



news release

Feb. 15, 2018

County, state reach settlement agreement over child welfare

The Superior Court of Humboldt County has accepted a stipulated judgment cooperatively negotiated by the California Attorney General (AG), the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) and the Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS). The stipulation, dated Feb. 14, marks the conclusion of an investigation by the AG into specific policies and practices related to DHHS's Child Welfare Services Division (CWS).

The inquiry was launched in 2015 after concerns were raised by local tribes and other community partners regarding inefficiencies and barriers to service in the CWS Emergency Response function, primarily dealing with screening practices and cross-reporting between agencies.

The requirements set forth in the judgment reflect collaborative efforts on the part of the AG, the HCSO and DHHS to improve outcomes for children and families in the county's child welfare system of care.

Details of the agreement include:

- Creation of an interagency agreement between HCSO and CWS, and the designation of liaisons at each agency to ensure compliance with the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA);
- Development of an interagency protocol to ensure coordination of mental health and child welfare services;
- Implementation by both HCSO and CWS of prompt and efficient emergency response systems available 24 hours a day, seven days a week;
- Movement by CWS from a paper-based intake system to an electronic system that will save time and reduce bottlenecks in the screening process;
- Creation of policies and protocols to ensure timely cross-reporting with both the HCSO and the District Attorney's Office;

- Implementation of a thorough risk evaluation process for any child who is the subject of a referral;
- Revision of CWS policies and procedures to deepen collaboration with tribes, including engaging a tribal consultant to assist with the implementation of policies and procedures that address assessments, investigation of referrals and the specific needs of tribal children;
- Development of protocols for handling reports of abuse or neglect that fall outside the county's geographic jurisdiction;
- Creation of an internal tracking tool for reports and for cross reports between agencies;
- Execution of a three-year agreement between CWS and the National Council for Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) to support systems change, including assistance with communication, policy revisions, usage of screening tools, workload assessments and specific plans to reduce the number of outstanding investigations;
- Development and implementation of a recruitment and retention plan to raise staffing levels at CWS;
- Design and implementation of training frameworks for existing and new-hire employees;
- Creation of a formal complaint process;
- Establishment of a taskforce of internal and external stakeholders to help create a mandated reporter guide, and provide input to both DHHS and HCSO regarding changes to policies and procedures;
- Retention of a compliance monitor who will provide the AG with bi-annual reports for three years.

In papers filed with the court, the AG's office stated that DHHS and HCSO worked cooperatively to reach this agreement and have "affirmed their commitment to make meaningful changes to how child abuse and neglect reports are handled in Humboldt County."

DHHS Director Connie Beck said the settlement agreement formalizes efforts that have been under way for years to modernize various systems within CWS. "Staff inherited an inefficient paper-and-pencil system that they've had to work with for many years. I'm grateful for their commitment to systems improvement and, ultimately, to the children and families we serve." Beck added that staff will continue their work to prioritize tribal values and input across all of the department's systems of care.

"Protecting the children of this county is the highest priority for the Sheriff's Office," said Sheriff William Honsal. "I am thankful that through this process our communication and teamwork with CWS has grown strong. Our new communications system and joint response protocol will ensure that mandated reports of child abuse and neglect are quickly investigated and that children are protected."