



SOCIAL WORKER

MELTDOWN

**A Shortage of Children's
Protective Services Workers
is Placing Children
and Families at Risk.**

by Richard Bermack

reprinted from the SEIU 535 Dragon

SOCIAL WORKER MELTDOWN

**Writing and Photography by
Richard Bermack**

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Introduction

California has one of the largest child welfare systems in the country, and one of the most troubled. Social workers claim they are too overworked and just plain lack the time necessary to do their job. In 1998 labor and community groups convinced the California legislature to commission a time-motion study to determine how many cases social workers could adequately handle. The study was being conducted during the time this series was published. The results corroborate the dire conditions documented in the Meltdown series. The study found that the number of hours required to fulfill federal mandates for children's services exceeded the working hours by as much as a factor of two to one. In other words, according to the study, it would take twice as many children's services workers to meet the demand.

Child welfare departments across the state are caught in a vicious cycle. They cannot hire enough social workers to lower caseloads significantly, and the high caseloads are causing more and more workers to leave. There simply are not enough social workers available. It has been estimated that Los Angeles County alone could hire every available social worker graduating from college in California, and the county would still be understaffed. Some counties, like Alameda, are being urged to send recruiters out of state. But no matter how many new workers counties hire, they cannot match increased demands and new regulations.

Unfortunately, with the exception of improvements to the child welfare computer system, the conditions for child welfare workers in California have changed very little since this series was published. At that time there was a budget surplus, yet counties lacked the resources to adequately staff social services. With the current state deficits and threatened cutbacks in services, many worry about the fate of California's children and families in need.



NOT ENOUGH WORKERS



Alameda County adoptions worker Amy Dooha-Chambers: "The new workers aren't staying and the older workers are retiring or quitting."

Adoption worker and union steward Amy Dooha-Chambers has worked for Alameda County for almost 20 years. She has never seen things so bad. "We have gotten so far down that it is hard to get back up. For years the department has been recruiting people and putting them through training, but they leave in a year. They go to other counties that pay better. The agency has been given permission to hire new

Even when management hires more workers, it lacks the resources to give them desk space and computer equipment. At one point workers were being stationed in utility closets and hallways.

Veteran social worker Pauline Polick doesn't even have a computer at her desk because there are no outlets. Her supervisor has to write down phone messages and hand them to her, because Polick's phone isn't connected to the tie line. "The supervisors are working on it as hard as they can," she comments. "But because of the lack of planning for the number of workers and the amount of space that we need, things have gotten worse. We get told that there isn't that much

while I would leave. Years ago I was less cynical and more enthusiastic, but now I'm tired and cynical."

Effect on Clients

"I hardly know anyone working here anymore. I find people leaving who I didn't even know were working here. A lot are going to private agencies because they feel so overwhelmed they can't do social work," Dooha-Chambers continues. "When I started, caseloads were manageable. I felt I had an effect on peoples' lives. I knew the clients and could really do social work. Now, with 55 cases, if I can return a phone call in a few days, I feel I'm doing okay."

Permanent placement worker Deborah Leeds shares the frustration. "All we do is crisis management and maintenance," she states. "I feel good about my critical skills, as someone



Alameda County family preservation worker John Petigrew (right) can't even pull out his computer keyboard without banging into the worker behind him. Both workers have to get up to allow the workers at the desks behind them to enter or leave their work area.

NOT ENOUGH SPACE

people, but they offer people the jobs and people turn them down."

There has always been a high turnover of new employees, but now the seasoned employees are quitting or retiring. "I've been here 19 and a half years," Dooha-Chambers states, "and I'm starting to think about retiring." She says many of the older employees who previously assumed they would stay until they reached full retirement are considering retiring early and facing less money because they don't think they can take another four or five years.

difference in attrition but it feels that there is a lot of difference. It feels like a lot of inexperienced new workers who come and go."

Years ago Polick was very enthusiastic about her job, but like many workers she is now counting the days until she can retire. "If they offered me a package that was worth my

who can interact with people. I can provide them the understanding that can make a difference in their lives. But you can't do that if you don't have time. I feel like all I can do is just run the same repetitive exercises that have already been unsuccessful. The way the job is structured, I don't even want to know about anyone's prob-



Alameda County permanent placement worker Neal Lupa: "They took away all these stable cases that we had worked on for years with kids and families that we knew, and then they gave us these new cases, which are much more problematic."

"Kids end up without adoptive homes, without adequate services, without appropriate matching, and we get in trouble with the court."

Kim Arikawa, Alameda Adoptions

lems. Any time you pick up the phone you get more things to do. Kids are having problems in school—you find out six months later. We are following the tail of the thing.

"I just got a case where the client has already had three different workers. The previous workers quit. Everyone I know in the agency hates their job. The agency has the uncanny ability to draw really good, intelligent, sensitive people, people who have the in-depth understanding to make a difference. So how do you get so many good people hating their jobs?"

The crisis has brought management and the workers closer together according to Don Canavan. "For the first time I feel there is a real dialogue. They are listening to us," he states. The problem is people don't want to be county social workers anymore.

MORE CHANGES MORE WORK

Changes in regulations have created more work, offsetting the gains made by hiring new workers. Adoptions has been particularly hard hit. The December issue of the Dragon described the pressure on states and counties to increase the number of adoptions completed each year. Under President Clinton's Adoption 2002 program, states can receive \$4,000- \$6,000 for every adoption placement over the state's baseline, and former Governor Wilson offered counties similar financial incentives. The length of family reunification was reduced from 12-18 months to six months. When a child enters the system workers now begin adoption planning concurrent with providing reunification services. The Dragon reported on the havoc in the Los Angeles County adoptions department, where the union forced management to arbitrate the caseload issue. (See article page 1)

Alameda County workers are also feeling the pressure. Social worker Renee Winge has worked for the county for 13 years. "Adoptions used to be a place where you didn't have to work under so much stress, and now it is reversed. We have been under enormous stress with the legal changes," she states. "We have to permanently plan for the kids, almost from the time they come into the system. So we end up doing a lot of work on cases that end up not being adoption cases. For me that feels like a wasted effort given our caseload. There is a much larger stream of cases coming in, and there is a lot of pressure to finish up cases to meet statistics. It was not like that 13 years ago."

Send Them All to Adoptions

"Before it might have been very clear cut," adoption social worker Kim Arikawa explains. "It was only kids who didn't have any health or developmental problems, and the parents were no longer involved. The

attitude now is to take any child under three who is in reunification and send them to adoption. We get all kinds of cases, all kinds of ages, with all kinds of medical conditions. And because the agency didn't plan in advance, we've been really understaffed in all areas."

Kids and Families Suffering

Arikawa continues, "As a result we haven't been able to meet the needs of children. We haven't been able to work with families that are adopting and we haven't been able to recruit families to adopt these children. The kids end up without adoptive homes, without adequate services, without appropriate matching, and we get in trouble with the court. We can't keep up with the flow of court cases, because we don't have enough workers to look for homes. But the court still expects it to be done."

Adoptions is not the only area that has seen workloads get worse.

Neal Lupa, a permanent placement worker, explains the problems in his department: "The union made an agreement where the caseloads were not supposed to reach 15% above yardstick, or 39. The caseload had been around 50 cases, and the department told us they would try to get down to around 45. But the next thing that happened is they started telling us all the kids in group homes were to be sent out. And then all the Independent Living Skills Program cases had to go to a special ILSP unit."

"So before you knew it everyone's caseload was going down, but as soon as it came down to where it was supposed to be, they started back filling us with new cases. So they took away all these stable cases that we had worked on for years with kids and families that we knew, and then they gave us these new cases, which are much more problematic. Now we are almost back to where we were in number of cases, but with a more difficult workload."

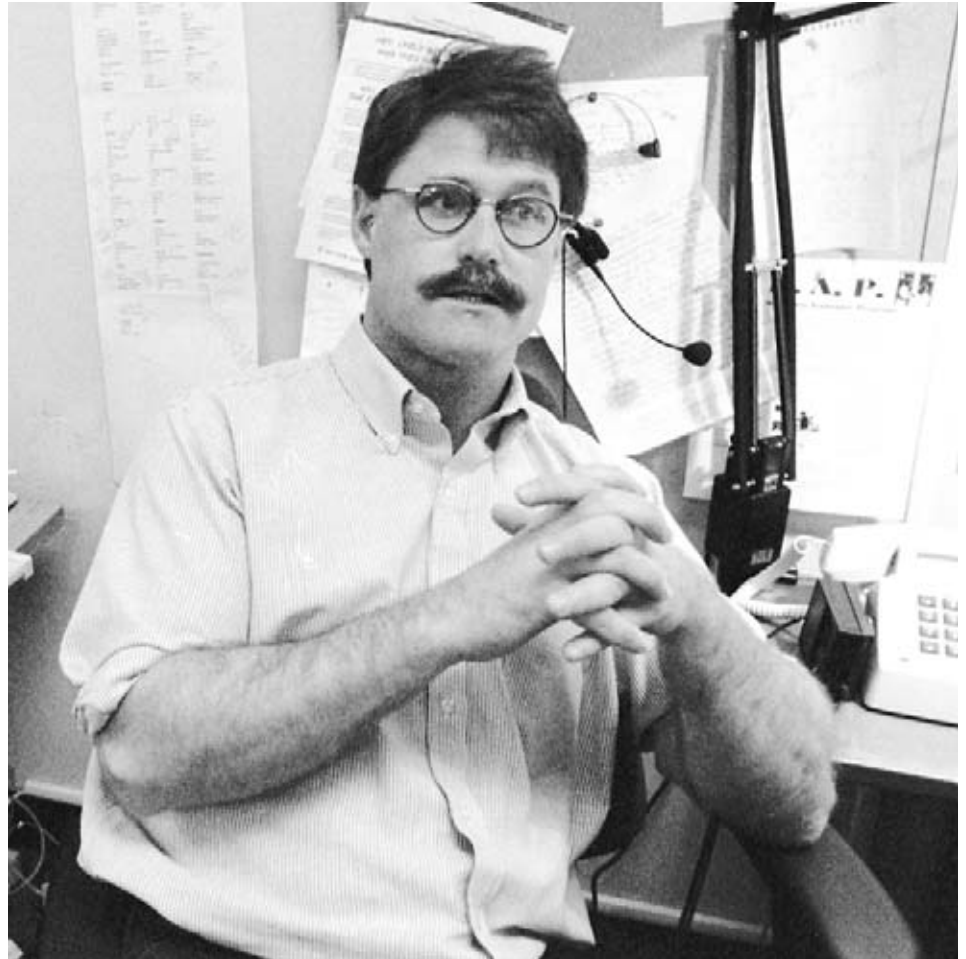
FROM THE TRENCHES: A New Worker's Perspective

During his first four months as a social worker for Alameda County, Erich Keefe worked in a hallway. "That was challenging," he reports. At the time the department was so short of space that management placed new hires in every nook and cranny of the building. Keefe was envious of the workers who were placed in closets. "At least they had a door and a computer," he remarks. He has now worked for the department for one-and-one-half years, which puts him close to the critical two-year mark—most children's social workers quit within the first two years. Will he make it over the hump? What is the job like from his point of view, and will he stay? He discusses these issues in the following interview:

"I was told the job would be very difficult on my personal life. That it can be traumatizing. But I had worked with kids for several years as a pre-school teacher and like working with kids. Well, there is nothing you could do short of going to war that would prepare you for the experience of working here. There are long stretches of time that just seem pretty close to intolerable. Then there are other times that I'm on top of things. You have multiple crises going on, requiring you to address really serious issues in kids' lives. But you are not given any time to interact with them.

