" policy. Under this policy, any injury (including any bruise or mark) to a child in foster care must be reviewed by a social worker who is not associated with the foster care case. This is in addition to the policy which requires that any complaint of abuse or neglect of a child in an active foster care case be investigated by a social worker not associated with the case. The "New Eyes" policy is designed to increase the objectivity of the assessment of possible or suspected injuries, and provides for multiple perspectives in a case.

Currently, foster parents are the primary reporters of injuries that occur to foster children while they are in the foster home. Under the "New Eyes" policy, foster parents are required to report all injuries, whether they are suspicious or not. Injuries that have been reported since the inception of the policy have included bee stings, scraped knees from playground falls and other injuries that are encountered in normal child development. The Policy Subcommittee of the Community Advisory Committee on Child Welfare Services suggested that a review of all injuries in licensed foster homes could be limited by type and severity of injury. They further suggested that focus should be placed on injuries that occur during visitation with the natural parent and during the reunification process by requiring parents to report all injuries as one part of their service plan. Staff is working on these changes.

Review of High-Risk Cases. Fairfax, Arlington and Alexandria Social Services have joined to provide outside risk assessments of high-risk cases in all three jurisdictions. Teams composed of supervisors from each jurisdiction now review 10 high-risk cases from each jurisdiction each quarter. These reviews include interviews with the social workers using a structured series of questions. All reviewers will meet as a group with a private child welfare consultant to review their findings for consistency in approach, and to identify any systemic issues across the region. The process of developing this collaborative risk review model has also benefitted the agencies

through the sharing of problems, ideas and solutions. Staff from Fairfax and Arlington will be attending the City's risk and safety assessment training, and they hope to be able to gain from the City's work in this area. DHS is also continuing its monthly random review of cases focusing on case documentation and compliance with policy. Future reviews will include a review of the use of the new risk and safety assessment tools.

Criminal Record and State Registry Checks. Another means to increase child safety is to require criminal record checks of all adults who, along with a child in DHS custody, reside in the home of the child's natural parent, including clearances from former states of residence. Under current Virginia law, the receipt of criminal history record information on these adults is only possible with the authorization of the adults themselves. Similarly, current State policy allows a check of the Central Registry for Founded Investigations of child abuse and neglect only with the authorization of such adults or a court order.

The City has included in its legislative package proposals that (i) will authorize local departments of social services to require criminal background checks on all adults living in a household where a child who is in the department's custody is to be placed, and (ii) will authorize local law enforcement agencies to perform criminal background checks on all adults who provide emergency child care. The legislative package also contains a proposal that will allow State and local departments of social services to proceed with placing a child for adoption or in permanent foster care within 30 days after taking a child under protection, if a juvenile court determines that reunification is inadvisable because seriously harmful acts (e.g., abandonment, torture, chronic abuse, sexual abuse) have occurred. Bills incorporating these proposals have been drafted and introduced, and staff is working with our delegation to secure their passage.

Case Collaboration. Prior to the reunification of any foster child, case collaboration meetings involving the foster parents, attorneys for all parties, the children's guardian ad litem and key service providers are being held. This process allows for a full discussion of the proposed reunification and of the plan to achieve the reunification, and allows for all parties to share any reservations and assure they are addressed.

DHS has also initiated monthly case collaboration meetings with Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services on shared cases. This process helps to assure that key elements in the service plan are being met, and that when problems arise, they are dealt with quickly. In addition, the two agencies also meet to discuss systemic issues that may need to be solved to assure the best service for the City's most vulnerable families and children.

Staffing. Pursuant to authorizations provided by Council last June, the Department has selected two new child welfare supervisors, an administrative assistant and a psychologist. All these professionals are now on staff. A new Chief of Services, who will oversee the operations of all child protective services and foster care work, has also been selected and will join the Department by March 1. All bring experience and new perspectives to our work that will enhance the City's child welfare efforts.

