Preliminary Report:
Department of Social Services
and
Local Police Department Relations

March 2000

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INTRODUCTION:

At the request of the House Committee on Post Audit and Oversight, the House Post Audit and Oversight Bureau (the Bureau) conducted a review of the relationship between local police departments and the Department of Social Services (DSS). The Bureau conducted this review after several House members raised concerns about police and DSS interaction.

The Bureau selected one DSS region and surveyed all sixty-nine police departments located within the region. In carrying out its work, the Bureau developed and distributed a survey to local police departments. Fifty of the sixty-nine departments responded to the Bureau's survey for a survey completion rate of 72%. The questionnaire solicited information regarding the nature, quality and quantity of interaction between the police departments and DSS. The Bureau followed up with police departments in person and with telephone interviews as needed to further discuss questionnaire responses. In all, the Bureau telephoned a dozen responding departments and met with eight departments for further discussion.
FINDINGS:

The overall picture is generally positive, yet relationships between DSS and police departments vary greatly. While most police report effective, congenial relations a few describe poor interactions.

The Child-At-Risk hotline does not operate well after hours. Many workers are not knowledgeable. Calls are not always returned. Often, police officers must repeat the facts of the case to numerous people before receiving assistance from DSS. One department flatly stated the hotline makes DSS seem to be a 9-5 operation.

DSS generally responds appropriately and in a timely fashion when police contact them.

Police departments almost universally support the use of SAIN teams finding them useful and beneficial to victims of sexual abuse.

In general, police are satisfied with the level of information provided by DSS.

DSS does not always inform police of the ultimate disposition of 51A reports filed by police.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The handling of DSS matters after hours should be revamped. Currently, DSS appears to be a 9-5 operation. Social workers should be placed on-call on a rotating basis. A social worker should be assigned the same geographical area each time s/he is on call so that relationships with the communities can be solidified. Local police and local hospitals should be notified of the DSS staff person on call with his/her beeper number so that direct contact can be made quickly. This may require labor/management negotiations.

The hotline staff who answer calls made by the general public should be better trained in social services and child abuse matters.

DSS should consistently inform police of the ultimate disposition of 51As filed by police.

While relations are generally good between police and DSS, each DSS area office, particularly investigators, should seek to deepen working relationships with local police to advance the goal of child protection. Outreach by DSS would be a worthwhile investment.

DSS caseload levels should be kept as low as financially feasible.
DSS workers and police should participate in cross-training in order to facilitate understanding of each other's missions and facilitate effective working relations.

DSS should track criminal prosecutions when a SAIN team is utilized in an investigation. This type of feedback could inform future investigations involving the same perpetrator(s).

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES & LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENTS

While police and DSS have different missions, one to enforce the law, the other to strengthen and encourage family life and also to protect children, their work often brings them into contact with each other. It is this contact, this working relationship, which the Bureau sought to explore with this interim inquiry. The Bureau released a preliminary report in October 1998.

The Bureau's five-page survey tool asked police questions covering quality and quantity of contact between their departments and DSS. The results of this survey are discussed within this report as is the Bureau's re-visiting of the SAIN teams.
PROBLEMATIC ISSUES:

The two principle problems affecting police and DSS relations are the Child-At-Risk hotline and the related issue of the assignment of social workers. Otherwise, DSS/police relations appear to be quite positive.

THE HOTLINE “DSS SEEMS TO BE A 9-5 OPERATION”

The Child-At-Risk-hotline was a significant source of complaint for police departments. This is a statewide hotline that enables individuals to report suspected child abuse and neglect on weekends and evenings when DSS offices are closed. (See 110 CMR 4.20). Police Departments expressed dissatisfaction with hotline procedures and staff.

A common complaint concerned a lack of response from the hotline. “DSS seems to be a 9-5 operation. Obviously the police cannot be. Little if any results ever come from calling the hot line.” Another department wrote that “[a]fter that [5 pm] it is difficult to get a response- weekends and nights is very frustrating.” One department said, “I feel we …should get some type of response.” Another said, “When we call the hotline, no one comes.” This complaint was reiterated by other departments as well. “Seems to be more problems after hours…Correct after hours service… Most of the staff are doing a good job. The after hours intake service is another story.” Finally, one department put it more bluntly. They requested that something be done “to improve the after hours hotline and their attitude.”
One complaint was the hotline workers' lack or perceived lack of social work knowledge and skills. "They sound young and inexperienced and are not familiar with basic terms and processes related to an emergency DSS situation," said one department. Many stated that the hotline should be covered by trained individuals who have social work experience. They felt that current workers do not exhibit the knowledge that would indicate such experience and training.

