

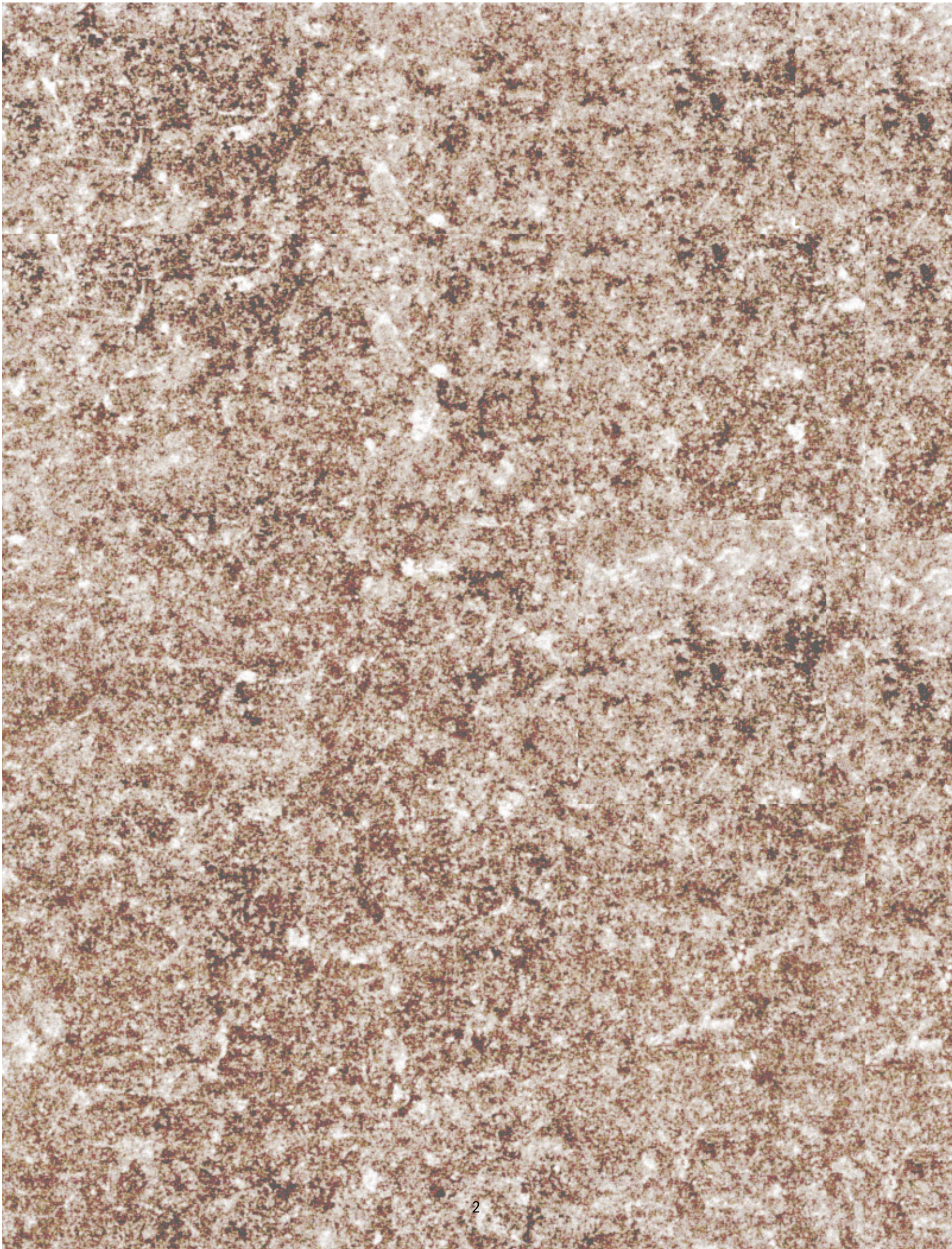
PROTECTING CHILDREN RESTORING FAMILIES

It Takes Time



Writing and Photography by
Richard Bermack

Produced by
County Welfare Directors Association of California
and
Service Employees International Union Local 535



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It Takes Time

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FAMILIES IN TROUBLE *CHILDREN AT RISK*

Complex Family Problems

Economic uncertainty

Child poverty

Increased family violence

Family break-ups

Hard Drug Use

Increased physical and
sexual abuse

Unstable family life

More Troubled Youth

Kids more troubled and
more violent

Rise of gang culture

Lack of positive role models

When the public hears “children’s protective services,” they think of social workers taking kids from their parents or of tragedies that happened to kids the system failed to protect. That is not the whole story. The child welfare system is about protecting children, repairing families, and finding better homes for abused and neglected children.