Community Advisory Committee. The Community Advisory Committee on Child Welfare Services (CCWS) has been meeting monthly since August. The Committee has formed three subcommittees: Public Education, Policy and Legislation. The Public Education Subcommittee began its work first and has made significant progress in developing a public education campaign on identifying and reporting child abuse. Two citizens, Phil Cohen and Ann Donohue, volunteered their time to assist in developing a logo for the education campaign (Attachment II). The logo focuses on the theme “Our Kids, Our Business,” and will be used not only to underline the need for all citizens to help identify and report child abuse and neglect, but also to help in providing foster homes for our children. Ensuring the welfare of the City’s children cannot be accomplished without the help of the whole community. The Public Education Subcommittee is working on scripts for a video and is locating volunteer help for the production. The Chair of this subcommittee, Linda App, and Meg O’Regan have been interviewed on two of the local cable shows and will be appearing on others in the future.

The Policy Subcommittee has also met and, as discussed earlier, has reviewed the “New Eyes” Policy. Their thoughtful consideration of this policy will produce changes in implementation that enhance child safety. Their serious commitment and clear focus are greatly appreciated.

The Legislative Subcommittee has not yet met, but will follow the City’s legislation in the General Assembly this year. It also will consider other legislation that can improve child welfare services in the Commonwealth.

The Department has committed itself to improving the City’s child welfare services. Staff have made significant progress over the past six months in implementing the CWLA recommendations and, with the help of their community partners, will continue to do so. I commend the staff, the Community Advisory Committee on Child Welfare Services and the many others who have demonstrated their unquestioned commitment to protecting the City’s most vulnerable children.

FISCAL IMPACT: There is no new fiscal impact to the City. The annual cost of the new staff positions is \$291,143 and will be funded with monies from federal reimbursement for local social services. We estimate that outside consultants for training, technical advice and assistance will cost approximately \$75,000, and that support of the Community Advisory Committee and the community education campaign will cost approximately \$25,000. These funds will also be derived from federal reimbursements for local social services.

ATTACHMENTS:

- I. Implementation of CWLA Recommendations
- II. Public Education Material

STAFF:

Meg O’Regan, Director, Department of Human Services
Suzanne T. Chis, Director, Division of Social Services

January 22, 2002

Implementation of CWLA Recommendations

POLICY

1. Recommendation

The agency should establish policy and practice guidelines for decision-making related to family reunification which should include the use of structured risk, safety, and family assessment tools. Time frames for the use of such tools should be established to ensure safety at every contact and to facilitate structured decision-making, highlighting key risk and safety indicators. Additionally, assessment tools would provide documentation of the basis for specific decisions. Reunification should not occur without a risk and safety assessment that incorporates the review of informal supports, formal services available, mental health condition of caregiver, special needs of children, caregiver parenting ability, and household composition. Safety must be assessed and documented at each contact.

Status

DHS has completed the design of Alexandria's risk and safety assessment tools and has completed training of all child welfare staff on the instruments. The use of risk and safety assessments begins with a child protective services investigation and continues to be utilized in foster care, active child protection and family services cases. Reassessments are completed at regular intervals or when there is a significant change in the family composition or dynamics. DHS began use of the new tools this month. Alexandria's risk and safety assessment process incorporates Virginia risk and safety tools utilized during child protection investigations and also incorporates a specific protocol to be used prior to reunification. Alexandria was assisted in development of this comprehensive risk and assessment process by Barry Salovitz, Director of the National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment. Mr. Salovitz has extensive experience developing risk and safety assessments for States, including New York, Illinois and Idaho. Funding for his consultative services was shared with the State Department of Social Services who are also interested in refining and expanding a risk and safety assessment process across the life of a child welfare case.

2. Recommendation

The agency should implement policies and procedures that require the review of all active cases in which the child is injured on more than one occasion. Agency policy should require that the Child Protective Service Unit assess all injuries occurring in active cases. Investigation and assessments of injuries by the ongoing caseworker risks over-identification of the worker with the family, application of differential standards, and lack of objectivity.

Multidisciplinary teams, composed of agency and non-agency professionals, should be convened routinely to review high-risk cases.