Some departments felt that the hotline was too removed from the cities and towns they serve. They felt the hotline workers lacked a basic understanding of their communities and their communities' problems. One department recommended "keep[ing] it local. Trying to explain emergency situations to persons on a weekend hotline in Boston and not familiar with our community can be difficult."

ASSIGNMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS:

Another common complaint of police departments was the lack of consistency in DSS personnel with whom they dealt. One department wrote, "I have never dealt with the same person twice."

They consistently stated a preference for on-call social workers with whom they could speak immediately. "Rather than getting an operator who needs to call investigators and relay information to them second hand, it would be better if a trained investigator would either answer the phone or immediately call back so the officer only has to relay the information once." One department of a small community does this as a matter of course. This officer handles most DSS matters for his department. Rather than call the
hotline, he calls a social worker with whom he has developed a rapport. The social worker gave the officer her home number and cell phone number for this purpose.

Police departments generally believe that on-call workers should be assigned locally so they could respond more quickly. “Nights and weekends are difficult, as the person is sometimes coming from a distance away. This becomes a problem as a police station is no place for scared children late on a weekend night,” explained one department. “DSS would do well to set up some kind of system where the local departments know who the on-call worker was at any given time, and how long the response time would be given a situation. It would have an impact on what could be provided in the meantime for the victims.”

They believe that each city and town should have one or more workers assigned who consistently handle cases from their city or town. In this way, deeper relationships could be developed between local police officers and DSS workers. As one department put it, “Assign workers by town, so [we can] build rapport.” Another department wanted an “[o]n-call DSS worker for [our] district.” Another repeatedly stated, “Give us one person to call for all [our] cases... We would always have a contact person for our town... Again, one person to handle [our town’s] cases would help a lot.”

COOPERATION:

Each Department was asked to rate DSS’s cooperation with their department on a scale of 1-10. Ten was the highest score available, 1 the lowest score. DSS received scores between 2 and 10, with two departments ranking DSS cooperation a two and six
departments ranking DSS a ten. The average score DSS received was a 7. Only 6% of
departments scored DSS between 1-3, while 62% scored DSS between 7-10.

**INFORMATION:**

The survey asked if police departments were satisfied with the level of
information they receive when DSS makes a report to them. 72% reported that they were
satisfied with the level of information provided. Of the 22% who indicated they were
dissatisfied, they expressed an interest in knowing any past history of abuse within the
family, any felonies observed, information regarding the reporter of the alleged
abuse/neglect, and whether DSS has an on going case involving the family. When such a
case is open, they also would like the ongoing case worker’s name and a way to contact
them for follow up.

One department that expressed great dissatisfaction with DSS indicated a desire
for basic information they feel is lacking in DSS reports. She requested answers to,
"simple questions such as: Who, what, where, when, and why.” Although this
department has significant complaints with information sharing, this appears to be more
of an exception than the norm.

**DSS RESPONSE TO POLICE:**

Police departments were asked if DSS responds in a timely fashion when
contacted by police. 74% responded that DSS does respond in a timely manner. Of the
remaining departments, 18% responded that DSS was not timely in response to police
contact. Two of the remaining departments did not answer the question while two others stated that “sometimes” DSS response was delayed. “Sometimes” was not qualified.

Along with the timeliness of DSS response, the survey inquired as to the appropriateness of DSS response. 70% of departments indicated that DSS responded appropriately to police calls. Of the remaining 30%, 16% wrote that DSS did not respond appropriately to police, while the remaining departments either chose not to answer or indicated that DSS response was sometimes appropriate.

**INVOLVEMENT OF POLICE IN DSS INVESTIGATION:**

Along with questions about DSS providing information and responding to police, the Bureau asked at what stage of a DSS investigation does DSS involve the police. Possible answers were early on, mid-way, late, after the fact, or not at all. The responses covered the entire range suggesting there is no consistent practice with regard to involving police. 18% indicated that DSS involves police early on in their investigations. 24% wrote that DSS involves police mid-way and 8% responded involvement is late. The greatest response was after the fact which was the response of 34% of departments, while 2% said not at all. 12% left their response blank. The remaining departments circled more than one answer. A consistent investigations practice needs to be developed police responses indicate.

**CALIBER:**

Each Department was also asked to rate the professional caliber of DSS staff. Again, the scale was 1-10 with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest score available.
Only one department gave DSS its lowest score of a 3. Six departments gave DSS its high score of 10. The average score received for this category was a 7.5.

**INVESTIGATIONS:**

When a report of alleged abuse or neglect of a child by a caretaker is reported to the DSS, they typically conduct an investigation into the allegations. Police were asked to rate these DSS investigations as excellent, good, fair, or poor. 10% of departments rated DSS investigations excellent. The majority of departments, 52%, indicated that DSS investigations were good. Over a quarter, or 26% rated investigations fair, while 6% rated investigations poor, and the remaining departments gave various, and at times, multiple answers.

