



Activities and Performance Outcomes

Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council

April 2010 – March 2011

Introduction

The Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council is a membership council with over 22 active members representing public and private organizations, community members and parents committed to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Its activities are supported by KIDS Network staff in the Department of Social Services.

The role of the Child Abuse Prevention Council is to a) raise community awareness about child abuse and neglect; b) provide resources and education to organizations and community groups to assist parents and educate the public; c) encourage and facilitate community support for the prevention of child abuse and neglect; d) educate service providers working with families about the Mandated Reporting Law, Risk and Protective Factors and evidence-based interventions and programs for the prevention of child abuse and neglect; d) engage parents as leaders in child abuse and neglect activities; and e) plan for the allocation of county child abuse prevention resources.

The services of the Child Abuse Prevention Council work in tandem with the prevention services provided by its members, and are designed to enhance and support direct service activities in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. These include, but are not limited to, basic need services, substance abuse services, domestic violence services, case management, parent education, mental health services and general community support.

Child Abuse Prevention Efforts in Numbers

- **150,000+ (est.)** viewers & listeners reached with child abuse messaging in Spanish and English
- **\$25,000+** procured in matching funds and grants
- **1,200 average monthly page requests from over 2,000 unique individuals** accessing CAPC website – most popular sites in order of request:
 - **Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect**
 - Get Involved
 - About the CAPC
- **1,200** educational contacts through targeted newsletter articles distributed by e-mail
- **520** professionals trained in Mandated Reporting and effective child abuse and neglect prevention

- **22** active Parent Leaders trained to provide (primarily Spanish language) outreach and education on behalf of child abuse and neglect prevention.

CAPC Performance and Outcomes

Community members are informed and knowledgeable about how to prevent child abuse and neglect and supportive of the County's prevention efforts

- **Recorded a 30 minute segment** on Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention aired on July 5, 2010 on Univision, specifically targeted to Spanish speaking parents. Segment was recorded *with parent leaders as spokespeople for the program.*
- **Recorded two English-language interviews** on how to prevent child abuse and neglect aired May 2010 by American General Media (Pirate Radio/the Beach) and January 2011 (Sunny Country/The Fox)
- **Recorded a 30 minute segment on child abuse and neglect prevention aired on** La Preciosa & Radio Bronco targeted to Spanish speaking parents, aired October 2010 *initiated and recorded by parent leaders.*
- **Created 30 second commercial completely free of charge to the County (written by CAPC staff, production and airtime donated by KCOY) and included online option** to receive community donations to the Children's Trust Fund.

(See attached articles for samples of the Child Abuse Prevention Council's communication strategy in the media)

Training: Professionals working with families are equipped to provide high quality prevention services and know how to identify child abuse and neglect and respond accordingly

- **Two Child Abuse Prevention Academies, reaching over 160 current and future professionals in the Early Care and Education and Medical Assisting fields.** The Academies are co-sponsored by the Allan Hancock Early Care and Education Department and Santa Barbara City College and cover topics such as Mandated Reporting, Identifying Physical Abuse and the Role of Community Members in Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect. **93% of those surveyed after the City College Academy indicated that they felt "much more or more prepared to identify and report child abuse and neglect."** **82% indicated that they understood their role in prevention better.**
- **Wrote, designed and published "The CAPC Connection," reaching over 300 Mandated Reporters quarterly.** 4-page e-newsletter targeted at education-based Mandated Reporters. Contains information on how and when to report correctly, services and supports for families and general child abuse prevention information.
- **Organized full day training on utilizing evidence-based programs in prevention.** The training was provided by speakers from the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse and was attended by over 50 regional professionals.
- **13 trainings in Mandated Reporting and the 5 Protective Factors reaching over 300 community-based professionals.** Staff worked with CWS to create a high-quality, standardized Mandated Reporter presentation used by all CAPC organizations as well as resources in English and Spanish, such as tent cards on how to report. Training requests have been streamlined to be received through the website.

Community Engagement: All sectors of the community collaborate in the prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

- **Engaged and organized parent leaders as required by the State Office of Child Abuse Prevention.** Parents are engaged in outreach efforts on behalf of child abuse and neglect prevention. Staff supports a South County parent group and facilitated and sponsored the attendance of ten new parent leaders to participate in the Annual Parent Leadership Conference in Ontario, CA. Based on an application submitted by KIDS staff, Strategies is supporting the parent outreach efforts with \$3,500 to be used toward materials.

System Change and Coordination: Prevention efforts are strategic, coordinated and efficient

- **Participated in regional collaboration and coordination with San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties to strengthen regional child abuse prevention efforts.** Regional collaboration has resulted in state-wide attention to local efforts.
- **Coordinated, facilitated and logistically supported 11 Child Abuse Prevention Council meetings,** focused on education, coordination and engagement of public and community-based agencies serving children and families in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.
- **Regional Convening.** Collaborated with San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties to hold day-long summit focused on engaging Child Welfare and Prevention leaders in coordination and collaboration efforts.

A publication of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Santa Barbara County — because their world depends on us!
 Member of the Coastal Tri-Counties Child Abuse Prevention Council

I Made the Report. Now What?