Status

The “New Eyes” policy went into effect on June 25, 2001. Any injury to a child in any active child welfare case is now being assessed by the Child Protective Services unit. All complaints of child abuse and neglect in active cases are continuing to be investigated by the Child Protective Services unit.

Currently the “New Eyes” policy is under review by the Policy subcommittee of the Community Advisory Committee on Child Welfare Services (CCWS). The subcommittee has suggested modifications to focus on the biological home, rather than the foster placement, when there is visitation or during the reunification process.

The City also completed a second review of high-risk cases in November using an outside consultant. Future risk reviews will occur quarterly and be conducted in collaboration with Fairfax and Arlington counties. This regional process expands the effort to improve outcomes for children throughout our region.

3. Recommendation

In addition to direct supervisory review of cases the agency should establish written policy that requires random reviews of cases by staff other than the direct supervisor and caseworker. The results of the reviews should be shared with the supervisor and caseworker.

The agency should provide resources that will institutionalize quality improvement, quality assurance, and quality control processes within the organizational structure.

The agency should develop a mechanism for producing management reports based on the results of quality assurance activities. These reports should be used to improve practice and/or change policies.

Status

Written policy has been developed that requires a random review of cases. Random reviews are completed monthly by the Director of Human Services with the Director of Social Services, as well as supervisors not associated with the case. Review results are shared with the social workers and supervisors. The Department is continuing its research of quality assurance processes. Quality assurance is planned for the new risk and safety assessment process that includes, establishing outcome measures, information collection and tracking. In addition a process evaluation plan will be completed and modifications made based on the analysis of the evaluation data.

4. Recommendation

The agency should continue individualized education plans for staff, based on assessed needs and skill levels. Additionally the agency should track the transfer of learning through case documentation and supervisory conferences.

Status

Individualized staff training plans will continue to be prepared based on the particular training need of the staff member. New written policy on supervision includes monitoring the transfer of learning and assessment of social workers' training needs. Transfer of learning will be monitored by the supervisor as part of the weekly supervision process.

5. Recommendation

The agency should establish written policy that requires routine collateral contacts with service providers and other parties to the case.

The agency should develop related protocols with social service providers; legal counsel for the agency, parents, and children, and medical and behavioral health systems.

Status

The Department has developed written policy that requires social workers to maintain routine collateral contacts with service providers and other parties to the case. Full collaboration meetings will occur prior to reunification of any child in the agency's custody. Various key participants will include CASA volunteers, parents, service providers and all involved attorneys.

The Department has contracts with all service vendors and began requiring monthly written reports from all providers and foster parents as of October 1, 2001. These monthly reports will be discussed with service providers to determine therapeutic progress or the need for change. These collaborations are in addition to those which now occur in the Family Assessment and Planning Teams (FAPT) meetings and other similar meetings.

6. Recommendation

Clearances should be obtained for every adult member in a household as a routine matter of policy and procedure. The agency should review and revise existing policy and related procedure to require that child abuse and criminal history clearances be obtained on all adults in the household, and that findings be documented and incorporated as key factors in decision making.

The policy should be specific that when an adult has resided in the current state for less than three to five years, clearances from the former state of residence should be obtained and included as a key factor in decision making.

Status

The Department is currently requiring criminal clearances on all adult household members in all foster care reunification cases. Now, these clearances are only possible with the voluntary authorization of the household member. In addition, current state policy only allows a check of the central registry of child abuse and neglect for persons who are the subject of a complaint of child abuse and neglect; not all household members in a reunification case. Staff recommended to the State Board of Social Services that both issues be reviewed and legislation proposed that would expand use of child protective service clearances and criminal records checks.

The City has included in its legislative package two items proposing legislation requiring criminal background checks for adults in households with children under the protection of social services and to authorize law enforcement to perform criminal background checks when needed to provide for emergency placements of children. These bills have been introduced and staff is working with the delegation to ensure the final legislation addresses our needs.

Expanded child abuse and criminal record checks, when available by law, will also be similarly incorporated into case decisions.