"Two weeks ago I received a call at 3:30 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, instructing me, as worker of the day, to go out to Antioch [40 miles from Keefe's Oakland office]. A foster child had reported to his therapist that he had been abused in his foster home. The worker who had been carrying the case quit after working two weeks. So I was told to go out there, and if the child said the same thing to me as he said to the therapist, I should remove him.

"Just as I'm getting ready to leave,



"We take kids out of situations that are catastrophic, even horrific, where they are abused daily. The problem for me is that is not enough. I want to bring them to a higher level of functioning."

Erich Keefe, Alameda County, Child Welfare Worker

I get an urgent call concerning a teenage client of mine. There had been a fight in the house and an accusation of theft. I'm trying to deal with that and then I get the teenager on the phone and she says, 'Well they think that I have stolen, but it doesn't matter because I'm going to be out of here by the time this gets somewhere.' So I ask her what she means by 'out of here,' and I find out that she has just taken 15 pills with the intent to kill herself.

"It is now 5:30, and there is no one else here. So I have to put her on hold, call 911, and then get back on and keep talking to her until the police get there. Finally, I get in the car to go out to Antioch. I arrive and there is no one there. So I wander around until the foster parent shows up, and I have to say, 'Hi,' this is who I am, and this is why I'm here. Not very pretty for anyone. I end up removing the kid and transferring him to another social worker in

Oakland to be taken to another foster home. By the time I get back to the office and return the county car, it is 9:30 Friday night.

"I think what we do is valuable. We take kids out of situations that are catastrophic, even horrific, where they are abused daily. The problem for me is that is not enough. I want to bring them to a higher level of functioning. So I take them out of a situation where they are getting the hell beat out of them daily, and in the worst case I put them in a group home with holes in the walls and completely torn up carpets, where it is obvious the staff has little or no training whatsoever. They talk to the kids in what is, to me, a pretty nasty, almost abusive way, but at least the kid is not getting beaten up daily. I also place kids in wonderful foster homes, where the foster parents are planning to adopt the kids, and I feel great about it.

And then occasionally I can spend some extra time with a kid, and that is what makes my job worth doing."

Do you think you will stay?

"I go up and down on it. There are times when I think that it is a real bad idea for my own mental and physical health to keep the job, because the stress level gets to be so high, for such extended periods of time. I get home from work and feel like I don't want to interact with anyone. I certainly don't want to call anyone over the telephone. You sort of withdraw. Then other times there are satisfying moments, and those are coming more frequently, so I think that maybe I could stay.

"I like helping kids, I like the idea of gaining expertise. The job is extraordinarily hard to do and feel good about what you do, and because of that not enough people stay long enough to develop a body of expert knowledge. As a result the kids aren't served very well. People leave constantly, and the kids say to me, 'You are my worker today, but two months from now I'm going to have a different worker, so...'"

What would it take to make you want to stay?

"If I could attend to the children on a regular basis instead of just when a crisis occurs. I would have more



CWS/CMS Continues to Drag Workers Down

Veteran Alameda County adoption worker Lois Shelton stares at the folders on her desk. All she can do is pile up cases and explain her situation to the court. She is hoping that today will be the day she can retrieve the information she needs from the CWS/CMS system. "I haven't been able to print out a court report for several days. The help desk has been gone or is busy. I can't get the stuff to do reports and the court is giving me short continuances and wanting to know why I can't do my work faster. I've worked here 22 years, and this is the worst time I've ever had."

According to senior field representative Joyce Baird, the union continues to meet with the California Department of Social Services concerning CWS/CMS, but there seems to be no remedy in sight. Workers continue to report problems and feel that the computer system drastically slows down their work performance. According to Baird, "At this point, the best we can hope for is that the system will become a neutral factor. At this point it is a tremendous minus."

success and feel better about what I am doing. That would make the stress level more manageable.

"We need transportation to enable kids to go to therapy. We need to have money for basic necessities. One gets tired of passing that message along to people who are trying to get the basic things that kids need. It is a triage sit-

uation. That is obvious to all of us, and that is not a position people want to be put in. You don't want to decide between who is the neediest of several people who all have very serious problems."

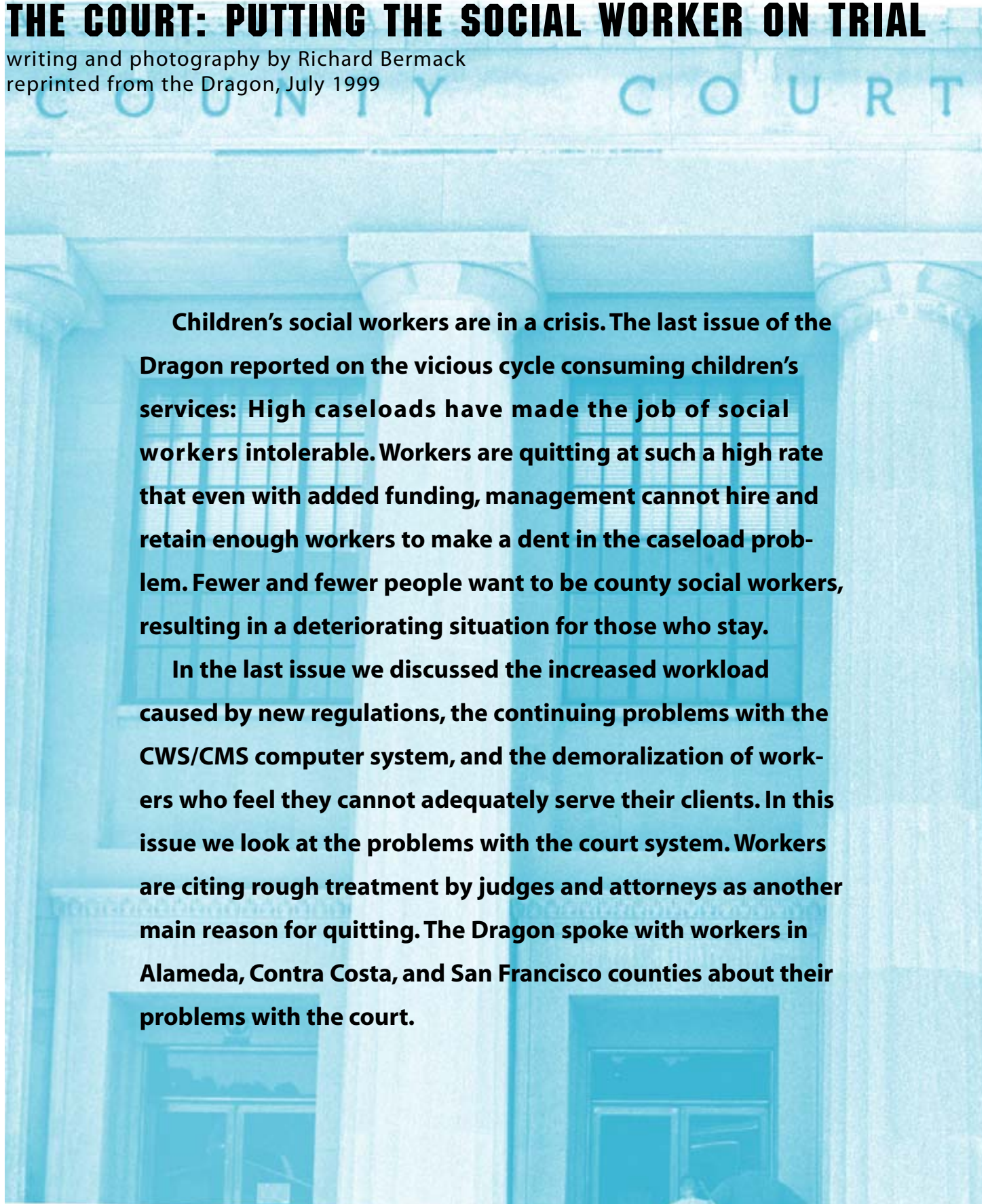
What is your worst fear?

"If I get mandated to use CWS/CMS I can't imagine staying."

SOCIAL WORKER MELTDOWN PART 2

THE COURT: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL

writing and photography by Richard Bermack
reprinted from the Dragon, July 1999



Children's social workers are in a crisis. The last issue of the Dragon reported on the vicious cycle consuming children's services: High caseloads have made the job of social workers intolerable. Workers are quitting at such a high rate that even with added funding, management cannot hire and retain enough workers to make a dent in the caseload problem. Fewer and fewer people want to be county social workers, resulting in a deteriorating situation for those who stay.

In the last issue we discussed the increased workload caused by new regulations, the continuing problems with the CWS/CMS computer system, and the demoralization of workers who feel they cannot adequately serve their clients. In this issue we look at the problems with the court system. Workers are citing rough treatment by judges and attorneys as another main reason for quitting. The Dragon spoke with workers in Alameda, Contra Costa, and San Francisco counties about their problems with the court.

MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL

JUDGES

Changes in the law that shorten reunification services to six months for young children and federal financial incentives to increase the number of adoption placements are putting pressure on the courts to move more cases through the system at a much faster rate. Judges and referees are under more and more pressure, and in turn have become less tolerant of the problems that prevent social workers from performing their jobs in a timely fashion. The courtroom is the place where the rubber meets the road, where the system's tires worn thin finally explode.



Deborah Leeds

Judges Lash out at Workers

New workers, lacking adequate time, training, or support, fall short in fulfilling the letter, or even sometimes the basic requirements, of the law. Experienced workers have trouble fulfilling "reasonable effort" mandates given the high caseload and computer breakdowns. Judges fear that their rulings may be subject to reversal on appeal and that children may be returned to dangerous situations because of these chronic problems. Unable to hold management accountable directly, they are lashing out at workers.

Workers are being humiliated in front of their clients, fined (the social service department pays the fine), and even threatened with incarceration. Social workers are taking the brunt of the system's failures, as judges hold them accountable for problems caused by management's inability to hire enough workers.

Although many of the judges are respectful of the pressure confronting workers, some judges are not. Social workers feel the courts use them as whipping boys for the department.

Alameda County It's Like War

"It's like war," stated veteran Alameda County social worker Deborah Leeds about the courtroom of one particular judge. "The social worker is the peon. We are treated

"We are treated like our opinions and evaluations aren't worth anything....This judge tore me up in front of my clients, the attorneys, and everybody else in court for nothing."

Deborah Leeds, *Social Worker, Alameda County*

like our opinions and evaluations aren't worth anything. This judge is overbearing, insulting, and doesn't mind dressing you down in front of a whole courtroom full of people. They treat us like we are the problem. I just got a case from a worker I used to supervise. She was a fine person, but she got so overwhelmed. And then felt she was being treated like dirt on top of that, so she left.

"I try to go to court as little as possible," Leeds says. She offers an example of the problems: "I have a kid who needs psych medication. He has already been hospitalized a number of times, but his medication has changed. So I'm going to have to get court permission, again, for him to be on the meds. But this one judge doesn't like to authorize kids being on meds, even if you have established the justification and have a psychia-

trist's recommendation. So who wants to do a job that is so frustrating, where you are beating your head against the wall? And for what? You know he should be on meds, the psychiatrist has said so, but the judge won't accept that."

She still shudders at the thought of one particular confrontation with a judge. "This judge tore me up in front of my clients, the attorneys, and everybody else in court for nothing," she recalls. "I think I had rolled my eyes or something. I'm still not sure what I did. It was just unbelievable. I was sitting in my chair when she started to read me the riot act. At first the attorneys thought she was reading them the riot act, it was so ridiculous. She just took off on me. It was terrible. The client looks to me as the authority figure and then watches me

get chewed out in court. We can't do our job after that."

