

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH CHILDREN IN CRISIS?

SUMMARY

The 2013-2014 Humboldt County Grand Jury received a complaint stating that the complainant witnessed the police handcuffing a child less than 13 years old. The Grand Jury thought this case might reveal an underlying policy problem, and investigated the policies used in dealing with children in crisis. We learned that unless a child is already a client of the social services system or has a Court Appointed Special Advocate, the only available respondents for children in crisis are the police. Sempervirens has an emergency unit for children but the child has to be brought to the facility for treatment. Although some law enforcement officers receive Crisis Intervention Training, this training does not address the special needs of children under the age of 16.

All witnesses interviewed for this investigation confirmed that the lack of crisis intervention services for this age group is a serious problem. The Grand Jury's recommendations include making Crisis Intervention Training mandatory for all law enforcement officers. We also recommend that the training be expanded to include appropriate responses to children under the age of 16.

BACKGROUND

In response to this complaint, an official representing the Eureka Police Department stated the police were called to a shelter because of a child who was having a serious crisis. The child was out of control, and had to be restrained by the adults around him. The official stated the police used standard procedures and described the complaint as unfounded.

The complainant described a different version of the event. He stated that while he was out one morning, he witnessed the police handcuffing a young child whom he described as being compliant and confused.

We inquired if other options were available or feasible for children in crisis, such as setting up a rapid response mobile unit staffed by mental health personnel. Some other counties and cities do have such mobile crisis units. The law enforcement personnel we interviewed stated a situation such as the one described above was rare.

APPROACH

We first interviewed the complainant who had witnessed the child being handcuffed. We then interviewed a juvenile parole officer, a staff member of Court Appointed Special Advocates, a staff member of the County Department of Health and Human Services, a crisis intervention trainer, and a police officer.

DISCUSSION

A child was in crisis at the shelter where he was staying, and the police were called in to assist. The police were in the process of handcuffing the youth, as the complainant came upon the scene. Upon observing the handcuffing, he stopped and watched the process. The complainant claimed the child was not resisting, and was handcuffed and put in the police car without incident. He believed that there must be a better way to handle an apparently depressed and compliant child other than by handcuffing him.

At present there is no other alternative in handling this type of situation in our county. We found that in some more affluent counties, mobile first responder units, comprised of social workers and officers, are called to handle similar situations. Our county does not have this service available for troubled youths. We also found that with the exception of one law enforcement agency, police officers are not required to take Crisis Intervention Training, and that the training available in Humboldt County does not address dealing with children younger than 16. Although Crisis Intervention Training is available to all law enforcement personnel in the cities and the County, several witnesses said that less than 1/3 of officers participate in it.

FINDINGS

- F1. There are very few public services available for young children in crisis who are not connected with a social welfare system. Children connected to a social service system may have more resources available.
- F2. At present there is no alternative to police being the first respondents to young children in crisis who do not have a social worker. Children who are connected to the social service system may have a wider choice of first responders.
- F3. Some police officers take Crisis Intervention Training on a voluntary basis, but with the exception of one law enforcement agency, this training is not mandatory for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. Crisis Intervention Training should be mandatory for all law enforcement officers. The Citizen Enforcement Liaison Committee and the Department of Health and Human Services have offered to pay for such training. (F3)
- R2. The curriculum of Crisis Intervention Training should include responses to children younger than 16 in a life-threatening situation. (F3)
- R3. Professionals of Child Welfare Services (CWS) should be called as first responders in addition to police when children are in crisis, whether or not such children are already CWS clients. (F1, F2)

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the following responses are required:

- The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (R1, R2, R3)
- The Humboldt County Sheriff (R1, R2, R3)
- The City Council of Arcata (R1, R2)
- The City Council of Blue Lake (R1, R2)
- The City Council of Eureka (R1, R2)
- The City Council of Ferndale (R1, R2)
- The City Council of Fortuna (R1, R2)
- The City Council of Rio Dell (R1, R2)
- The City Council of Trinidad (R1, R2)

The Grand Jury invites the following individuals to respond:

- The Director of the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services (R3)
- The Arcata Chief of Police (R1, R2)
- The Blue Lake City Manager (R1, R2)
- The Eureka Chief of Police (R1, R2)
- The Ferndale Chief of Police (R1, R2)
- The Fortuna Chief of Police (R1, R2)
- The Rio Dell Chief of Police (R1, R2)
- The Trinidad City Manager (R1, R2)

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code § 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
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