(This story is continued from our October CAPC Connection issue.)

“Did my call help this family?” That is certainly our intent when we make a report to the hotline. This article continues our examination of a “typical” case from the last issue to help us understand how Child Welfare Services might respond to one of our legally mandated reports.

In the last issue, based on a mandated report from the teacher, the case worker had established a safety plan for the family while leaving the children in the home. Now she has 30 days to decide whether to open a case that will lead to further services for the family.

During those 30 days the investigating social worker has three main tasks: decide whether there is sufficient evidence for child abuse and neglect to substantiate* the referral; decide what resources or services will most benefit the family; and decide whether to provide emergency response services during this period, such as emergency shelter care, substance abuse testing or parenting training.

In the case of our family, the social worker, who, based on her observations at the visit and meetings with the mother and father, is considering the children to be at high risk of neglect, now returns to the Structured Decision Making tool and completes a family risk assessment to help her determine next steps for the family. At this point a so-

cial worker may also call a Team Decision Making meeting if the family is involved with various service providers or there are other people playing an important role in the family’s life. When deciding whether to open a case on the family, the social worker researches and takes into account such circumstances as whether there have been any prior investigations on this family for any type of abuse or neglect, the age of the children, whether any of the children have physical, mental or learning disabilities, whether one of the parents has mental health or substance abuse problems, and whether there is any domestic violence or criminal history in the family. In our case, the social worker arrives at a “high risk level recommendation” based on the fact that the younger child seems developmentally delayed and is not receiving any services, the mother seems severely depressed at times and neither of the parents is consistently taking care of the physical needs of the children. This recommendation in turn causes the



social worker to open a formal case for services for this family. A letter is sent to the mandated reporter stating that the report was substantiated. This is the final communication with the mandated reporter.

The Case Plan

Because the social worker deems it safe for the children to stay at home, but considers the risk too serious for voluntary engagement of the family, the case is now passed on to the **Court Services** Unit, which will file a dependency petition for the children with the juvenile court. In our case, the court agrees to keep the children at home and the family is assigned to the **Family Maintenance** Unit. A different social worker from this unit now takes over and develops a case plan with the family. The case plan is based on assessing strengths and needs of the family. Goals that are included for our family are stabilizing the mother’s depression, engaging the father in providing adequate and appropriate parenting, and arranging for an assessment and possible services for the younger sibling. The social worker’s role is to help the family access services, monitor the family’s progress toward the agreed upon goals and continuously evaluate the children’s safety and well-being. The parents’ role is to actively participate in taking steps towards resolving the issues they are facing. Throughout this process, the social worker is bound by very strict timelines and regulations once a petition has for-

mally been filed in court. The Family Maintenance social worker is required to conduct a formal risk re-assessment at least every six months, including any time that circumstances for the family change. In addition, the social worker is required by law to meet with the family and others involved in the case from one to four times a month depending on the severity of the risk. At those meetings, which are often but not exclusively in the caregivers' home, the social worker reviews with the family progress toward the plan's goals and current needs, and continuously re-assesses the child's safety.

What help does the family receive?

As in many cases encountered by Child Welfare Services social workers in their daily practice, our family's problems are serious and require specialized services. These services, particularly in languages other than English, are often impacted and waiting lists make it difficult to obtain timely assessments. In addition, many families have been dealing with the issues for years before they come to the attention of a mandated reporter. Luckily our family is able to schedule an assessment of their younger child with Tri-Counties Regional Center within the week. The assessment indicates that the child requires therapeutic intervention and would benefit from interaction with peers and trained pre-school teachers. The social worker helps the family identify an inclusion pre-school with an opening for subsidized care. Out of concern for the parents' ability to transport the child regularly to the program, the social worker works with them specifically on anticipating barriers and finding solutions. She also explains to the parents the importance of regular attendance for the child's development. In the mother's case the family is less for-

tunate. There are no current openings for mental health assessments or depression support services where the family lives. After considerable research and many phone calls, the social worker is able to identify a community agency that will transport the mother once a week to the county's mental health clinic, where once diagnosed she will be receiving services or referred for further treatment.

The father, who initially was very angry about Child Welfare Services' involvement and refused to acknowledge his younger son's developmental delays and his wife's mental health struggles, is now resigned to participate to ensure that his children are not removed from home. He agrees to be present at home visits conducted by a community-based Safe-Care® worker trained to help families struggling with neglect.

This is the point at which we leave our family. The case worker may stay with this family up to a year, but more typically will close a case after 6 months to one year. It is too soon to tell whether, once the intensive support provided by the social worker ends, the family will be able to continue their progress by independently utilizing the services that are surely necessary for some time to come. We also don't know whether the father will continue to stay involved once the threat of losing the children is removed.

The little boy, who originally prompted the teacher's referral, is no longer hungry or excessively tired, but is still struggling to keep up in class and the teacher is looking for tutoring or after-school services to help him make progress. The teacher is also committed to communicating with the parents regarding the child's progress in class. After an initial physical and mental health assessment,

the child was not considered in need of any specific services outside of the help the family is receiving.