In her 10 years with the department, Leeds has been in many dangerous situations. She has been assaulted and even had her life threatened. Those are some of the unavoidable givens that come with the job. However, disrespect from the court shouldn't be another one of those givens. Leeds took up the incident with her supervisors. "I approached upper management about this," she states. "It seems only decent if a judge has a complaint they contact your supervisor, who could then talk with you about it. But our agency refused to take it up. I was told it is a good old boys club and you play by their rules. It doesn't matter how unfair it is or how it affects our ability to do our jobs." Leeds no longer works

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MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL

ATTORNEYS

Even during the best of times, going to court is the most grueling part of the job for many social workers. The logic of law and the logic of social work are in complete contradiction, explains Contra Costa social worker Judy Maynard, who just retired after careers as both a social worker and a federal attorney. Social workers look at the big picture. They are responsible for finding a solution that is in the best interest of the child and of the family. They are charged with both protecting the child and helping the parent, even though many times the two tasks may be in opposition.

In contrast, the attorneys are charged with representing the narrow interests of their clients, which they often do by focusing on minor details and technicalities, without regard to the larger consequences. Social work is about helping individuals; the law is about applying abstract principles in an objective fashion.

"What lawyers advocate in court may be the opposite of what they personally believe should happen," Maynard explains. "For the social worker that is unethical, but for attorneys it is the other way around. They must represent the interest of their client even if they know that they are going to lose and even believe they should lose. If they don't provide the best possible

"If the facts are not on your side, pound on the law; if the law is not on your side, pound on the facts. If neither the facts nor the law are on your side, pound on the social worker."

defense for their client, they are guilty of malpractice. Often a social worker will ask, 'How can that attorney advocate for the child to visit when the mother is still using drugs?' The attorneys may actually cringe at the thought of what they are advocating, but that may be what is ethically required."

For the social worker, the goal of the proceeding is to protect the child



Social worker Diane Smith (right) conferring on a case with county counsel Nora Barlow. It is the job of attorneys like Barlow to present the department's case and to defend workers from attacks by attorneys representing the parents.

and guide the parent to a more healthy life (with or without the child). The parent's attorney may see his or her role as preventing the state from punishing the parent by taking the child or intruding on the parent's rights by forcing a reunification plan on the parent.

The workers we spoke with feel that a large portion of the attorneys they deal with are open-minded and understand that their role is different from that of a defense lawyer in a criminal case and attempt to steer their clients in a healthy direction.

However, the workers also feel that many attorneys do not have this understanding and are only concerned with winning in the narrow sense. Whatever the attorney's personal motivation, if the social worker is advocating removal of a child or termination of parental rights, and the parent is in opposition, the job of the parent's attorney is to attack and

destroy the social worker's position.

According to veteran social worker Paula Hollowell, the shortening of reunification time has caused a lot of hostility on the part of attorneys representing parents. Many of them feel pressured by the time limit, and believe that their clients are not being given enough time, especially in drug cases. The attorneys are also aware that the workers' overwhelming case-loads make it impossible for a worker to fulfill all the requirements of the law, especially concerning "reasonable services." So for the attorney, the social worker is an easy target. "They put the social worker on trial, especially if their client can't bear the spot light. I would do the same thing," Hollowell comments. "That's their job. If they can show that a client didn't receive treatment for four months, they might get the client four more months of reunification services, and stall termination of parental rights."

A recent issue of a legal publication featured an article offering advice to attorneys on how to go after social workers to help the parents prevail in a termination case.

MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL



San Francisco Social Worker, Maria Muñoz

Judges

Continued from page 7

dependency investigation and is thankful she doesn't have to spend as much time going to court.

Social worker complaints of abuse by judges are becoming commonplace, according to Alameda chapter union steward Amy Doocha-Chambers. "We are put down in front of our clients. We are told, 'You are supposed to be professional, but I'll treat you the way I want to.' They don't respect your opinion. They don't treat you like you know what you are talking about. They are more concerned that you have dotted every 'I' and crossed every 'T' than they are about the social work issues of the case.

"A lot of people feel they shouldn't be in a job where they are treated so poorly." She warns, "A lot of new people are quitting or becoming supervisors to get out of the caseload and to get out of going to court."

"They don't respect your opinion. They don't treat you like you know what you are talking about. They are more concerned that you have dotted every 'I' and crossed every 'T' than they are about the social work issues of the case. A lot of people feel they shouldn't be in a job where they are treated so poorly."

Amy Doocha-Chambers
Social Worker,
Alameda County

"The court blames us for anything that is not provided to the client."

San Francisco
Social Worker
Maria Muñoz:

"The court blames us for anything that is not provided to the client. I used to be able to just call a therapist directly to provide mental health services. Now I have to go through foster care mental health, which is a complicated system. In the past it took just one piece of paper. Now, not only do we have to depend on foster care mental health services, but we have to fill out three pages of very complicated forms, and wait for the referral. I have had to wait four months to receive the referral before the clients could get therapy, and then I go to court and I get blamed because the clients aren't getting services.

"The department is not doing what it's supposed to be doing in terms of having enough competent services for us to provide to our clients. The judges get hostile, and I don't blame them because the clients are not getting what they need to complete their reunification requirements. They see the department as the bad guy but the workers get blamed.

"The attorneys don't understand the social work standpoint. They only look at it from their clients' point of view. They don't consider the well-being of the family. They don't see the big picture. They only look for the winning part. They are not all like that, but I feel that most of them have no respect for social workers, and many don't treat us well. Many times they turn around what we said and even confuse the clients."

MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL

Referee Stirling's Court *A Hostile Vicious Place*

Three years ago Contra Costa County social worker Judy Maynard thought she had found her calling. "I wanted to be a bridge between the court and social workers. I wanted to explain the court to social workers and social work to the court," she states. So when a problematic referee, Bruce Stirling, announced that he wanted to make his court a kinder, gentler place for social workers, she seized the opportunity.

Maynard felt she was uniquely qualified for the task. Before becoming a social worker, Maynard had been a federal attorney for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. So Maynard asked to become a court officer.

Three years later she resigned. "I thought I could make the court a better place. I thought if he understood the challenges facing social workers, he would be less hostile toward them," she explains. Although she feels she may have succeeded in toughening up social workers, when it came to changing the attitude of Referee Stirling, she says, "I failed horribly. I wish I had never even tried."

The Dragon spoke with Maynard a few days after she retired: "Bruce Stirling's court is a cruel, vicious place for social workers," she states. Stirling is especially brutal to new social workers. According to Maynard, supervisors estimate that it takes almost two years



to learn all the details of the job, yet Stirling expects workers to function perfectly from the day they enter his court. Any mistake and he berates them in a very harsh, insulting and unkind manner, in front of their clients and the attorney. It is not uncommon for veteran social workers to leave his courtroom in tears. "I can't describe how horrible it is," comments Maynard. Stirling's tirades can last for several minutes, during which he calls workers everything from incompetent to ignorant, in front of their clients.

Maynard often called social workers after they left court to see if they were okay. The week before she left,

reunification, but because of a few errors in technical wording that had nothing to do with the services ordered by the court—which were provided correctly—Stirling berated the worker in court and then phoned the supervisor and e-mailed the director of the department threatening to find that the department had failed to provide reasonable efforts. That would have meant the department could not be reimbursed by the state for the services it provided— even though the worker had knocked herself out and performed an incredible job of social work. "He has no sense of proportion," Maynard stated.

"New social workers go in thinking that court will be a safe and fair environment where they will be treated professionallyThey end up leaving in tears."

she spent a half hour on the phone calming down a shell-shocked worker who had received the Stirling treatment. Maynard described that social worker as one of the department's best.

One of Stirling's pet peeves is mistakes in the legal recommendation section of a report, a part of the report that requires a lot of legal expertise to write, for which social workers lack training. In one instance a social worker submitted a 30-page report detailing exemplary work with a family that resulted in a successful

"New social workers go in thinking that court will be a safe and fair environment where they will be treated professionally. But instead they find a hostile, unpleasant environment. They are not trained as lawyers, so they end up leaving in tears. Workers have nightmares and describe going into an altered state when they enter Stirling's courtroom, akin to the feeling soldiers have in a battlefield, under fire. "I'm young. I'm skilled. I don't have to take this," one

continued next page

MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL

Stirling

Continued from page 10

worker stated to Maynard, before resigning. Another worker, who had been with the department for a number of years, filed for early retirement when she was told her job had been redefined and that she might have to go to court.

According to Maynard, although workers have run-ins with other judges, they don't feel personally attacked, the way they do in Stirling's courtroom. They are able to put the

Stirling's advice to new workers: If you don't find the court a comfortable environment, then you better find a new career.

incident aside and go on.

Ironically, the rulings by Referee Stirling tend to be the most favorable to the department. "I really think he cares about the kids," Maynard states. But "he is a very angry and hostile person toward social workers."

Recently, Stirling addressed a group of newly hired social workers who were touring the court. He warned them in a hostile manner that they better find out what it's like to be in court, and if they don't find the court a comfortable environment, then they better find a new career. Maynard cringed at his words, coming at a time when the department has a major problem retaining social workers.

Stirling has his defenders, who attribute his outbursts to overwork. He has good days and bad days, they state. He travels all over the county hearing cases, and on the days he has 30 cases he is okay, but on the days when he has to hear 80 cases he tends to lose his temper, according to his defenders. Like social workers, he suffers from an overwhelming workload and waseload.

The Union Responds to the Contra Costa Court Problems

To assess the depth of the problem, the union surveyed Contra Costa members about their problems with the courts. The union then wrote to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors Family and Human Services Committee apprising them of the results. The board forwarded the letter to the court. The letter stated the following problems:

- The courts are asking too much of workers, especially in relationship to "reasonable efforts" mandates to provide visitation to incarcerated parents.
- Social workers are not given the routine courtesies paid to other court officers and attorneys.
- County counsel is not aggressive enough in supporting the Social Services Department's position or in defending workers against attacks from opposing attorneys and does not spend enough time meeting with social workers to prepare cases.
- A general lack of respect and "rude" behavior on the part of judges toward workers further undermines their position with both county counsel and their clients, implying the workers have a lower status in the court.

Contra Costa Superior Court Judge Lois Haight's response to the union's letter is indicative of the complexity of the problem. She first wholeheartedly praised social workers and acknowledged the difficulties they face in court, including hostile cross-examination by opposing counsels, and the high caseloads, but then stated the system's dilemma:

"Nevertheless, the legal requirements that are placed on the Department of Social Services, as well as the Court, do not lend themselves to much negotiation. If the department or the Court do not comply with those legislatively mandated requirements, cases will

be dismissed and/or successfully appealed. Most important, dependent children and their families will not be provided needed services in a timely manner which does not bode well for all concerned," she wrote.

Judges state it is inappropriate for the union to address the court

After receiving a forwarded copy of Judge Haight's letter, union representative Joyce Baird wrote to Judge Haight restating many of the workers' concerns and requesting a meeting with the judge and juvenile court referees. In response, Presiding Superior Court Judge Spinetta stated: "Your letter and attendant request to meet concerning its subject matter is not properly addressed to the Court or any of its members. The social workers you represent are not employees of the Court, but rather of the County's Social Services Department." He then suggested the union take the issue up with the department.

Department of Social Services Welcomes Union's Help

Shortly after receiving a copy of Judge Spinetta's letter, the department contacted the union indicating the department's appreciation of the union's initiative and welcoming the union's help. The Department of Social Services has been raising the same issues with the courts.

The department drafted a memorandum of cooperation with county counsel with the hope that it will improve the representation of social workers in court. However, for better or worse, the department, the board of supervisors, and the union have no power over the court. Under the constitution the judiciary branch is shielded from political influence and accountability to either the legislative or executive branches of the government.

MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL

Lack of Proper Training and Supervision

The lack of training and the lack of guidance from knowledgeable supervisors are two of the major complaints of workers in Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco. Many workers feel that part of the courts' hostility is caused by inexperienced and poorly prepared workers who are making mistakes in court that adversely affect cases. "I was trained well, so I don't have trouble with the courts," stated San Francisco social worker Erin Monahan. "But now there is a horrible lack of training. Social workers don't know what they are doing, and supervisors don't know, because they were never trained either."