Social work can make a difference. The following interviews, conducted with child welfare workers and their clients, tell about child welfare workers reclaiming families that were on the brink of crisis. Parents talk about how workers helped them learn how to control their children and transform their lives.

Over the last two decades the problems facing parents and children have greatly increased. Pressures on parents from economic insecurity, combined with the increased use of hard drugs, have resulted in more emotional instability and family violence. These social problems are bringing greater numbers of children with more severe problems into the system.

The child welfare system cannot cure all the ills of society, but it can repair some of the damage. It can help some of those who have fallen by the wayside back on the track and give others a new start. Social work can break the cycle of abuse and dysfunctional family life, but effective work requires time and resources.

At present, caseloads are so high that all workers have time to do is document and evaluate cases; they no longer have time to work with their clients and solve problems. Child welfare workers report that they spend most of their time on paper work, filling out forms, entering case data and writing up court reports. They barely have time to fulfill the minimum requirements for seeing clients, and don’t have time to work with them. As a Los Angeles family maintenance and reunification supervisor stated, “If you spend 15 minutes interviewing a kid, you feel good. You’re lucky if one hour a day is spent with clients, the rest is paper work. We can’t function because our caseloads are out of hand.”

Child welfare workers need caseloads lowered to a manageable level if they are to have a chance at fulfilling their mission of protecting children and rebuilding families.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT RISK FROM HIGH CASELOADS



Jann Noddin, right, listens to a young teenager who ran away from home and tried to commit suicide. Her parents feel inadequate to take care of their daughter's emotional problems.

Children's social workers are so overburdened by high caseloads and workloads they are no longer able to protect and serve their clients adequately. This dangerous situation places children, families, and the society at large at risk.

FACTS

- **Abused and neglected children** are over 50 percent more likely to be involved in juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior.
- **Sexually molested girls** are more likely to become pregnant as teenagers.
- **California has the highest rate** of reported child abuse among the 10 largest states.
- **Abused children** tend to become abusive parents, repeating the behavior they learned.
- **Social workers can break the cycle** of abuse by providing healing emotional support and understanding to victimized children and teaching parents proper child raising techniques.
- **High caseloads** are preventing social workers from seeing their clients for even the minimally mandated amount of time, resulting in numerous complaints by children's rights advocates, such as that social workers don't spend enough quality time with the foster children in their caseloads.

OUT OF DATE CASELOAD STANDARDS

The last study to determine the number of clients a social worker could adequately assess and provide services for was completed in 1984.

MORE LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Since the 1984 study, the work required to provide services for each client has astronomically increased due to the enactment of state and federal laws and regulations. In the last 10 years, over 250 laws were passed requiring additional reporting by children's protective services workers. These changes have mandated more services and reporting per case, without adequate additional funding.

MORE SEVERELY TROUBLED FAMILIES

The children and families workers see suffer from much more complex and severe problems as a result of social conditions, such as the epidemic use of hard drugs like crack-cocaine and methamphetamine. The increased economic pressure on clients from the changing economy,

downsizing, job layoffs, and the lack of job security has also put additional stress on families, resulting in more cases of pressure-cooker abuse.

MORE CASES AND MORE WORK PER CASE

The increase in the amount and difficulty of the workload should have resulted in a lowering of the number of cases assigned to each worker, but instead workers in many counties have caseloads that are twice the 1984 maximum recommended level. Social workers in some California counties have the highest caseloads in the nation.

LOWERED PRODUCTIVITY FROM NEW COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY TRANSITION

The implementation of the CWS/CMS computer system, requiring social workers to do data entry, is the most recent example of the increased tasks placed on social workers. Workers who were already overburdened are now having to learn new work skills and procedures, as well as to work out the bugs of a computer system that is still evolving.

WORKER BURN OUT, A VICIOUS CYCLE

Veteran social workers are quitting because they are overworked, creating even higher caseloads for the remaining workers. Children's social workers are leaving at a rate of 11% per year, creating even more risk for children. Newly hired workers lack the experience to carry as many cases.

NEW PROGRAMS SHOW POSITIVE RESULTS BUT REQUIRE SMALLER CASELOADS

Innovative approaches to delivering child welfare services, such as risk assessment, family conferencing, and intensive neighborhood-based services, are much more workload intensive. The caseloads of workers assigned to these programs are much lower, requiring other workers to take on the burden of more cases. Many counties in other states have embraced these programs with positive results. However, California counties have lacked the resources and staffing to adopt these programs widely.

RESCUING KIDS



*Katherin Lujan,
senior social
worker,
Orangewood
nursery*

"We have kids who are injured so badly and are so scared that it takes them a while to become comfortable and make their milestones, like being able to stand up, walk, make sounds. The whole staff gets excited every time a child starts talking."