Did our call help this family?

There are many factors that influence the outcome of a specific case. Often a family's difficulties are rooted in chronic problems requiring continued community services and resources that the family will have to access long after a CWS case has been closed. Making those connections for the family is an important part of case management, as is ensuring that the family develops enough resilience to ask for help when needed and an ability to resolve stressful situations and new problems as they arise. It is also important that the family stays connected to others in their community who can support them in raising their children, such as the teacher or the neighbor in our story.

There are no easy solutions for struggling families, and our best responses remain prevention and early intervention through community services and supports. However, without the teacher's initial call, this family—like many others—may not have gotten help in time to prevent serious damage and to give the children a chance at growing up with the support they deserve.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS: KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parenting is a learning experience, and prepared parents do better at raising their children. Similarly, childhood brings new stages every year—sometimes every month—and parents and children have to develop hand-in-hand to continue responding appropriately to the new challenges that come with growth. Knowledge about developmental stages and effective parenting skills allow parents to guide and respond, rather than react to behaviors. The relationship between parent and child becomes less stressful and parent and child behaviors become more measured.

If your school is not currently offering parenting resources, such as classes, referrals to community-based organizations or parent support groups, consider working with parents to bring those resources to your site. Parents consistently rate teachers and school staff as a trusted resource for advice on their child.

How Child Welfare Services is Organized

CWS is divided into units; this issue focuses on the two units whose efforts are centered on **working with families and children identified as needing help**.

The **Court Services Unit** represents Child Welfare Services in juvenile court proceedings, prepares legal documents when a child requires the protection of the court, and provides services for families and children who enter the court process.

The **Ongoing Unit** provides services to children and their families with the goals of maintaining the family together, reunifying the family or establishing a permanent plan for a child who is unable to return safely home.

Look for more to come on Foster Care Licensing and Services, Adoptions, Concurrent Planning, and the Independent Living Program in upcoming issues.

Ask the Experts

I am a principal at a high school, and I have a concern regarding something that happened recently at my school. A new teacher made a child abuse report by calling the hotline. He followed our internal policy, which is posted in our staff room, and notified me of the report immediately after calling. However, when three days later I asked for a copy of the SCAR form, I found out that he had forgotten to submit the written report, which I know he was required to do right away as well. We immediately corrected the problem by completing and sending in the form, but I am very concerned that we inadvertently hindered the investigation.

You are correct that [the law](#) requires any mandated reporter to report a suspicion of child abuse or neglect both by calling the hotline right away **and** by submitting a [Suspected Child Abuse Report](#) form **within 36 hours** of making the report. The form can be accessed online at the State Department of Justice website. It is important that all Man-

dated Reporters receive regular training on reporting procedures and that internal policies are updated and consistent with the law. It is also vital (and a requirement of the law) that staff report any suspicion immediately for the safety of the child (and possibly other children), so that CWS may take appropriate actions as swiftly as possible. Delays in reporting may impede investigations or allow further endangerment of children. As a mandated reporter, there may be liability involved if further harm is done to a child (or other children) in the time lapsed between the observation and the initial call to report. While this is rare, it is very important to realize that timely (and correct) reporting - in addition to being a requirement of the law - is critical to children's safety. As a supervisor you should make every effort to train new staff as soon as possible and periodically review whether all staff have a clear understanding of their responsibilities as mandated reporters.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

Understanding the Child Welfare System in California: A Primer for Service Providers and Policymakers

http://www.ccrwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/final_web_pdf.pdf

The California Evidence-based Clearinghouse

http://www.cebc4cw.org/files/One_page_Information_Guide_12_6_10.pdf

Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, CA Penal Code Sections 11164-11174.3

<http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=pen&group=11001-12000&file=11164-11174.3>

Members Corner



CAPC members and supporters recently attended a training on how to utilize evidence-based interventions to prevent child abuse and neglect. One of the resources presented was the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse below (left). You can find more information on effective prevention, a resource guide and activities for Child Abuse Prevention Month at the site featured below (right).

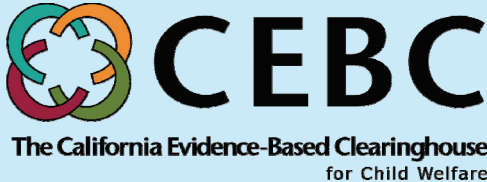
The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse

The CEBC is an online resource for professionals interested in planning for, implementing or simply knowing more about programs and interventions that have proven to be effective in child abuse and neglect prevention, intervention and treatment. A team of experts researches programs in over 27 topic areas, including anxiety and depression treatment, domestic violence, adolescent substance abuse treatment and parenting.

The site rates programs on an evidence-based scale, but also includes extensive resources on how to implement programs according to the research.

While primarily directed at Child Welfare professionals, the site provides a wealth of resources for any professional working in a therapeutic setting with children and adolescents.

You can access the site at <http://www.cebc4cw.org/>.






For more information or to schedule a training on how to utilize the site effectively, e-mail Blake Zimmet, Training Coordinator at the Chadwick Center for Children and Families, at bzimmet@rchsd.org.