PRACTICE**1. Recommendation**

The agency should establish written policy that requires weekly formal supervisory conferences between caseworkers and supervisors. Supervisory conferences provide support for caseworkers and an opportunity for supervisors to monitor casework activities. Supervisor-manager conferences facilitate identification of key service program issues, agency management issues, and opportunity to develop strategies for enhanced services to children and families.

Status

Written policy has been established requiring documentation of weekly formal supervisory conferences between social workers and supervisors.

2. Recommendation

The agency should require that the case dictation document the use of and participation in services, and the evaluation of service effectiveness.

Status

Written policy has been established requiring increased case record documentation regarding use of services by the client family and evaluation of these services. The case record format has been redesigned to ensure that the record reflects and addresses social worker's assessment of all services. Monthly written progress reports from service

providers and foster parents are required to address service utilization and effectiveness. These reports will be utilized by the social workers as part of the assessment of the family's progress and the assessment of risk factors.

3. Recommendation

The agency should develop written instructions to staff that outline the need for documentation in the case notes that includes concrete and therapeutic services provided, and related information from service and treatment providers. Both types of services should match the assessed level of safety and risk.

Status

Written policy has been established to increase documentation of all services provided. The use of a structured risk assessment will show the relationship between service provision and safety and risk factors, and will help workers define the type and level of services needed to address assessed risk factors.

4. Recommendation

The agency should have standards of practice that require the verification of information related to a parent or caregiver's participation in services. Verification should include the frequency of participation and the quality of participation. This information should be documented in the case record dictation.

Status

Written policy has been established requiring verification of a parent or care giver's participation in services. Monthly reports are required from service providers.

5. Recommendation

The monitoring of caseworker contacts with foster children and foster parents should be an element in the quality assurance system and monitored by the supervisor through case record reviews.

Status

Current State policy requires social workers to visit with foster children and foster parents at least once per quarter in the foster home. Foster parents are required to complete a written monthly foster parent observation form. Supervisors are required to monitor compliance with this policy through a routine review of the OASIS computer documentation of contacts and regular review of the case record.

6. Recommendation

Agency managers stated that all workers receive training on how to identify indicators of abuse and neglect. The State of Virginia mandates this training. The agency should ensure that all caseworkers, after receiving the training, are applying the learning to their documented risk and safety assessments.

In addition, the agency should develop a plan for educating all service providers and the public on the characteristics of child abuse and neglect and how to report it.

Status

The Department will continue to monitor social worker's application of their learning to their risk assessments. This will occur by case conferences, supervisory conferences and follow up on training. Training on the new structured risk assessment has been completed and will be continued throughout the year to assure consistency and appropriate use of the tool.

Training of mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect is continuing and occurs annually. This fiscal year, the Child Protective Services unit has completed training for 150 new teachers, Mount Vernon Recreation Center staff, Health Department nurses, the Domestic Violence Committee, Carpenters Shelter staff and school social workers and psychologists, as well as for interested child serving agencies through the Community Services Act (CSA) Brown Bag lunch series.

The Public Education subcommittee of the Community Advisory Committee on Child Welfare Services is also working on a public education campaign. A new logo has been designed "Our Kids, Our Business" that focuses on involving the community in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. Public appearances have occurred and are planned in the future as well as advertising.

7. Recommendation

The agency should provide caseworkers with clear practice guidelines on how to make clinical connections between key observations related to the casework process, and case and service goals and objectives.

Practice guidelines should include direction as to when and how to use technical assistance from clinical consultants such as psychologist and psychiatrists.

Status

The new psychologist has been hired and will assist in establishing practice guidelines on making clinical connections.

PROCEDURES

1. Recommendation

The agency, with the City Attorney, should develop written guidelines for determining when appeals of court decisions are needed and when other court actions should be used to assure the safety, permanency, and well being of the child.

Status

Written guidelines will be implemented which require that a review of all relevant information, the evidence and the law will be made by the social workers, supervisors and managers and the City Attorney in determining whether an appeal is warranted.