Not Always Like This

The situation was not always like this. When Monahan started in Contra Costa County 10 years ago, the county had a full-time training unit and a comprehensive program. She recalls the training she received with pride: "They had a two to three month training program that was program specific. A supervisor led the training, accompanying the new workers while they took a hot line call and then an ER referral and went all the way through the system. So when you hit the floor you had a generalized program-specific view of what to do at each step of the way." Several years later, when she started working in San Francisco County, she was shocked by the lack of training workers received.

"Training here is non-existent," she says. "At most you get a six-week overview and then the new worker is dispersed to whatever position is open. If it is emergency response, they hit the floor and after six weeks training they have to make life and death decisions for kids and families. If new workers had a knowledgeable supervisor to balance off their lack of experience, it might be okay, but that is not happening because the supervisors are so poorly trained. They hardly know

laws and risk assessment."

San Francisco County workers were so inadequately trained that in 1995 the state of California cited the department for being out of compliance with state regulations.

According to union chapter president Craig McCracken, workers were either unaware they needed to document the regular visits to children and

Monahan, "Workers don't even know what the law is, let alone how to do the right thing. I know workers are not removing when they should and removing when they shouldn't because of the lack of training and checks and balances. It is not the worker's fault. I understand why a judge sometimes gets mad. There are no quality of work standards or consistency."

(The training program she described no longer exists, and Contra Costa workers now share the same complaints as San Francisco workers regarding training.)



Erin Monahan, San Francisco County Social Worker

families or did not know how to document them adequately. According to Monahan, after the state censured the county, management trained workers in how to fulfill state regulations. "However they do not train them in the Welfare and Institutions Code, the laws that govern taking a child from a parent or providing proper intervention to allow a child to remain safely at home and out of the system. These are the laws workers need to know when they go to court," she explains.

"They don't know juvenile dependency law and risk assessment law," Monahan continues. And these are the laws specifying under what conditions a child should be removed from a parent and how to support those actions in court. According to

Poorly Trained Supervisors Offer Poor Supervision

The high caseload pressure has caused many line workers to apply to become supervisors. This only adds to the problem. Instead of new workers being able to turn to experienced supervisors for help, they are getting advice from supervisors who were never properly trained and never able to do the job themselves. It takes five years to really learn the job. "Child welfare requires a lot of expertise on the law and risk assessment to treat families properly, yet many workers are becoming supervisors after only two years of experience," Monahan states.

MELTDOWN: PUTTING THE SOCIAL WORKER ON TRIAL



Paula Hollowell, Contra Costa Social worker

“When you walk into the court arena, you need to put on a bullet proof vest emotionally.”

Paula Hollowell

Paula Hollowell has been a social worker in Contra Costa since 1974. “They call me the dinosaur,” she muses. Like many, she brought to social work the idealism of the 1960s. “I still believe you have to change the world,” she states, but her goals have become more modest. “You realize that no matter how many reports you write it will not stop the drug problem. I can’t solve all the problems, but I can help a few people.”

In nearly 25 years she has never seen such a high turnover in workers. She sees the cause as three-fold: the overwhelming caseload, pressure from malfunctions in the CWS/CMS computer system, and the department’s failure to prepare social workers adequately for the court arena.

Lack of Supervision and Guidance

She sees the problem not so much as a lack of training as a lack of supervision and guidance. “It is not enough to get a three-hour lecture

from a lawyer. What we need are good supervisors who can be there when you are writing up a report and can prepare the social worker for going into the courtroom. The problem is that the supervisors may be good at casework, but they may not know the law, so they often send workers into court with bad advice. And then the worker gets eaten alive by the attorney and the court.”

According to Hollowell, new workers often fall easy prey to the parent’s attorney. The attorney approaches the worker in a friendly manner, and the worker responds in a normal social worker manner, being open and candid. Then a few minutes later, when they get in court, the attorney twists around what the worker said and uses it against them. “The defense attorney can be real friendly to you and then turn on you and go for the jugular vein,” she explains. “The social workers are devastated. They get chewed up by the attorney and then they leave the department.”

Lied About and Trashed in Court

“I’ve been lied about and trashed in court. I have had to become emotionally bullet proof. I understand that my clients are the children and that puts me at odds with the defense attorney. Their clients are the people society despises, drug dealers and poor people. I admire the attorneys for defending these people, but I resent their personal attacks.

“I know what can happen if I’m too nice to the parents. The department used to use returning children as a carrot to entice then not to use drugs. If a client stayed clean for a short time, like two months, we would say, ‘Okay, you’re trying,’ and we would return the kids. But then I’ve seen kids injured because of that. It used to be very painful for me emotionally, but now when I walk into that courtroom I don’t care what they feel about me. I only care about saving the kids.”

SOCIAL WORKER MELTDOWN PART 3



PUTTING SOCIAL WORK BACK IN CHILD WELFARE

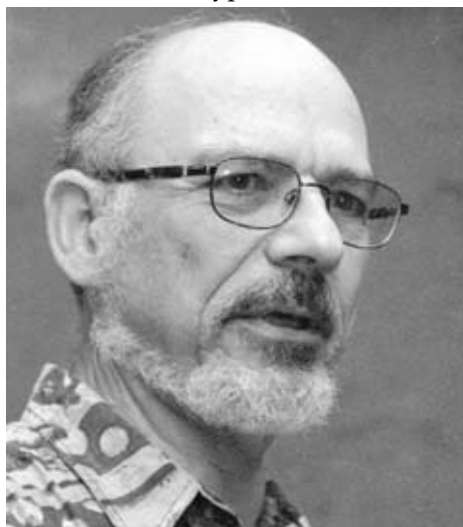
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In a recent meeting between Alameda County children's social workers and the Child Welfare League of America, the CWLA suggested that workers try to imagine what the best practices for a given client would be and then act accordingly. Workers responded to the suggestion with anger and disbelief. "It was an insult," responded adoption worker and shop steward Amy Dooha-Chambers. "Caseloads are so overwhelming that we can barely meet, and many times don't even meet, what is required by the courts. Workers are held responsible for not providing services that we can't possibly provide in the time limits we have," she stated. Not only do workers not have time to spend with the exercise the CWLA suggested, but until workload and caseloads decrease, best practices are irrelevant. CWLA eventually concluded that Alameda County needs to cut caseloads drastically before there can be any real improvement in child welfare.

There is some hope. The union has been meeting with the new director of the state Department of Social Services, Rita Saenz, and she was very concerned about the lack of time child welfare workers have to spend with their clients. Several solutions are being considered to lower workload. They include attempting to deal with the problems around the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System and providing more clerical support, and possibly paraprofessionals, to ease the workload. The Dragon asked workers what they thought.

Many workers, like LA County social worker Stephen Thomas, are skeptical about how clericals can be used effectively. "For me it doesn't seem like it would be that efficient. We will still need to get the information to them in a form they can enter into the computer," he states. Madera county social worker Catherine Balbas echoes Thomas's concerns. "I can type as fast as I can



Arthur Rubin

dictate," she says. She believes that it will take as long to review and correct information put in by others as it would take for her to put it in herself. She would, however, like to see paraprofessionals used to transport kids and other similar tasks.

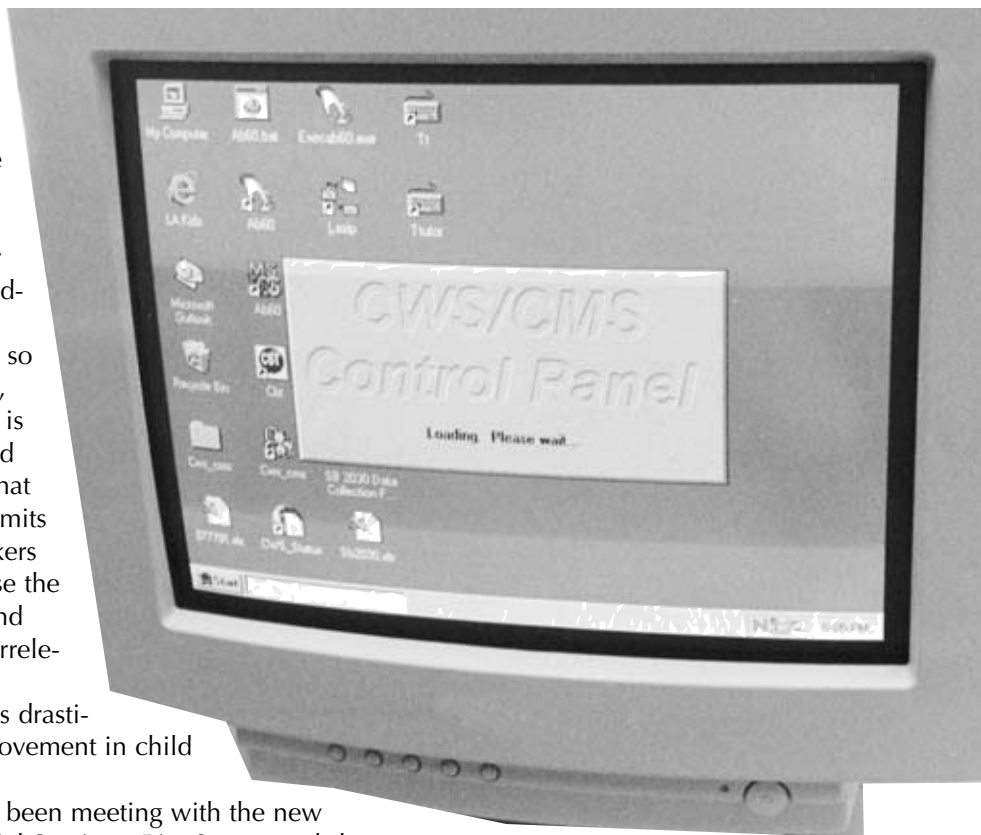
Planning is the key, according to LA social worker Arthur Rubin. Both clericals and paraprofessionals could be used effectively he believes, but it won't be an off-the-shelf solution. "We do a tremendous amount of work that could be done under supervision," he states, but it will require job assessment, planning, and training.

Lower caseloads

Alameda County social worker Amy Dooha-Chambers likes the idea of using clericals. She presently types up information in Microsoft Word and gives it to clericals for input. She would also like them used to send out notices and perform other tasks. She, however, questions the use of paraprofessionals. "If it is my case, I'm responsible for everything that is

done. If someone doesn't do something right, I'm responsible. If we have paraprofessionals supervising visits and transporting children, what if the parent has a question and the case aide gives the wrong answer or undermines our authority? What we need is lower caseloads. When I first started doing family maintenance, I had 25 cases. I was able to see all my clients twice a month, and I was able to do really good social work. Just lower the caseload."

"The idea is to increase the time social workers can spend one-on-one in relationship with the families and the children that they are working with, and paraprofessionals can be helpful doing that." Alameda County social worker Donald Canavan states. "But if the idea is to substitute paraprofessionals for the social worker-client relationship, if the agency is thinking of keeping the caseloads at the same level and lowering the workload so we can be better number carriers for the data they need for reports, then it is a bad idea," he concludes.





Participants at the statewide retreat plan out legislative campaign to deal with CWS/CMS and the caseload problem.

Responding to the rallying cry, "Put social work back in child welfare," children's services workers from all over the state met to discuss the crisis in child welfare: Social workers spend most of their time writing reports and filling out documentation and only a minimal amount of time working with their clients. The retreat, organized by the Local 535 Children's Services Committee, met on September 24, in Los Angeles, the day before the Local 535 executive board meeting. The retreat included San Mateo social workers, who are members of AFSCME. One of the main focuses of the retreat was how to deal with the continuing problems with the CWS/CMS computer system.