April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

Consider having an event at your school to commemorate National Child Abuse Prevention Month and draw attention to how all of us can play a role **in preventing child abuse and neglect, strengthening families and building strong communities.** Below are some simple, low-cost suggestions from your CAPC members:

-  Include an announcement in your school newsletter with some parent resources.
-  Ask your PTA or PTO to sponsor a parent resource table for a day.
-  Schedule a Mandated Reporter refresher training for your staff.

For more tips, resources and ideas, contact your local Child Abuse Prevention Council or find handouts, sample materials and resources at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/preventionmonth/>.

Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

If you are a Santa Barbara County mandated reporter and you suspect child abuse or neglect, YOU MUST ADHERE TO THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURES:

1. Immediately call Child Welfare Services at:
800.367.0166 Santa Barbara County Hotline
805.683.2724 After Hours
 In the case of an emergency, please call 911.
2. Complete and file a Suspected Child Abuse Report, Form #SS8572 (www.CTC-CAPC.org/SCAR)
3. Retain a legible copy of the SCAR Report.
4. YOU are responsible for making this report. DO NOT ALLOW your supervisor/principal to make the report for you or assume because another co-worker has some of the same information that they will make the report.
5. Do not attempt to investigate, conduct interviews or interfere with the information you hold.
6. Remember that you are to report SUSPECTED abuse—you are not required to have witnessed or have complete proof of the incident. You are obligated by law to report what you observe or what you are told that caused suspicion the child is being physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected. When in doubt, call CWS or law enforcement and get their input about the scope of your report.

This info is also available at www.PreventChildAbuseSB.org!

The Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council welcomes your feedback, ideas and requests for training and resources.

Email us at: capc.newsletter@gmail.com

The CAPC meets the third Thursday of every month (except August and December) from 10am-12pm at the Santa Ines Mission. All meetings are open to the public. To receive agendas or more information, call the KIDS Network at 346.8222, or email j.thomas@sbcsocialserv.org.

The CAPC Connection is compiled by Santa Barbara County CAPC Members. Concept by Ann McCarty.

Desktop publishing by Joy Thomas.

December 10, 2010

Dear Canary,

Thank you for having the courage to talk openly about child abuse and neglect in our community. The circumstances surrounding the death of this young boy are certainly heartbreaking and as a community, we need to respond- not only by scrutinizing the court proceedings and asking the hard questions but also by taking responsibility for educating ourselves. Prevention is only possible if we know how to recognize child abuse and neglect and if we each make the effort to find out what we can do about it. You are right in thinking that there are many people in our community who dedicate themselves to standing up for children. The members of the Santa Barbara Child Abuse Prevention Council represent a wide array of agencies, community residents and parents who come together to do just that. As the chair of this council, I see first-hand the many ways we are working together to help strengthen families and protect children every day.

Our instinctive response to the extremely tragic cases that end in the death of a child is to turn away in shock from the perpetrators of these inexcusable crimes. However, after our emotions pass, we often wonder if there is something that can be done to prevent such a case from ever occurring again. If we take a step back and look at the bigger picture we quickly learn that the majority of abused children across our county, state and nation suffer from neglect, defined as *the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision such that the child's health, safety and well-being are threatened with harm*. While it may seem less dramatic, the impact of neglect on children can be equally tragic or even fatal, especially if the children are infants or are victims of chronic neglect. Most parents or caregivers who place children in harm's way struggle themselves with issues such as substance abuse, mental illness, depression or isolation. Research shows that by providing support to struggling families, child abuse and neglect can be prevented. All of us can do something to help - starting today. Reaching out to a family, donating food to the food-bank, volunteering in a child care center, advocating for safe parks in your neighborhood, offering a ride to a family without a car – all these actions add up to safe and caring communities that protect their children.

Thank you for starting the conversation! Please continue writing about child abuse and neglect. All of us will benefit.

Barbara Finch, Chair
Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council

The Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council welcomes any interested community members. To find out more please visit our website at www.PreventChildAbuseSB.org

Santa Maria Sun / Cover Story

The following articles were printed from Santa Maria Sun [santamariasun.com] - Volume 11, Issue 46

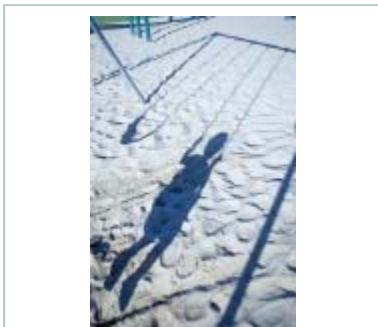
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Senseless acts, sensible prevention

Child abuse reports are increasing as the county braces for impacts of budget cuts and realignment Child abuse reports are increasing as the county braces for impacts of budget cuts and realignment

BY JEREMY THOMAS



A looming specter

Budget cuts and Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed realignment of Child Welfare Services have county child abuse organizations concerned about their ability to provide the same preventative services they have in the past.