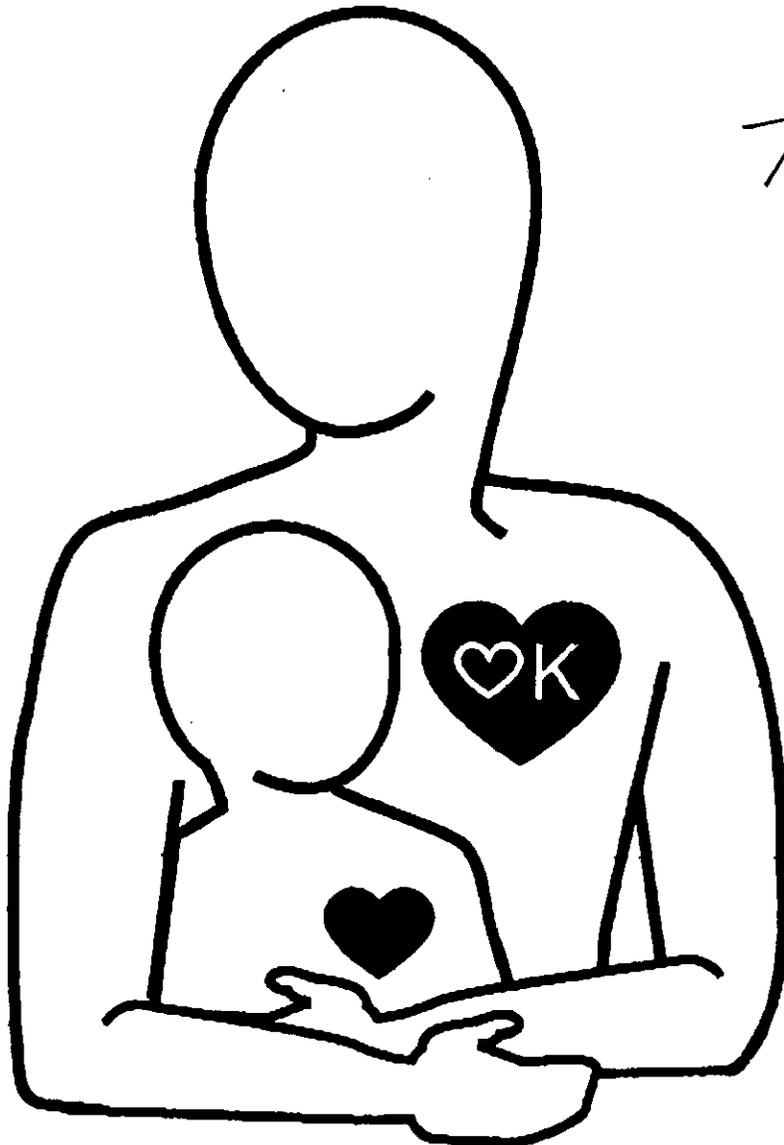
2. Recommendation

The Virginia Deputy Administrator for the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) provides training on all aspects of ICPC and is available for technical assistance. DHS supervisors and managers, and the Alexandria city attorneys, who provide counsel to the agency, should participate in training and request technical assistance when appropriate.

Status

This training occurred and was attended by Assistant City Attorney, Judges, social workers, attorneys and various service providers. Technical assistance is utilized when needed by seeking case conferencing with the ICPC Administrator.

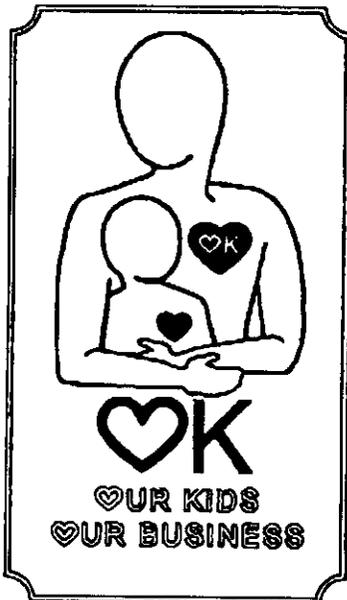
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