Workers from Solano, San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Los Angeles counties exchanged horror stories about long waits and breakdowns in the CWS/CMS computer system. CWS/CMS remains a controversial subject, with some workers skeptical about the viability of the system and others believing it could be a good system if it only worked right. The latest software fix to make the system Y2K compatible has pretty much marginalized the abilities of the original 75 MHz Pentium computer

installed by IBM. The committee, therefore, endorsed a resolution to encourage the state to fund counties to replace the old computers with new 400 MHZ computers with adequate memory. The funds must come out of a funding source that is separate from that to be used for lowering caseloads. Another proposed solution was increasing the use of clericals to enter data. IBM has stated that it could restructure the system to create two types of users, clericals and social workers.

However, CWS/CMS aside, the main problem confronting social workers is that they have too many cases and too much work, and the only solution is to hire more social workers. Last year the Children's Services Committee conducted a successful campaign that resulted in a \$40 million augmentation to last year's state budget to hire more workers and a yardstick study to document the workload confronting children's social workers. The yardstick study is to be completed by January, but workers were warned not to rely on the findings of the study to come up with a plan for lowering caseloads. A lobbying campaign is being launched for an additional \$40 million augmentation for this year's budget to hire more social workers.

Tim Farrell, special project organ-

izer, and Local 535 political director Jerry Fillingim outlined the second part of the caseload campaign, a petition calling for a reduction in the time social workers spend on the computer and an increase in the time they spend seeing clients (see color box page 6-7). County chapters are to develop written plans that include quantifiable goals for getting petition signatures and then forming teams of workers and community groups to lobby legislators. The campaign calls for the lobbying teams to meet with their local legislators at district offices, while the legislature is recessed between now and January. Special emphasis is placed on meeting with members of the legislature's budget committee.

Workers need to tell their personal stories about the children they have helped and the families they have reunified. These stories can then be contrasted with stories about the clients who fell through the cracks because the resources were not there to help them.

On a statewide level, Children's Services Committee members are planning meetings with Assemblywoman Dion Aroner, State Director of Social Services Rita Saenz, the County Welfare Directors Association, and the IBM CWS/CMS project managers.

Proposed Interim Fixes for CWS/CMS System

The union has been meeting with representatives from IBM and the Health and Welfare Data Center, which is the state department in charge of the Child Welfare Service/Case Management System computer system. In these meetings both IBM and the state workers expressed their concern over the continuing problems with the CWS/CMS system. The problems are at several levels: the CWS/CMS software program, the phone lines, the county networks, and the computer hardware. Information has to travel from the mainframe in Boulder, Colorado, to the state's system in Sacramento, and from there to the 58 counties. And then each county has its own network linking the computers used by each social worker.

County network problems

Depending on the county, the local network can be one of the bottlenecks. Although San Francisco workers believe their network is okay, Los Angeles appears to have major network problems. According to LA child abuse hotline worker Paula Gamboa, who was involved in the original pilot project, IBM warned Los Angeles from the start that CWS/CMS would have problems unless they installed it on a network separate from the main LA network. The LA network has too many other applications on it and uses a different technology than most of the other counties. LA refused, and as a result many of the system shutdowns and crashes are ascribed to problems with the LA server. Even with the new computers, Gamboa estimates that the system goes down at least once every 10 days. She is appalled that the county won't spend the extra money to install a more reliable network.

The individual computers on workers' desks are another major problem. At this point both the state and IBM have agreed that the original

75 MHZ computers are not adequate. They suggest upgrading to 400 MHZ computers with more memory, such as those used by the LA emergency response workers at Metro North.

Is the program just too big?

When it comes to the CWS/CMS software program, at this point IBM and the county are doing only minor interim fixes. A request for proposal for a major fix of the program is out. The main contract with IBM is over, and it will probably be at least a year until new proposals are submitted, evaluated, and approved. It will be even longer until major rewrites of the program are implemented.

Is the software program just too big? It is the largest Windows program in existence. Unfortunately, because of the political nature of the process, there seems to be a lack of agreement on what to cut out of it. According to Tim Farrell, Local 535's project organizer, there is a lack of governance. Each county has autonomy, which means there are 58 county

welfare directors who need to agree on what parts to cut out, and no vehicle for getting them to act in unity. So even some simple changes that IBM proposed could not be implemented because the LA director vetoed them. To make matters worse, the federal government requires quite a bit of information, and new guidelines may require even more.

Why not just pull the plug on the system?

If the state were to pull the plug on CWS/CMS, it would have to repay the federal government the money it put into the system, which could be hundreds of millions of dollars. The situation would be similar to that of the failed child support collection computer system, where the state must repay \$90 million to the federal government. According to SEIU State Council legislative advocate Michelle Castro, this could easily bankrupt the child support collection agencies of most counties. The state is, therefore, stuck with the system for the time being.

Petition: Put Social Work Back in Child Welfare!

Social Workers circulated the following Petition.

We, the undersigned, are child protective services social workers. We strive to do the best we can to protect the children of California from abuse and neglect, often against tremendous obstacles. Despite the dangers, we face the challenges, and our work does make a very positive difference. We want to continue providing the highest level of professional services, for which we have spent years preparing.

The child welfare system should also strive to protect children and repair families by providing an environment and technology allowing for its workers to spend more time delivering services than documenting them. But, Social Workers now spend more time on the computer than doing social work. This must stop now! CWS/CMS must be made user friendly, allowing for social workers to spend 20% of their time on the computer and 80% doing social work. The computer is of value to the social worker as a tool, not as a master. Let us put social work back into the child welfare system.

Point, Click, and Wait

Workers dream of a computer system that will manage the massive amount of documentation required by their job, help them enter the information for court reports, and give them immediate access to a client's history. Will the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System ever fulfill that mandate? The jury is still out, but many workers remain skeptical.

Much progress has been made. Workers using the newer computers at the Los Angeles hotline are having positive experiences with the system—that is, when the LA server is not down. But after years of eliminating bugs, some of the main problems still remain: the system is time consuming, unreliable, difficult to navigate, and loses data. The Dragon interviewed workers from all over the state. The following comments are typical of workers' reaction to the problems with CWS/CMS.

No Random Access

CWS/CMS is the largest Windows system, yet there is no way



Rolinda Gomez, Fresno SW

to navigate effectively through the hundreds of screens. Arthur Rubin worked for a systems development company before he became a social worker for Los Angeles County. According to Rubin, the CWS/CMS system violates the basic rules that he learned for designing a system: "You never make a computer system act like the original paper and pencil system, because you are not using the system to make it easier. And that is what they have done. The system does not have an interface that allows users to quickly get to the forms they want. They never took the time to understand the work and organize the system accordingly. They could have set it up so that when you identified the type of work you do, only the pages you need to access to do your job are available. Instead everyone has to go through the same forms page by page. When I try to do something like enter notations on a case, I can't get to it without going through hundreds of other documents. I can't just request the document I need to work on. The system is not designed to be efficient."

Information Poorly Organized

Many workers say they feel the program was organized in a way that is counter-productive to doing their case work. According to Los Angeles emergency response worker Stephen Thomas, "The information we are supposed to collect doesn't match the collection of information in the real



Ilvene McDonald, Supervisor, LA County

world. You may be out doing ER at 2 in the morning and when you get back to enter the information you may have a family with four kids and four different fathers. The way the screens are set up, it is very hard to enter that information."

Unreliable and Time Consuming

"There have been times when the computer has been out for a whole day," states Fresno reunification worker Rolinda Gomez. Saving to the database is so slow that she has left work with the computer still on, asking another worker to turn it off after it has finished saving. She estimates that it takes at least 10 or 15 minutes to save to database. If she needs to leave work at 5:00 p.m., she has to start saving to the database at 4:40 p.m. The computer often crashes, causing her to lose all her work. She uses the old computers, but even if the computer were faster and more reliable, she says she would still find the program very cumbersome, especially if there is more than one kid in the house.

It's Like the LA Freeway

Los Angeles County supervisor Ilvene McDonald suggests to her workers that they first type informa-

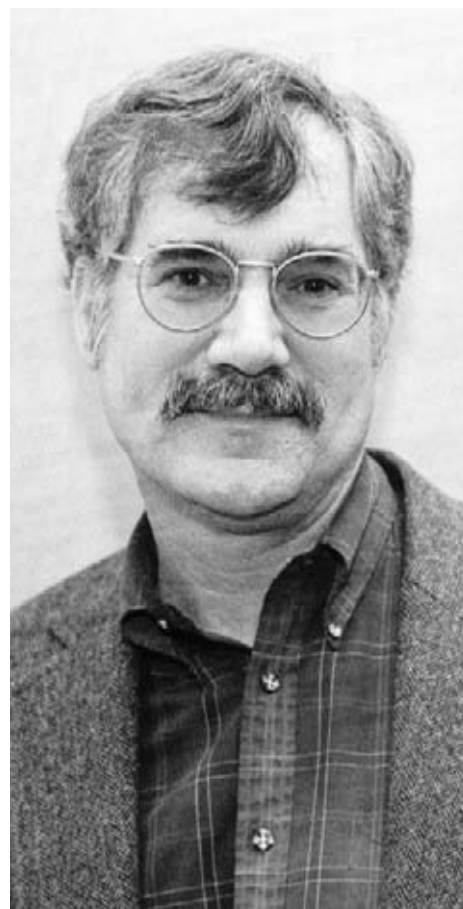


Los Angeles emergency response worker Kim Keating, using one of the new computers, was able to find the history of a family that the child abuse hotline referred to her for investigation. She found that there were several past referrals and was able to read about the exact allegations and the outcome of each. She noted the child had once been removed from the home, but the parent had completed a reunification plan and the child was returned several years ago. Although it took a lot of clicks to get the information, it was certainly faster than searching through years of paper records.



Two floors below Keating, child welfare supervisor David Meyers is not as lucky. He has one of the old computers and has to wait while the system appears to spin its wheels, endlessly failing and then re-attempting to load the program. To open the program and assign one case to a worker takes him almost 30 minutes, during which time less than four minutes is spent working. The rest of the time is spent waiting for the computer. After the latest program fix, the department warned workers to avoid certain sections of the program, such as the assignment page. Unfortunately that is the page supervisor Meyers needs to use to do his job.

tion in Microsoft Word, save the file to a floppy disk, and then cut and paste the information into CWS/CMS, a very tedious process. "It may be a lot slower doing it that way, but it is faster than losing your work," she states. Since the newest software upgrade, "the computer is much slower. It freezes two or three times a day. The down time is a big issue. Field workers have scheduled appointments with their clients. When they are in the office, that is the time they have to do the computer work. If it is not available, everyone



Stephen Thomas, LA Social Worker

gets upset." McDonald blames a lot of down time on the LA network server. On the other hand, she enjoys having the access to information and the promise the program offers. "It would be a neat application, if it just worked," she added. "It's like the LA freeway."

Rosalinda Flores:

Parents Are Calling and We Can't Find Their Kids!

Solano County worker Rosalinda Flores likes the idea of having a computer where she can easily access all the information about a case. She hopes that someday the county will have one. In the meantime, she raises the problems the present system is causing workers and the trauma it is inflicting on the children and parents the system is trying to help.

"Since the last code drop [system upgrade] in August the system has become unmanageable," Flores reports. "The down time has been horrendous. They tell us they have to work on the network, or it is because of the telephone, or we have to get new equipment. Well, I don't care. I can't find homes for my kids. I have parents calling and we can't locate their child, because we can't find them in the computer system.

"I have gotten cases two or three weeks after the kid has initially been removed from a home, without the child having had any contact with the parents because of the time it took to transfer the case out of ER. That is a really crucial time in the reunification process. The initial shock for a child to be pulled out of a home and not to have any contact with their parents, it is very hard on the parent and the child. We don't want to traumatize them any more than they have been traumatized already.