PHOTO BY STEVE E. MILLER

On the afternoon of June 11, 2008, paramedics responded to a 911 call at the Santa Maria apartment of Sylvia Dominguez, her boyfriend Gabriel Peralta, and the couple's three children. Dominguez's 3-year-old foster son Gilbert, her sister's biological child, wasn't breathing—the apparent victim of a drowning.

Gilbert Dominguez never regained consciousness.

Visible cuts and bruises on the young boy's body drew the attention of police, and detectives launched an investigation. At first, Dominguez claimed Gilbert had choked on peanut butter while in the bath, but in follow-up interviews, her story changed, and prosecutors eventually charged the couple with first-degree murder.

Despite maintaining her innocence throughout preliminary hearings, Dominguez pled guilty to a lesser charge of second-degree murder on Dec. 22, admitting she purposely drowned Gilbert in the bathtub, upset the young boy had urinated on himself. Peralta, who prosecutors alleged allowed the abuse to occur, pled guilty to felony child abuse.

Dominguez was scheduled to return to court on Jan. 27, where she'll receive 15 years to life for Gilbert's murder. Peralta will likely get 12 years behind bars for his role.

Gilbert's death prompted an investigation by the Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury in 2009. At the time of his murder, the boy was under the protection of the county's Child Welfare Services (CWS) and a dependent of the Juvenile Court, which placed him in Dominguez's care in March 2006. Gilbert's mother, according to court testimony, abused methamphetamines, and Gilbert himself was born an addict. His biological mother's custodial rights were eventually terminated in April 2008.

Because Gilbert had behavioral and speech problems, social workers from CWS and Sojourn, a Santa Maria-based child services center, paid in-home visits to Dominguez's home on a regular basis. According to the Grand Jury's report, CWS investigated complaints from neighbors about yelling and crying in the home, determining the allegations to be unfounded. A separate CWS unit investigated bruises on Gilbert's body and scratches on his face, but determined them to have been inflicted by his younger cousin.

After the birth of Dominguez's third child in 2007, social workers noted the family was under increased stress, according to the report. Gilbert

was crying and screaming more, and regressed from his toilet training. In February 2008, one social worker offered to remove him from the foster home, and others expressed concerns of inadequate supervision.

“Retrospectively, the point could be raised that the cumulative impact of all these issues should have raised a red flag,” the Grand Jury concluded. “While CWS staff recognized the need for improved parenting skills and contracted for outside support to meet that need, in no interview was there any concern raised that the child might be a victim of abuse.”

Looking back on the case, Kathy Gallagher, director of Santa Barbara County’s Department of Social Services, said CWS did all they could do for Gilbert, given the situation.

“There wasn’t anything we could have done differently that would have prevented the child’s death,” Gallagher said. “With the information we had, the role the mother was playing, the role the aunt was playing, there was nothing we could have done within the law.

“You can’t be in somebody’s home 24 hours a day,” she added, “People just snap. ... That’s what happened to little Gilbert.”

Though the Grand Jury concluded CWS workers followed established procedures and determined there was no overt indication Gilbert was being abused, they did find communication lacking among social workers from different divisions. The jury recommended regular reviews with all workers, periodic face-to-face discussions, and interviews with all people involved in a child’s care.

Gallagher said CWS has made several changes since the Grand Jury’s report, to the extent allowed within state regulations and confidentiality concerns.

“When we’re dealing with an open case, we don’t have the freedom to share information and talk about the case, even with other people in professional staff,” Gallagher said. “We can’t divulge information when we talk with neighbors and family members, so there are a lot of legal limitations.”

Besides working with advocates in Sacramento to gain more legal leeway, Gallagher said CWS has improved documentation, adding more follow-up interviews and making efforts to centralize information previously scattered among the agency’s different departments.

“Now, knowing what happened, were there any clues, was there anything we missed?” Gallagher said. “After the fact, now that we’re looking at those records, it sure would have been helpful to know some of that information.”

Child abuse on the rise?

Gilbert Dominguez’s death is just one of several recent high profile abuse cases to jar the Central Coast. On Aug. 11, 2010, Orcutt foster parent Bertha Mae Savoy and her nephew, Duane James, were arrested and charged with six counts of child abuse. The Santa Barbara County District Attorney’s office alleges Savoy and James, who lived next door to each other, beat nine foster children in their care, in some cases denying them food and shelter.

On Dec. 17, a Santa Maria jury found Lompoc resident James Lujan guilty of second-degree murder, two counts of torture, and assault on an infant in the beating death of 4-year-old Diego Callas, his girlfriend’s son, in June 2009. Lujan was also found guilty of abusing another child in 2006.

In Diego’s case, though the young boy’s family claims they reported prior abuse to CWS, Gallagher denies it, claiming Lujan was never investigated.

“That’s often the pattern after a child dies,” Gallagher said. “The family members will claim they made reports, but we had no reports.”

According to Ann McCarty, associate director of the North County Rape Crisis and Child Protection Center in Santa Maria, the incidents that make the news—like the Lujan and Dominguez cases—only mask the full scope of the problem.

“What everybody has to keep in mind is child abuse is happening,” McCarty said. “We’re busy every single day. Sometimes our child welfare advocates and individuals doing the front line work are just running from crisis to crisis. Being on top of it doesn’t necessarily happen anymore.”