**RECOMMENDATIONS BY POLICE:**

Many police departments site overwork and overwhelming caseloads as a DSS constraint. The need for more DSS staff was frequently raised by police departments. "Additional staffing… The only problems we have experienced are ones in which the case workers are so overburdened with other cases they may be slower and less effective in various situations." Another wrote, "Provide more staff and lessen case load of the social workers.” This was echoed by another department who wanted “extra staff and case workers.” Yet, as one department pointed out, “More case workers to lessen a heavy case load is always on a wishlist.”
Finally, a few departments urged greater training for DSS workers. One Department recommended cross-training between police and DSS to facilitate communication and understanding of each other's goals and procedures. Other training recommendations included child psychology, child custody law and courtroom procedure.

**DISSATISFIED DEPARTMENTS:**

While police did have recommendations to improve DSS operations, the survey results indicate a general satisfaction with DSS/police relations. However, a few departments' experiences stand in contrast to the overall picture. One such department, the Bureau met with serves a large urban area. During the meeting, they expressed a general dissatisfaction with police/DSS relations. They stated that DSS information is insufficient and DSS responses to police, while timely, are not appropriate. Their greatest frustration surrounded DSS not notifying police of crimes against children immediately. They said that this hinders their ability to investigate the crime which may possibly hamper the prosecution of the crime later on.

Another department that expressed a higher level of unhappiness with DSS services a wealthy town. They described frustration over what they perceive as a lack of response from DSS. "We should get some type of response," they said. They also indicated that when DSS does respond, the response is generally not timely, nor appropriate.
SAIN Teams (Sexual Abuse Intervention Network):

In the Bureau survey, police departments were asked whether they found SAIN teams effective. 86% stated yes, they were effective. Many stated that it was the best way to conduct interviews in sexual abuse cases. Virtually all respondents who mentioned the victim when discussing SAIN teams agreed that this method was beneficial to the victim.

SAIN teams are multi-disciplinary teams consisting of the social worker responsible for servicing the family, a representative of the District Attorney and at least one other member with experience and training in the field of child welfare and criminal justice. Most importantly, SAIN teams attempt to minimize the possibility of multiple interviews of the child, thus reducing trauma from the recounting of their abuse.

While SAIN teams are not mandatory, they are usually convened following a DSS referral to the District Attorney of an allegation involving sexual abuse or serious physical abuse. Team members enjoy full access to information about the family. Confidentiality is assured.

In the rare instance that a police department lacked SAIN team participation, the police nonetheless believed SAIN teams were worthwhile. They were a sound approach chiefly because of the legitimate goals to avoiding re-victimization, and the efficiencies gained from a single, multi-agency meeting.

Of the remaining departments, 14% of respondents, one department simply did not respond to this question, while another professed to have no knowledge about the practice. A third department found no value in SAIN teams, maintaining that no child
ought to undergo multiple interviews. As noted earlier, a SAIN interview is used to replace the old method of conducting multiple interviews and only one SAIN team member is typically designated to ask questions of the victim (usually the social worker or medical member of the team). In contrast, a fourth department offered that sometimes more than one interview session is necessary in order to build trust and rapport between the team and the victim. A fifth department noted that too many individuals were present and tended to distract the victim. This can easily be obviated by employing a one-way mirror. The Bureau inspected several SAIN facilities in which such mirrors are utilized. Departments six and seven found SAIN to be very effective but wanted it employed earlier in the investigative process.

Results from a prior survey disclosed that all eleven District Attorney’s offices also found the SAIN team approach to be effective in increasing the level of information available to all SAIN participants and to minimize the trauma or re-victimization experienced by the child victim. This finding was echoed by the police departments surveyed and interviewed. DA’s offices did note that the use of SAIN teams varies by DSS office and by type of case. Many DA offices expressed the need to make more use of SAIN teams for physical abuse cases.

By all accounts the teams are working well. Yet, every police department interviewed indicated that DSS should track criminal prosecutions when a SAIN team is utilized in an investigation. Departments want DSS or the prosecutor to notify them if prosecution is declined. This type of feedback, the police opined, could inform future investigations involving the same perpetrator(s).
CONCLUSION:

DSS/ police relations appear to be generally solid and positive. There were two problematic areas identified: the Child-At-Risk Hotline and the related issue of the assignment of on-call workers. There were also a few departments that expressed greater dissatisfaction with DSS performance and relations than the norm. The Bureau believes that the positive experience of the other police departments illustrates that good working relations can be developed with these departments as well. The Bureau believes DSS outreach to police would be very beneficial.