"The case has to get started in CWS/CMS, and it takes a lot of time to input all the information. Then the case has to go to a supervisor, where it can be in limbo for weeks until the supervisor can close that phase of the case and transfer it to the next worker in another part of the system. Then the continuing worker has to review it. It takes them 10 screens just to find out who the kid is, where the kid is, which home or foster home they are in, what school they go to, where the

parents are, and every phase takes getting on the computer and going through a myriad of screens and notebooks that have to be opened and closed. And then, during those two weeks it was sitting in the supervisor's office, the child could have been moved from the emergency placement to one foster home and then to another. So when you start calling, no one knows where the child is. And since many of our parents are transient, you might not know where they are either.

"I would like to be able to go to one page and find out everything about where the kid is, where the kid goes to school, and where the parents are. Instead, I have to go to the ID page, which tells me information like when the child was born. Then I have to go to another page of a whole new notebook to find out about the parents. Then I go to another page to find out where the parents live, and then to another page to find out where the child is placed. Then I have to go to another set of pages to find out about the foster home placement, and another to find out where the child goes to school. Each one of these can take up to five minutes. Just to find what home the child is in and where the parents are can take 20 minutes.

"Doing something simple, like documenting that I visited a kid, used to take five minutes. Now I have to access my caseload, that's one step. Once I find the child I have to open the child's notebook, that's another. Then I have to go to the particular section that tells me about the contact. Then I have to go to the contact page and I have to fill that out, what I did,



Rosalinda Flores, Solano SW

who I saw, where I went. After that I have to go to another page to tell what I did, what services I provided. Then if I saw another child in the same family, I have to go back to my caseload and do the same thing for that child in that child's notebook, repeating the whole thing.

"Each family member has their own notebook, whether they are involved in the case or not. You might have four different kids, four different foster homes, requiring four different notebooks of everything. Even if the computer didn't take so long between pages it would still be too much.

"The system is a good idea but it is too cumbersome. I like that we have a system and that it is accessible and that I don't have to tumble through two giant notebooks that are heavy just to pull off the shelf. We are telling management, here is how to make it better. Here is how to make a system that will help us manage our caseloads better, but they won't listen."

Paradigm Shift or Shaft

Is the purpose of the CWS/CMS system to help social workers or is it to help the state auditor? Many workers raise the question of whether they are being required to serve a system that is more about creating statistics for federal funding than helping clients. As Contra Costa County social worker Ted Gempf states, "A paradigm shift has occurred in what the computer's purpose is in the workplace in general, and in our CWS/CMS system in particular. When we look at the broad picture, management's assumptions and blind trust appears to be that ever greater computerization leads to ever greater information retrieval, and thereby to ever greater efficiency and productivity. The relationship between computerization and productivity was undoubtedly generally true until a few years ago. However, the internal government systems being developed now have been redirected toward serving management's requirement for ever more data, rather than meeting the workers' hands-on needs."

The CWS/CMS computer was originally designed to provide information for legislators to analyze the effectiveness of children's services programs, to provide data required by the federal government for funding reimbursement, and to allow social workers access to case histories on a statewide basis (see the December 1997 issue of the Dragon). The designers of the system quickly realized that if the system didn't have anything to help social workers, social workers wouldn't use it. The system tried to be everything for everyone. And thus the creators of CWS/CMS didn't blush at creating the largest Microsoft Windows program, a boast that causes pause to most Windows programmers.

When the system was developed,



Social work retreat participants, Tulare Social Worker Arlene Nañez, Political Director Jerry Fillingim, Field Rep. Linda Joseph, and San Francisco Social Worker David Williams, singing the CWS/CMS Blues (to the tune of Breaking Up is Hard to Do):

Down, dooby doo, down down

My computer's down, dooby doo, down, down

My computer's down, dooby doo, down, down

Punch it in is all we do.

Right from the day we got those VDTs

My life has been so full of misery

No one knows what we've been through

And punch it in is all we do.

Remember when you held that pencil tight

And all you had to know was how to write

Now there's fifty different screens to view

And punch it in is all we do

By Julie McCall, SEIU Local 722/Adapted by the VDT Coalition

Governor Wilson's administration favored large, complex, do-everything computer systems. Now, after the plug has been pulled on five other state systems, that philosophy of "bigger is better" has come under ques-

tion. Governor Davis has evidently put computer system acquisitions on hold to give the administration time to evaluate the past failures.



Cindy Amador, Santa Clara County Social Worker, Clover House

Supervising Visits

One of the proposals to lower the workload for social workers is to create a class of paraprofessionals to perform activities such as transporting kids and supervising family visits. Santa Clara social worker Cindy Amador supervises visits at the Clover House, a special facility that was originally created to provide a more comfortable environment for parents to visit their children in foster care.

Amador has reservations about someone other than a child's social worker supervising visits—although providing needed relief for social workers who may be too busy writing court reports or appearing in court to supervise a routine visit, the worker loses the opportunity to interact with the client. She explains: "A lot of things happen at the visit and during transportation. The child is processing what happened during the visit, which many times was very upsetting for them." Amador takes notes and sends them to the worker carrying the case, but it is not the same as immediate feedback, and the worker loses that chance to bond with the child or parent.

Recently Amador supervised the visit between a mother and her newborn baby. "She needed some support. She never had a baby and didn't feel comfortable holding the baby. She wanted to know how to feed it and burp it and diaper it right." The 19-year-old had all the potential to be a good mother. There was never an issue of abuse, but the young mother was single and didn't have the support of her parents, so she was considering putting the child up for adoption. "She needed to have a positive experience, and if she is nervous holding the baby and making eye contact, the baby picks that up." After working with Amador, the mother calmed down, proudly held the child, and asked to have their picture taken.

The county is trying to increase the number of visits workers have to supervise at one time. Workers say they can supervise no more than two families at a time, but the county has attempted to assign workers as many as four families to supervise simultaneously. "If I had been supervising three or four visits I couldn't have spent the time with that mother for

her to have the positive bonding experience," Amador says.

Workers must also safeguard confidentiality issues during the visit. In alleged abuse cases, workers must make sure the parents don't coerce or attempt to get the child to change the story about what happened. If there are security issues involving the foster placement, they must make sure the child doesn't reveal where he or she is staying.

Workers are very concerned that the county will have workers who are not trained social workers supervising visits, and they will be supervising more visits than they can adequately monitor. Not only will the clients be short changed on services and foster parents put at risk, but if something goes wrong, it will be the case-carrying worker who will have to answer in court.

What Happened to the Caseload Reduction?

Last year, in 1998, the state legislature approved \$40 million to lower the caseloads of children's services workers. In theory workers were supposed to get a 10% to 15% reduction in the number of cases they carry. Now, a year later, many social workers are asking what happened. Many feel that, if anything, their workload has increased.

According to Local 535 political director Jerry Fillingim, counties have spent most of the money on "up-front" programs that are aimed at early intervention and keeping kids out of the system. Although these programs are considered state-of-the-art social work, they don't alleviate the problems of case-carrying workers, because the kids and families these programs serve are not counted in the normal caseload.

These programs are very attractive to county administrators because the counties can often get additional grant funding. The programs are also popular with constituent groups in the community. Often these programs involve contracting services with community-based organizations, which provide the opportunity for political patronage. This problem is particularly acute in Los Angeles, according to chapter president Paula Gamboa, where the former head of the department of children and family services was a master at playing patronage politics.

These up-front programs, and other state-of-the-art programs that allow workers to concentrate their efforts on particular families and children without the burden of an overwhelming caseload, or of having to spend an overwhelming amount of time on court work, are expected to become even more popular. From a social work standpoint they make some sense. Unfortunately, management's implementation of these programs has created resentment among workers who saw their workloads and caseloads increase while other workers were being transferred to

these new programs.

These programs select out the cases that are most likely to succeed, and then put extra resources on these cases with minimal needs. As a result, the normal case-carrying workers are getting a higher percentage of the more difficult cases with fewer resources to spend. With the release of the yardstick study and a new emphasis on reforming child welfare, the union will have to make sure that these programs aren't played off against lower caseloads, and that services that should be provided by county workers are not contracted out.

Workers Taking Charge to Save the System

Los Angeles Chapter president Paula Gamboa works at the child abuse hotline at Los Angeles Metro North. Her department has the newer, faster computers. She was part of the initial project test in Glenn County and has watched the system develop. When they first started using the system two-and-one-half years ago there were so many problems that she never expected the system to last. "I thought they would have thrown it out by now, it was going nowhere," she states. But with the addition of more powerful computers and consistent fixes, she now believes the system may have a chance. "I can see it has benefits and it could become a good tool, but who knows?" she asks. The system still has many problems, but she believes that if management would take the union's feedback and suggestions seriously, there might be hope for the system.

Poor communication, planning, and implementation by the management of the Los Angeles social services department has been the major problem, and that problem continues today. For example, workers have



Paula Gamboa

"We need to be pro-active and stop being led. We need to empower ourselves to be at the table. People think of the union as dealing only with workplace issues, but what about social work issues?"

Paula Gamboa, L.A. County
Chapter President

been pressuring management to develop contingency plans for when the system is down, yet despite continual shut downs there are no plans for how to continue working. "If I get back to the office and have to file a petition in 72 hours for a detention hearing and the system is down, I don't know what to do. How long do I wait for the application to come up before I start writing the petition by hand? There needs to be an alternative plan," she says.

According to Gamboa, workers and supervisors are developing their own plan and have begun meeting and conferring with management to create a formal disaster plan. "Since we are the ones working on the application, it makes sense that we should be part of the plan. Some workers feel that is not our job, but it is. One of the union's roles is to make the job workable. We need to be pro-active and stop being led," she states. "We need to empower ourselves to be at the table. People think of the union as dealing only with workplace issues, but what about social work issues?"

National Perspective

Why the Computer Systems Don't Work

"We are left with a costly system that does not work properly and is adding more of a burden to the already-burdened case-workers on the front lines. Children are at risk."

H. Carl McCall, New York State Comptroller, referring to the New York child welfare computer system

"Even though they have admitted to the public that the system is not working, they have no problem bringing workers up on disciplinary charges for not inputting information or for losing information in this failed system."

Faye Moore, Social Service Employees Local 371, New York

The federal government encouraged states to computerize their child welfare cases under the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems program. The SACWIS program offered to fund up to 70% of the costs of computer systems completed in two years. How are other states doing? Well, believe it or not, California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System may be one of the best.

New York's System Barely Functioning

New York has not been able to fully implement its system, which was supposed to be implemented by 1997, and the cost has risen from \$113 million to \$170 million. An audit by the New York comptroller found that 81% of local social services districts had significant problems with the system, 69% of the districts felt the system was unreliable, and 59% felt it had no added value over the previous paper system. Many fear that the New York system may be unfixable and that the state will be forced to pay back the \$120 million the federal government contributed to the system.

According to one of our sources,

one of the problems with the New York system is that it can switch data fields. A child abuse investigator can go out to interview an abuse victim only to find out that the person listed as the victim is really the alleged perpetrator.

The New York system was developed by Anderson Consulting and IBM. It was based on a software system that Anderson was developing for

using proprietary code, and they are the only ones who can fix bugs or make revisions to the system. They have charged the state dearly to fix problems that should never have been there in the first place. The system was not designed with the user in mind, and is evidently even less user-friendly than California's CWS/CMS.

Federal Guidelines a Recipe for Disaster

So what is the problem? Why can't state governments create workable computer systems? We asked Larry Singer, president of Public Interest Breakthroughs. The problems social service departments have had attempting to computerize are so prevalent nationwide, that Singer's non-profit company received a grant to help states figure out what went wrong.