Child deaths from abuse are thankfully a rare occurrence. Statewide, according to the California Department of Justice, 79 children died as a result of abuse in 2008. There were 76 fatalities in 2009, the last year the state has data.

In Santa Barbara County, the Department of Social Services reported one fatality in 2007, three in 2008, two in 2009, and none in 2010. All of the deaths occurred in North County.

Overall, about 70 percent of the county’s reports of child abuse come from the North County, records show. In 2010, CWS investigated 1,345 claims of child abuse/neglect in the Santa Maria area; of those, 214—or 16 percent—were substantiated. The agency investigated an additional

773 cases in Lompoc, substantiating 149 of them. Overall, substantiated reports in Santa Maria have declined steadily, from 419 cases in 2007 to 214 in 2010.

According to statistics from the city clerk’s office, Santa Maria police arrested 30 people for felony child endangerment in 2010, up from 28 the previous year, but down from the 34 arrests made in 2008. Misdemeanor endangerment arrests have risen steadily from 11 in 2007 to 22 in 2010. Felony child abuse arrests in the city jumped from 24 in 2008 to 46 in 2009. There were 33 people arrested for the charge in 2010.

“The reports we’re getting are increasing in severity,” Department of Social Services’ Gallagher said. “They’re coming later, after the abuse has occurred. People are waiting and then reporting. There’s been a slight increase in substantiated reports.”

The figures have led the county to focus child abuse prevention efforts on the North County, Gallagher said. After Sojourn folded, the county’s Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Health Services (ADMHS) approached Cecilia Rodriguez, executive director of Child Abuse Listening and Mediation (CALM) to ask them to expand to Santa Maria and Lompoc.

“The need as we’re finding in Santa Maria is huge,” Rodriguez said. “There are a lot of at-risk families.”

It takes a village

For 40 years in Santa Barbara, CALM has sought to prevent and treat child abuse through teaching parenting skills and providing support for foster children. With the largest unemployment rate in the county in Lompoc and highest rate of foreclosures in the county in Santa Maria, the area has become a top priority for CALM, which targets families experiencing poverty, isolation, or a lack of education.

“What happens when parents are stressed is they sometimes tend to take it out on their children,” Rodriguez said. “Or they could be so preoccupied with the stressors in their lives, they tend to not pay attention to the lives of their children.”

Through CALM’s “Great Beginnings” program, at-risk parents are identified before their children are born, taking into account factors such as age, mental illness, depression, and drug use. To prevent another child’s death, Rodriguez said, families need early support.

“A parent who is really attached and bonded with their child is less likely to abuse that child,” Rodriguez said. “There’s just so much to be done really early. It’s all about prevention.”

Early prevention is the main goal of the Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council, a coalition of 21 members and agencies who coordinate child abuse responses and raise awareness of the issue countywide. The council currently has sights on partnering with teachers of young children, educating them to look for early signs of abuse.

“Once kids are in the system, we’re playing a different game,” council chair Barb Finch said. “It’s preventable, but it has to happen early on, and everybody has to be invested in it in our community.”

With more families considered at-risk in the North County, according to Katharina Zulliger, coordinator of the Santa Barbara County KIDS Network, intervention must happen much earlier to be effective.

“Child abuse and neglect is preventable,” Zulliger said. “There’s an actual role that we all can play in it. It’s such a challenge to have that perception in the public eye changed.”

Zulliger said more education is needed for childcare providers on how and when to report abuse. Even if the report doesn’t lead to an investigation, she said, the suspicion aroused could still be an important step in getting help for a family.

According to a study by the University of California Berkeley, which analyzed data for the Santa Barbara region from 2009 to 2010, only 3 percent of child abuse reports came from neighbors, family, or friends of the abused child. About 90 percent of allegations in Santa Barbara County came from mandated reporters: teachers and health professionals required to report any suspicion of abuse.

Early detection in schools is also at the forefront of efforts by the North County Rape Crisis and Child Protection Center, which puts on puppet shows in classrooms to teach children about improper physical contact. Also, through the group’s ChildSAFE program, therapists teach North County schoolchildren to “Say no, get away, tell someone,” a program encouraging children to speak out about abuse.



Teaming up

Barbara Finch (left), chair of the Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council, and Katharina Zulliger, coordinator of the Santa Barbara County KIDS Network and a staff member for the council, hope to educate more schoolteachers and childcare professionals on identifying and reporting incidences of child abuse.

PHOTO BY STEVE E. MILLER

According to McCarty, the organization's associate director, many cases are disclosed through the program, and many more will come to light as her organization and others continue to educate the community about what to look for.

"It's amazing the number of children who are being victimized that are told at a very young age, 'Don't tell anyone, this is our secret,'" she said.

Handing over the reins

The ability of social workers to maintain services amid funding shortages is a major concern of many county organizations going into 2011. So far, Child Welfare Services has remained relatively immune from the budget cuts that have gutted other government agencies. In 2010, the county's Board of Supervisors elected to backfill a \$1 million cut from the state, enabling services to continue unimpeded.

