

County grapples with growing child welfare services caseloads

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | June 16, 2017

Yolo County is experiencing a dramatic increase in the number of reported cases of child abuse and neglect as well as in the number of children being removed from their homes following investigations of those reports.

Referrals requiring immediate response from the county — those for which child welfare staff deem the alleged maltreatment severe enough to require an investigation within 24 hours — increased by 96 percent between January 2016 and April 2017, with March and April of this year being particularly busy (57 referrals requiring immediate response in March and 51 in April).

Over the past year and half, child welfare services has responded to more than 460 referrals that required immediate response.

Meanwhile, the number of children removed from unsafe situations during that same time period increased 43 percent.

“We’ve ... had a dramatic increase in the numbers of children we’re removing from their homes,” Karen Larsen, head of Yolo County’s Health and Human Services Agency, told county supervisors last month.

Speaking in mid-May, Larsen said, “We’ve had about 60 children just since April. That’s a huge increase.”

Between January 2016 and April of this year, the county removed 293 children from unsafe home situations.

County staff noted that while the increase in children removed from their homes is likely related to the increase in immediate-response referrals, possible causes for the overall influx include:

- * Improved cross reporting by law enforcement agencies;
- * Improved fidelity when using the safety and risk assessment tool; and
- * Increased community awareness due to the child welfare services workshops convened by the Board of Supervisors.

Whatever the reasons, the county’s social workers are suffering the consequences.

And on top of that increased caseload, Larsen said, are increasing court orders for supervised visitation.

“Between the need for responding on immediate referrals, removing children from care and investigating those cases and having to supervise visits, our social workers cannot keep up,” she told supervisors last month.

Supervised visitation is commonly ordered by the court when a child has been removed from his or her parents due to abuse or neglect and is intended to help preserve the parent-child relationship during reunification services while also keeping the child safe.

In the six months leading up to April 2016, county staff reported, social worker practitioners covered 30 to 35 hours per month of supervised visits. Currently, they cover more than 539 hours per month — 351 of which are overtime hours to accommodate after-hours requests.

That supervision by county social workers is in addition to the supervised visitation provided by CommuniCare Health Centers through a contract with the county.

Supervisors Jim Provenza of Davis and Matt Rexroad of Woodland — who sit on the board’s child welfare services subcommittee — reported that Yolo County supervises three times as much visitation as other counties.

The subcommittee met in early May to discuss the increased workload and is recommending that the contract with CommuniCare be augmented to increase the supervised visitation the agency provides; that additional providers be located to assist with supervised visitation; and that additional positions be funded for child welfare services.

The last of the three — additional funding for staff — is critical, Larsen said.

“We need to take care of our staff,” she told supervisors.

“When I stand before you, I often focus on the facts and what you need to know, and it’s really important to acknowledge the people on the front lines and doing this work every day.

“They are amazing human beings who come to work every day just to protect children and they go into really dangerous situations and put themselves at risk every day, and we have to take care of them and part of that will have to be increasing our staff.”

Supervisors agreed.

“I am worried about the burnout rate,” said Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento. “I really can’t underscore the importance of the quality of the people we have doing the work ... They are working nonstop. This is real.”

His comments were echoed by Provenza and Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis as well.

The board plans to address funding for child welfare staff in the 2017-18 budget to be voted on in September.

— Reach Anne Ternus-Bellamy at aternus@davisenterprise.net or 530-747-8051. Follow her on Twitter at [@ATernusBellamy](https://twitter.com/ATernusBellamy)