According to Singer, the federal guidelines and the state procurement procedures lock computer vendors into a process contrary to best industry practices. Building successful computer systems requires breaking large projects into small modules. The stan-

"Technology can be used to make life better, but it must use best practices across all state and federal levels, which involves planning from the bottom up and designing the system around the needs of the end user."

Texas, which Texas later rejected and made Anderson redesign. New York contracted with IBM for the computer hardware, because IBM is a New York company and New York hoped the large orders for computers would prevent IBM from going through with threatened layoffs.

One of the major problems with the system is that Anderson built it

dard industry practice is to build the simplest module first. KISS, keep it simple stupid, is the operative model. When the first module is completed and successfully implemented, you go on to the next module. That way, when failures occur, they are small enough to embrace and learn from, before going on to the next phase. Instead, the federal guidelines, com-

bined with very cumbersome and time-consuming state procurement procedures, require the creation of a colossal computer system, win or lose. To do it right would have taken at least 10 years, according to Singer, yet the states were pressured to do it in two. Admitting failure subjects states to harsh fines and even repayment of the federal money spent on the systems.

Shouldn't the Contractors Have Warned the State?

According to Singer, the contractors acted more like opportunist than crooks. They were also caught in a bind. If they refused to bid on the project according to the federal guidelines, they would have been surrendering the nation's largest market to their competitors. So they decided to take the risk. They built in a huge profit margin, and then had their lawyers negotiate contracts that limited their liability.

Systems Not Designed with the End User in Mind

"Technology can be used to make life better, but it must use best practices across all state and federal levels, which involves planning from the bottom up and designing the system around the needs of the end user," Singer states. "For that reason, you never want computer technicians designing the system around their needs."

The CWS/CMS system had another problem as well. The vendor was asked to design a system to serve four masters, the feds, the state, the county, and the social worker. Having to choose, they picked the ones paying the bill. That is why the system is geared so much toward the auditing functions and federal requirements.

According to Sherry Novak, an aide to Assemblywoman Dion Aroner, California is presently negotiating with the federal government over all the information the state is required to provide the federal government, much of which has nothing to do with social work. The federal government is fining the state millions of dollars for not providing that data. According to Novak, they have been told that the



Lobbying Effort to Lower Caseloads

Local 535 members met with Assemblywoman Dion Aroner and Eleanor Moses, Aroner's aid, to discuss the problems confronting social workers in Alameda County. The county is so short staffed, that they have run out of workers to assign cases. When new cases come in they just pile them up in a "bank," waiting for a worker to become available. Aroner acknowledges that the shortage of social workers is a statewide problem. She is part of a work group meeting with academic administrators who are evaluating the curriculum for a Master of Social Work degree. Aroner is trying to find a way to encourage academic institutions to expand their MSW programs and graduate more social workers.

The meeting was part of Local 535's statewide campaign to make legislators aware of the need to lower caseloads. Present at the meeting were Local 535 political director Jerry Fillingim, Field Representative Fred Beal, social workers Deborah Leeds, Deborah Busler, Denise Smernes, Sadania Gibbons, Amy Doocha-Chambers, and retired 535 member Irv Kestin.

Republican Congress is insisting on this data, even though it may encumber a child welfare workers' investigation.

Hope for the Future

There is hope for the future. Computer and network technology is growing by leaps and bounds. There has been quite a bit of progress in the last few years, driven by the popularization of the World Wide Web and the Internet. The development of T1 lines capable of carrying much more data and the Internet network protocols make connecting computer sys-

tems, even across state lines, much easier and more reliable. Counties like Los Angeles, which have primitive network systems, will have an easier time replacing their old systems, once they make the commitment.

Public Interest Breakthroughs has analyzed the issues around welfare information technology systems. Many of the studies and articles are on its web site, www.p-i-b.org.

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SOCIAL WORKER MELTDOWN PART 4:

Writing and Photography by Richard Bermack
reprinted from the Dragon, December 1999

When Children's Protective Services workers go out on a call they never know what to expect:

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

When she saw someone in the next room loading an automatic weapon, Alameda County children's protective services worker Denise Smernes's immediate thought was, "If I don't do something fast we are going to get shot. A verbal confrontation had broken out between the police officer accompanying her and the woman who had answered the door. Emotions were escalating, fast. She turned to the officer and told him to leave the apartment immediately and wait for her in the car. "I'm not leaving you with these people," he responded. "Leave before someone gets hurt," she replied. Then she quickly began reassuring the occupants that she was not a threat to them. "I'm not here to take the kids, I just need to make sure they are safe. I know the father has left them with you. And we can set it up so you take care of them honestly..."

Later, while driving back to the office, the officer apologized for being overly aggressive and on edge. A few days before another officer, his close friend, had been killed in the same housing project, he explained.



Alameda County Children's Protective Services Worker Denise Smernes

Children's protective services workers often must defuse potentially explosive situations. They routinely go into dangerous environments where even police officers fear to tread. Verbal abuse, death threats, and the display of guns are not uncom-

mon. But unlike police officers who carry guns and wear bullet proof vests, social workers' only protections are compassion, understanding, and the knowledge that they are basically there to help.



Fear Keeps You Alive

"The fear factor is an important part of the job. You can't make mistakes out there," states Michael Yee, who has been an emergency response worker for 17 years. He estimates that he has probably investigated over 4,000 cases. "You have to be very cautious and have a lot of street smarts. We're the first one through the door, and you never know what you are stepping into." Yee has found himself in the middle of drug raids, been threatened with knives, had a police officer point a shotgun at him, and was even once threatened with a hot frying pan full of lard.

Down These Mean Streets

"Most of our clients are good people who are confused about their lives," Smernes feels it is important to point out. "They have problems with substance abuse, mental health issues, and general societal problems," she explains. The dangerous people are not the majority, it is just that they are hard to predict and erratic situations can catch workers off guard.

Much of the danger comes from the neighborhood environment where social workers must go to see their clients. And the clients are as much a victim of that environment as anyone. "We go into areas where even the police don't want to go. They tell us we are crazy," Smernes states, and offers an example. She was once interviewing a mother and child when bullets suddenly started flying through the house. She ended up hiding behind a couch with the family. They lived next to a drug dealer, and drive by shootings were not an uncommon experience in that neighborhood.

Another Alameda County CPS worker, Carolyn Lacativo, walked past a group of teenagers standing next to the door of a client she was visiting in a housing project. She knocked on the door, but just as it opened one of the teenagers grabbed her cell phone and ran off. After she

walked into the apartment, the teenager broke the windows of her county car and stole her belongings.

Police Escort No Guarantee of Safety

Madera County social worker Catherine Balbas responded to a call from police who were conducting a raid on a drug house. The situation was supposedly secure; the residents of the house were in handcuffs, waiting to be taken into custody. As Balbas walked through the house to get the kids, one of the suspects, who was handcuffed, swung around and kicked her, knocking her down.

Madera County has become a center of methamphetamine production, according to Balbas, and this has created many dangers. Workers often have to walk through methamphetamine labs to remove children. The organic solvents used to produce the drug, such as ether and denatured alcohol, are very volatile. Just being in their presence creates a health risk. When social workers remove kids from those environments they are exposed to the fumes and the dangers of explosions. "We have a protocol for immediately taking the children to the hospital for medical evaluation, to check for respiratory damage," Balbas explains. "The chemicals can be absorbed through the skin and eyes."



Babs Calloway was permanently injured when she was grabbed from behind by a client. The woman shook her so violently that she has had severe back and shoulder pains for the last seven years. She feels the county mishandled her worker's comp claim, forcing her to use her sick leave time.

But there is no protocol for the health risks posed to workers, who can be exposed to drug residues in the air and on the children's skin and clothes.

The drug culture presents other problems as well. Drug dealers not only tend to be armed, and unstable, but they have lots of money and the resources to make good on threats. Balbas once got a call on her unlisted home phone number from the girlfriend of a suspected perpetrator who was in hiding because of parole violations. The girlfriend warned her that she better stop looking for the fugitive.

Workers Assaulted

Los Angeles social worker Doris Wallace was waiting in the car for her co-worker when the mother of a child Wallace had just detained ran out and started punching her in the head through an open window. The mother

then tried to pull Wallace out of the car, but Wallace managed to get the ignition started and was able to drive off, pushing the woman away while trying to protect the baby in the car. The mother had a history of drug use and was a member of a Compton gang. She called Wallace's supervisor and informed her that she the gang intended to kill Wallace.

Wallace filed assault charges against the woman, who showed up in court escorted by gang members. The gang members followed Wallace from the parking lot into the courtroom. "They were pointing their fingers like guns saying, 'You a dead bitch,'" Wallace remembers. The gang members continued their threats inside the courtroom, and deputy sheriffs finally escorted Wallace to her car. "L.A. County doesn't take threats to workers seriously," Wallace says. "The lady who assaulted me only got six months and that was because she

threatened me in front of a judge and then cussed out the judge. The system is just too over worked and over crowded."

Before moving to L.A. Wallace worked as a social worker in Chicago. There the authorities were much more aggressive in prosecuting people. "I don't think the county protected me adequately. In Chicago, they would have arrested her immediately," Wallace says.

Mentally Unstable Clients

Social workers not only face dangers from clients involved in criminal activities, many of their clients are mentally unstable. Los Angeles social worker Bill Boynton had a client who was diagnosed with a psychotic disorder show up on his doorstep in the middle of the night. When Boynton confronted him, he was trying to lift up one of the ornamental statues on the porch as if he intended to throw it



*Madera County CPS Worker
Catherine Balbas*

through the window. The client called the next day and asked Boynton if his life insurance was paid up. Boynton called the police, who told him they couldn't do much to help him.

Another Los Angeles social worker, Barbara Dean, was stalked by a child abuse hotline caller. He would phone in suspicious calls to set her up. When she went out to investigate a call at 4:00 a.m., he came out of a hiding place and grabbed her. She fought him off, but later he called the hotline and told her he liked her voice. Perhaps her most bizarre threat involved a ritual abuse investigation. The perpetrator, who admitted being a devil worshiper, attempted to get

THE RAZOR'S EDGE: *Vulnerability Is Part of the Job*

Placing themselves in harm's way is part of children's protective services workers' job. Meeting a client's rage with calmness and understanding is part of the process social workers use to create transformation and change.

Retired Los Angeles child welfare supervisor Bill Boynton recalls meeting with a mother, child, and police officer at a school yard. The mother feared if they returned home, the father was going to hurt them. When Boynton offered to go talk with the father, the mother replied, "If you go out there, he'll kill you. He is really upset."

Gathering up his best social worker skills, Boynton went and knocked on the father's door. He was greeted by a very large, angry man. "I talked with him for three hours and finally got him to calm down," he recalls. "If I had gone out there with the police the situation might have escalated. The police are very valuable, but they can make it harder. It is a murky line and you can't be stupid."

Social workers need the police to impress upon the clients the seriousness of the situation, to help remove children from a home, and to investigate cases involving physical abuse and sexual molestation. Workers need the protection police provide. On the other hand, the presence of police often increases the client's hostility and defensiveness.

Los Angeles social worker Stephen Thomas remembers intervening in a domestic violence dispute involving a middle-class family. "The father was a fireman, and he was wound pretty tight over his job. He was fighting with the mom, and the kid was trying to intervene. We had to get a restraining order against him. He was very confronting, verbally challenging my right to intervene. Finally he insisted I meet him alone in the park. So I did it, perhaps foolishly. Here I was alone with him. He could have assaulted me, but I had to show him I was willing to meet him man to man to discuss the issues. He was real angry, but the interview went okay, and that was a turning point in the case."



Los Angeles CPS Doris Wallace

one of her personal possessions so that he could put a spell on her.

Management Not Doing Enough to Protect Workers

Los Angeles social worker Geoff Stephen went out to remove a child who was malnourished. Such cases are termed "failure to thrive," meaning the child is malnourished to the

point of not growing properly. The cases are usually referred by medical personnel.