Only 5 percent of CWS's budget comes from the county, with the remaining 95 percent from state and federal coffers.

That relationship, however, appears to be changing.

As part of his proposed state budget and "historic realignment" of state government, Gov. Jerry Brown is proposing putting primary control of CWS completely in the hands of individual county governments.

Details of the realignment are still being hammered out, and a look at the proposed budget provides few clues about what it could mean to county service levels. Santa Barbara County CEO Chandra Waller is currently analyzing the budget for local impacts, and Department of Social Services' director Gallagher said it's too early to tell what to expect.

However, Gallagher is worried the agency will have to eliminate the Family Preservation Program, an abuse prevention effort serving about 150 families each year. The program is intended to keep children at home with their families and out of foster care, a more expensive and less desirable option for the agency.

The potential shakeup in CWS has others worried about the effects on the nonprofit organizations with which the county contracts.



"People just snap"

Foster mother Sylvia Dominguez and her boyfriend, Gabriel Peralta, were convicted in December of second degree murder charges in the 2008 drowning death of Dominguez's three-year-old foster son Gilbert. The couple is scheduled to be sentenced for their crimes in Santa Barbara County Superior Court on Jan. 27.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANTA BARBARA SHERIFF'S OFFICE AND SANTA MARIA POLICE DEPARTMENT

"If [Gov. Brown] says this is the county's problem and there's not the resources to make it work, then it's not a good suggestion," the Child Abuse Prevention Council's Finch said. "Whether CWS is given to the counties or kept by the state, there really needs to be a broader coalition happening to make sure families are getting the help they need."

Even if CWS survives the next round of cuts unscathed, Finch is concerned funding reductions to other social services will impact reports of child abuse.

"Families who are already under stress are going to be under even more stress when resources are pulled out from under them," she said. "That could be a very dangerous situation as far as the safety of kids."

The North County Rape Crisis and Child Protection Center has so far been shielded from budget problems, but McCarty sees changes ahead in 2011.

"[This year] is looking the bleakest for us," she said. "We know there are some funding streams that are completely going to dry up."

McCarty said her organization would likely be forced to look for money from private foundations to maintain its current level of services. In the long term, however, the onus to prevent child abuse is on teachers, neighbors, family members, and the rest of the community-at-large.

"People need to take the blinders off," she said. "It's easier to turn away and say, 'Someone else is going to deal with it,' but then what happens is we have a Gilbert, we have a Diego.

"There is no reason in this world why children should die," she added. "It's unacceptable."

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANTA BARBARA SHERIFF'S OFFICE AND SANTA MARIA POLICE DEPARTMENT

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Preventative effort, volunteers lacking in Northern SB County

Child abuse on the rise

By John McReynolds Contributing Writer | Posted: Saturday, January 8, 2011 10:32 pm

James Lujan has disappeared from the front page, at least until Feb. 17 when he will be sentenced for second-degree murder in the death of 4-year-old Diego Calles. Before Lujan, readers were told about Robert Anthony Garcia, and before him, Jason Gomez.

In June 2009, only two months before Diego Calles perished, Garcia was sentenced to 71 years to life for second-degree murder in the death of 2-year-old Isabella Cortes, who was slammed against a wall in February 2008.

In January 2006, Gomez was charged with manslaughter for rolling over on infant twin girls in his bed and smothering them. Lompoc police said at the time that they suspected five other infants had died over the previous three years at the hands of their parents.

Child abuse is on the rise, and for every case that makes headlines, there are many others that the public never hears about, said Ann McCarty of the North County Rape Crisis Center.

“Everybody knows that child abuse is out of control,” said McCarty. “Child abuse occurs at an alarming rate. You only hear about it when there’s a severe beating or a death or a child is locked up in a closet. For those of us entrenched in the work, we know it’s happening every single day.”

McCarty estimated that she receives five calls a week inquiring about or reporting child abuse. Statistics support her observations.

According to police, since 2008 child abuse cases in Lompoc have risen 25 percent.

At the end of 2009 the Center for Social Services Research in Berkeley ranked 86 census tracts in Santa Barbara County for child abuse allegations per 1,000 children. Of the 10 worst tracts, five are in Lompoc.

Santa Barbara County’s Child Welfare Service reported in 2009 that a whopping 80 percent of its open child abuse cases were located in North County. They didn’t tabulate separate totals for Lompoc, Santa Maria and Guadalupe.

Familiar causes

The causes of child abuse are well documented — the forces that put tremendous pressure on parents.

“The more stress, the harder it is to stay on a steady path,” said Katharina Zulliger of Santa Barbara County Kids Network. The group was chartered by the Board of Supervisors 20 years ago to coordinate services for children.

Delfino Neira, of the county Department of Social Services (DSS), also cites family stress: “No extended family networks, high unemployment and poverty. That’s what tells the tale.”

There is nothing like a stack of bills to tighten family tension. The same day that James Lujan’s jury returned its verdict, it was announced that Lompoc’s highest-in-the-county unemployment rate had clicked up to 16 percent.

Drugs also contribute to child abuse in Lompoc, but methamphetamine is no longer the epidemic it was just two years ago, according to Police Chief Tim Dabney. “Meth on the street is much more expensive,” he said, with a hint of a cautious smile. “A tighter border and law enforcement have done a good job of reducing it.”

Preventative effort lacking

Compounding the pressure-packed abuse problem in Lompoc and Santa Maria is a preventive defense that is weaker than elsewhere.

“There are less services for families in the North County and greater stresses,” said Zulliger, pointing to dozens of nonprofit groups in Santa Barbara which provide human services of all description in the southern portion of the county, often to a population which is aging.

Child abuse on the rise

“There are more services per capita, more nonprofits and more funding. Many South County foundations serve only the South County.”

Neira of DSS, who moved from Kern County only a year ago, said he soon noted another tendency of Santa Barbara-based foundations, a certain aversion to family support.

“For the amount of foundations we have, the support for those who work with stressed families is low,” he said.

Further, the defense against child abuse in the North County is not only limited in resources but is poorly coordinated.

“There’s not a whole lot of communication between legal, family service, and health agencies,” said Barb Finch, chairperson of the Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council. “The systems are not talking to one another.”

Children at risk

Another widely-felt concern is that the last line of defense, the county DSS’ Child Welfare Service, once known as Child Protective Services, is not always effective at stepping in to protect endangered children like Diego.

The Grand Jury roundly criticized DSS in a nine-page report in 2008, charging that understaffing and massive personnel turnover undermined its work. Today, some social service professionals privately label the department “under-qualified,” and say it practices only “drive-by social work.”

One observer alleged that “Diego’s father reported (abuse), Head Start reported, Diego’s mother’s family reported, and still they said it was unsubstantiated. Digging deep just doesn’t happen any more. They run from crisis to court to crisis.”

Neira acknowledges that his new, younger staff has less experience, but he notes that revolving door turnover has been slowed and he denies that cuts have taken place within reach of at-risk children.

Even the brutal 39.7-percent increase in caseload the department has faced, with the 12-percent decrease in staff, has been handled without Child Welfare cuts. “We’ve allowed caseloads in other areas to rise to keep investigative services constant,” he said. “We have not eliminated investigation positions.”

Budget cuts

Whether those front-line workers will have to run even faster in the future, with an almost-certainly reduced county budget for 2011-12, remains to be seen. The lion’s share of DSS funding comes from state and federal sources which are under enormous pressure to chop their budgets.

Budget slashes could also shrink new preventive services that have taken place in Lompoc during recent months, services which in a more favorable climate would give rise to hope for the future.

The Child Abuse Prevention Council drafted in 2009 a three-year plan which encouraged more county funding in the North County. As a result, CALM (Child Abuse Listening and Mediation), the widely respected thousand-pound gorilla of the child abuse prevention field, whose base is in Santa Barbara and whose services in Lompoc were limited to quiet work with the police department, expanded its footprint in the North County.

In the last few months the \$3-million agency opened its first office in Santa Maria and initiated a working relationship with Lompoc agencies. It now offers counseling with the Community Action Commission, the Dorothy Jackson Center and others.

“We are certainly trying to provide the needed services,” said Zulliger, one of the prime movers behind the shift. “There is just not enough funding to meet all the need.”

In coming months the impact of even less funding is likely to stagger the smaller agencies which conduct the bulk of preventative work in Lompoc: presentations at schools, staffing hot lines, etc. They face devastating financial hits as recession-shrunken state and county budgets for 2011-12 are adopted in the spring, this on top of cuts they have already suffered.

Ann McCarty’s North County Rape Crisis Center, formerly Lompoc Rape Crisis, is one of them. The agency talks with 12,000 children a year in Lompoc and Santa Maria schools.

With the little ones they use puppets. McCarty’s favorite story features a 5-year-old who told her teacher about abuse at home. “The puppets said I should say ‘no,’ get away and tell someone,” the little girl said. So she did.

“We used to have a training budget,” said McCarty. “And travel and office supplies.” Now the staff and volunteers pay for those themselves.

Besides money, minutes are reduced. Lompoc schools have begun to cut back time available for Rape Crisis programs, from three days to two, or even one. Or they have merged classes into unruly audiences of 90.

Volunteer corps shrinks

At the same time, Rape Crisis' volunteer pool is drying up.

While McCarty can remember marshaling 40 volunteers, she now commands only a remnant of 10. Stay-at-home moms and Vandenberg airmen were once frequent volunteers. No more. The moms are at work and the airmen are gone. "For us the 2011-12 grant year is looking the bleakest," McCarty wrote in a follow-up e-mail. "I don't want another Diego or Isabella."

She said she hopes the public will remember Diego, and Isabella, and the twins, and take action. They could dig deeper and give money to her agency or find time to volunteer. Maybe they could call county supervisors and say, "Child Welfare Services needs help, not more cuts."

Maybe they could grab their cell phones when they see adults abusing children. "People need to not be afraid," said Lompoc police Capt. Larry Ralston.

"When Diego's mother and Lujan were walking through the park and Lujan pushed Diego down the hill, why didn't somebody call the police?"