Fortunately Stephen brought the police with him. The father became very hostile and physically attacked Stephen. "I'm sure he would have harmed me if the police hadn't restrained him. He got within an inch of my face," Stephen recalls. The police officers were having so much trouble controlling the father that they were reluctant to remove the child, fearing the father would become even more enraged.

When Stephen finally arrived back at his office, he was told that the father had telephoned threats to the entire department and even the state office in Sacramento. Stephen was advised to take precautions for his own personal safety. In the months that followed, the threats continued, with the father showing up at the office, where a security guard had to keep him from attacking Stephen. During that period Stephen feared for his life.

What troubled Stephen almost as much as the father's threats was the department's response. "They never took any action. He was never prosecuted. All they did was tell me to be careful and not to drive the same route, and to park my car in different places. The man was obviously crazy, but I was the one who had to take action. Here, he was threatening me in front of the police, and all they did was restrain him until I could drive off," Stephen reports.

Finally, Stephen's family wrote a letter to the county, putting management on notice that if anything happened to Stephen, they would file a lawsuit. The county responded by transferring him to another office in a different city. However, the client had no trouble getting Stephen's new phone number and continued to threaten him, even after he moved.

Although Stephen has dealt with a lot of hostile clients, this was the only time he really felt his life was threatened. "In the back of people's minds they know we are trying to do good. We want to diffuse the situation and provide help, even to those who harm us."



LA County CPS Worker Geoff Stephen

Safety Retirement or Retirement Enhancement

Last year the Senate Public Employees Retirement Committee approved Assembly Bill 553 (Strom-Martin). The bill would have allowed counties to classify child protective services workers as safety employees for retirement purposes and required each county welfare department to develop a specific written plan to provide safe and secure working conditions for CPS workers. Retirement disability benefits are significantly better than regular retirement and are designed to compensate employees whose job routinely exposes them to extraordinary risks.

Unfortunately the fiscally conservative Governor Gray Davis stated that he would veto the bill because of exaggerated costs. The bill was therefore held in the Senate Appropriations Committee, which means that it will come up before the legislature in January.

SEIU State Council legislative advocate Terry Brennand is attempting to reach a compromise with the administration. Although the Davis administration may not support safety retirement for anyone other than licensed police officers, it may be willing to increase retirement benefits across the board. Brennand hopes to have the bill reintroduced as a retirement enhancement bill, in which workers would get much of what they want from safety retirement, but the benefits would be available to all workers and would not be called safety retirement.

At present, after five years of work, county employees can retire at age 60 (and in some cases 55) and receive 2% of their highest wages for every year they worked. For example, a worker employed for 10 years would receive 20% of his or her highest salary. This formula is referred to as "2 at 60." Under Senate Bill 400, police officers were given 3% at age 55. Brennand is attempting to negotiate a formula by which all state and county workers could get 2% at age 50 and 2.5% at age 55. Although it may not be everything available under safety retirement, there would be no need to demonstrate why a worker was entitled to the benefits, which would be available to all public employees.



CPS workers like Carolyn Lacativo are often accompanied by police officers, but even a police escort cannot always guarantee their safety.

PROBATION v CPS

Child protective services workers often compare the risks of their jobs to those of probation officers. Probation officers are classified with police officers and receive salary enhancements, such as safety retirement. Social workers claim their job is just as risky and they, too, should receive these benefits based on parity between the two jobs.

How does the job of a probation officer compare to that of a child protective services worker? "There is no comparison," states Alameda County CPS worker Carolyn Lacativo. "Children's protective services is much more dangerous." Lacativo should know; she has been both.

Lacativo has worked as a children's social worker for two and one half years, and before that she worked as a probation officer. She is quick to state that she does not want to minimize the difficulties or importance of the probation officer's job. One thing the two jobs have in common is an overwhelming caseload. Nevertheless,

although she had some pretty dangerous people to supervise as a probation officer, "We saw them in a controlled situation, in an office with guards, in a secured building," she explains. "You were able to control and confront them, but the situation wasn't as explosive, because there were always other people around, and the clients understood they were under threat of immediate arrest." As a probation officer, when Lacativo did go out in the field to see a client, she always had a partner, and if police officers weren't present they had police walkie talkies for direct communication with the police.

As a children's social worker, Lacativo often goes into homes alone, and even when she sees clients in the office, it is not uncommon for clients to explode. She relates an incident that happened a few months ago: "After I explained to a mother with a long drug history that her child was being removed, the mother threatened to kill me and started talking about how she had ways of getting revenge, and

someday she was going to get back at me. This was in the county building, with an officer present. She was completely out of control, and just went on and on for 30 minutes straight."

Unlike a law enforcement officer, whose job is to arrest dangerous people and remove them from society, the social worker's job is transformation and healing. "I could have pressed charges," Lacativo states. "But instead, I allowed her to vent and express herself. We brought in her attorney, and we gave her an opportunity to talk through why all this was happening, until finally she was able to handle the difficulties of the separation from her child. We explained that we would continue to help her and provide services and that the case would be reevaluated by dependency investigators for reunification."

Ever-Present Uncertainty

Probation cases are fairly straight forward compared to child welfare cases. When child welfare workers walk into homes, they never know what to expect.

One of Lacativo's most harrowing cases happened soon after she started working for the agency as a family maintenance worker. She thought she was going out to investigate a medical neglect case, where the task would be simply to help a parent get medical attention for a disabled infant. But as any social worker will state, once children start to trust you, they tell you about all kinds of things, and anything can happen.

Normally workers don't bring along police officers on neglect cases, but because the father was on probation, and the neighborhood was a high crime area, Lacativo was accompanied by an officer. The house was a mess, as Lacativo feared, and the infant was wheezing and having trouble breathing, in need of immediate medical attention. But when she started interviewing other children in the home the situation intensified. One boy confided that he was being beaten by his father and his cousins next door, as well as by other relatives living in the complex. They were whipping him with extension cords that they heated up on the stove and were sexually abusing him. (Lacativo examined the boy later;



Carolyn Lacativo

his body was covered with scars and burn marks.)

Suddenly several neighbors walked in, demanding Lacativo leave the house. "Relatives started coming out of the other apartments," Lacativo recalls. "They were threatening us and telling us we had no business being there and that we had to get out." At that point even the police officer no longer felt safe. He called for back-up. It finally took five police cars and nine officers just to control all the hostile relatives and the father so that Lacativo could finish interviewing all the children in the house.

Lacativo then had to find foster homes for the five kids living in the house and take the infant to the hospital. The situation was so volatile and it was so late at night that one of the police officers followed her to the foster homes and then to the hospital to assure her safety and that of the children. The infant was listed in critical condition and Lacativo, who had begun the case at 3:00 p.m., had to stay with the infant in the hospital until 7:00 a.m. the next morning. "In a situation like that we have to assume the responsibilities of the parent," she states.

When she runs into her old friends from probation, they wonder what possessed her to become a child welfare worker. When she compares her salary and benefits, she is making the same or even less now after going to school for two years to get a master's degree. Why does she do it? "I wanted to get out in the field and help kids," she replies.



Alameda County CPS Worker Barbara Reynolds

The First One Through the Door

Right after the Rodney King riots and during the height of the crack epidemic, Alameda emergency response worker Barbara Reynolds found herself in many situations involving potential gunfire. During an incident that turned into a raid on a drug house, she remembers an officer yelled, "gun." "Then they all started backing up and drawing their guns. Everything seemed to go in slow motion," she recalls. She ran for cover, only to find nowhere to go. Although the occupants of the house backed down and didn't shoot, she remembers their drugged-out violent looks as they were taken away in a police wagon.

On the suggestion of the police, Reynolds finally got a bulletproof vest. "I got it more as a statement,"

she states. "I don't wear it now, but at that time I felt it was necessary. The cops kept telling me to get one, so finally I said, 'Why not?' Those were very strange times."

Reynolds has worked emergency response for 20 years. Calming down very hostile, agitated people has become, for her, commonplace. "They get very uptight about why you are there," she explains. "So you just find a way to join with them. 'I can imagine you were feeling that way, anyone would. It's part of my job to tell you about other ways to handle the situation.' Or, 'You say it is totally untrue, great, but I just need to document it. So tell me why it is untrue.'"

"I'll get an immediate [call] where someone reported a kid being abused and before you know it, all the family is there and everyone is talking at

once. They are getting very hostile: 'Why are you here?' they will demand. 'There are so many other people who are getting beaten up. I want to know who called.' It is like in a day care room; when one kid cries they all start crying. So you have to get up that energy to meet them and back them down. Sometimes I have had to separate people out or just talk to them through the door."

Reynolds has also received her share of death threats and comments like, "It's payback time." Although she figures most of the threats are hot air, she remembers one case where the threats were very credible, and she had to get a restraining order against the client. In an attempt to get his child back from his ex-wife a father had filed a report of child abuse against the wife. When the report was found to be unsubstantiated, the father kidnaped the daughter. Reynolds recalls. "He wouldn't tell the judge where she was, so they threw him in jail. They asked me to see him, hoping he would tell me. I ended up working with his attorney, and finally he disclosed where she was." Reynolds remembers when he found out he wouldn't get his kids back. "His eyes went stone cold, and he said, 'You are not on my side. You are on theirs.' He was a very dangerous guy. They found a gun in his car."

What Keeps Her Going?

"We also have a lot of very nice families who haven't done anything bad. They just need a little help," she adds.

"What keeps me here is helping the kids, Reynolds states. "Despite all the problems with the agency and the lack of resources, I believe in what I'm doing. I just had a case involving a teenage girl who was in the psych ward because she wanted to kill herself. She wouldn't tell anyone why. Then finally she disclosed to me and an officer that a relative had been molesting her for three years. Now she is doing okay. She went from wanting to kill herself to being able to get counseling and support. And he's in jail, where he can't hurt her or anyone else."



Los Angeles Social Worker Mimi Roshan Zamir

In the office where social worker Mimi Roshan Zamir works, near Los Angeles International Airport, there is little to stop clients from walking right over to workers' desks and assaulting them. No locked door separates workers from the public hallways. The office, which is part of a shopping center, has only one security guard. Social workers enter and leave the work place using the same door and parking lot as their clients. Workers at the airport office complain that Los Angeles County is too cheap to provide adequate security.

Workers became critically aware of the lack of security when one of Zamir's clients threatened her and assaulted a police officer. According to Zamir, the woman, who has a history of mental illness, has threatened everyone she has talked to in the office. The woman even threatened a public health nurse who answered the phone. "She has a lot of mood swings from nice to 'I'm going to hurt you and your family,'" Zamir states.

Social workers were required to provide supervised visits between the woman and her child, but during one of the visits she left the visiting room and barged past the guard into the area where workers have their desks. According to a supervisor in the office, Illvene McDonald, the woman was so hostile that the guard was too intimidated to control her. After that

her scheduled visitations were canceled, but she continued to show up unannounced and would refuse to leave. At one point Zamir received a page warning her that the woman was at the office and to stay away until she left the office.

Management finally got a restraining order against the woman. However, according to Zamir, the order only prevents her from coming near the office. It doesn't protect social workers when they are out in the field.

Another Los Angeles social worker, Christine Fregoso, who works in a different office, suffered a sprained shoulder and neck attempting to stop a client from assaulting her supervisor in the office. Fregoso had just removed a child from the client's home. The child had been assaulted by the mother's live-in boyfriend. The mother first told Fregoso to take the child, but later had second thoughts. The mother showed up at the social worker's office. Fregoso recalls what happened: "She started striking my supervisor, and when I intervened she struck me." It wasn't until the next day, after she handed in her court report, that Fregoso started getting headaches, and realized she needed medical attention. She ended up in the hospital. "We believe we are invincible, and we minimize our own injuries," she comments.