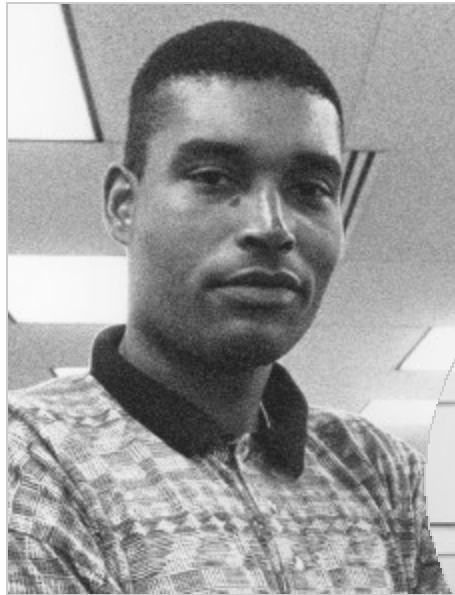
ALAIN DOMINIQUE
EMERGENCY RESPONSE
RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Not all homes can be made safe. Once a worker decides to remove a child, the work has just begun. There is a shortage of foster care homes, and foster parents are becoming more selective about the kids they will take.

“Emergency placements are harder and harder to find,” explains Dominique. “You can be driving around with five kids in the back of the car, pleading with shelter parents to take them. If I pick up some kids at the end of my shift at 4 p.m., I might not find a home for them until 10 p.m. The shelter parents want to know if the child has any behavior problems and the child’s history. They want to know what they are getting into, but it is unrealistic to expect us to have the information when we just picked the kids up.”

but then you get a call from a foster parent saying to pick up the kids because the two siblings are fighting.”

Social workers are in favor of these new regulations aimed at helping children maintain some aspect of their family.



They also want to make every effort to ensure that the child’s new home is safe. However, these efforts require taking more time. And given the present caseloads, taking time for one activity means taking it away from something else. Spending extra hours to place one child may mean a worker doesn’t get to see another child, possibly placing that child at risk. Social workers are asking that the availability of services be enhanced and caseloads be reduced so that they can do the job right.



“You can be driving around with five kids in the back of the car, pleading with shelter parents to take them. If I pick up some kids at the end of my shift at 4 p.m., I might not find a home for them until 10 p.m.”

“Recent legislation has increased the criteria for where we place kids, putting more obligation on us to find and place children with relatives. And if we can’t do a relative placement we have to document why.” So after picking up a child, the worker must first find the relatives and then determine if they are suitable and willing to take the kids. Dominique continues:

“You might drive for an hour to the grandmother’s house in Pasadena, and then find grandpa is a registered sex offender. So then you drive to the other grandparents, who have said they want the kids, but you find they are living in a single bedroom trailer and think they can take 5 kids and that they will sleep on floor. Or you get to the house and the roof is caving in or the electrical sockets have live wires sticking out. We are supposed to place siblings together,



Los Angeles emergency response worker driving around in the middle of the night trying to find a placement for a child.



It is hard for people to believe the simple fact that every persecutor was once a victim.... [There is] the unconscious need to pass on to others the humiliation one has undergone oneself.

ALICE MILLER,

FOR YOUR OWN GOOD: HIDDEN CRUELTY IN CHILD-REARING AND THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

- California has the highest rate of reported child abuse of the ten largest states.
- Abused children tend to become abusive parents, repeating the cycle.
- Children who experience severe violence in the home are approximately three times as likely as other children to use drugs and alcohol, get into fights, and deliberately abuse property.
- Over the last decade, reports of child abuse have increased by 70%.





Because of the controversial and litigious nature of sexual abuse charges, Orange County social workers interview alleged victims in a special room. The interviews are video-taped and watched through a one-way mirror by law enforcement officers, therapists and the district attorney.

“Our job is to try to relieve the trauma and collect evidence. What, where, when it happened, and with whom. The alleged victim may be any age from as young as two years old to an adult. We work with law enforcement and do a forensic interview.”

DIANA HERWECK
SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER
CAST: CHILD ABUSE SERVICES TEAM

“Social workers are so busy we may not get cases brought in until 8 or 10 o'clock at night. We did 33 interviews in three days. Four-hundred-fifty cases per month is considered a normal caseload. Often we are at 125%, 150%, or even 175% of the normal caseload. We've investigated as many as 700 cases of sexual abuse in a month.”



“Heavy drugs are an element in most of our cases, because of the havoc it wreaks with people’s lives. We don’t have the resources to deal with mental health and drug addiction at a family level.”

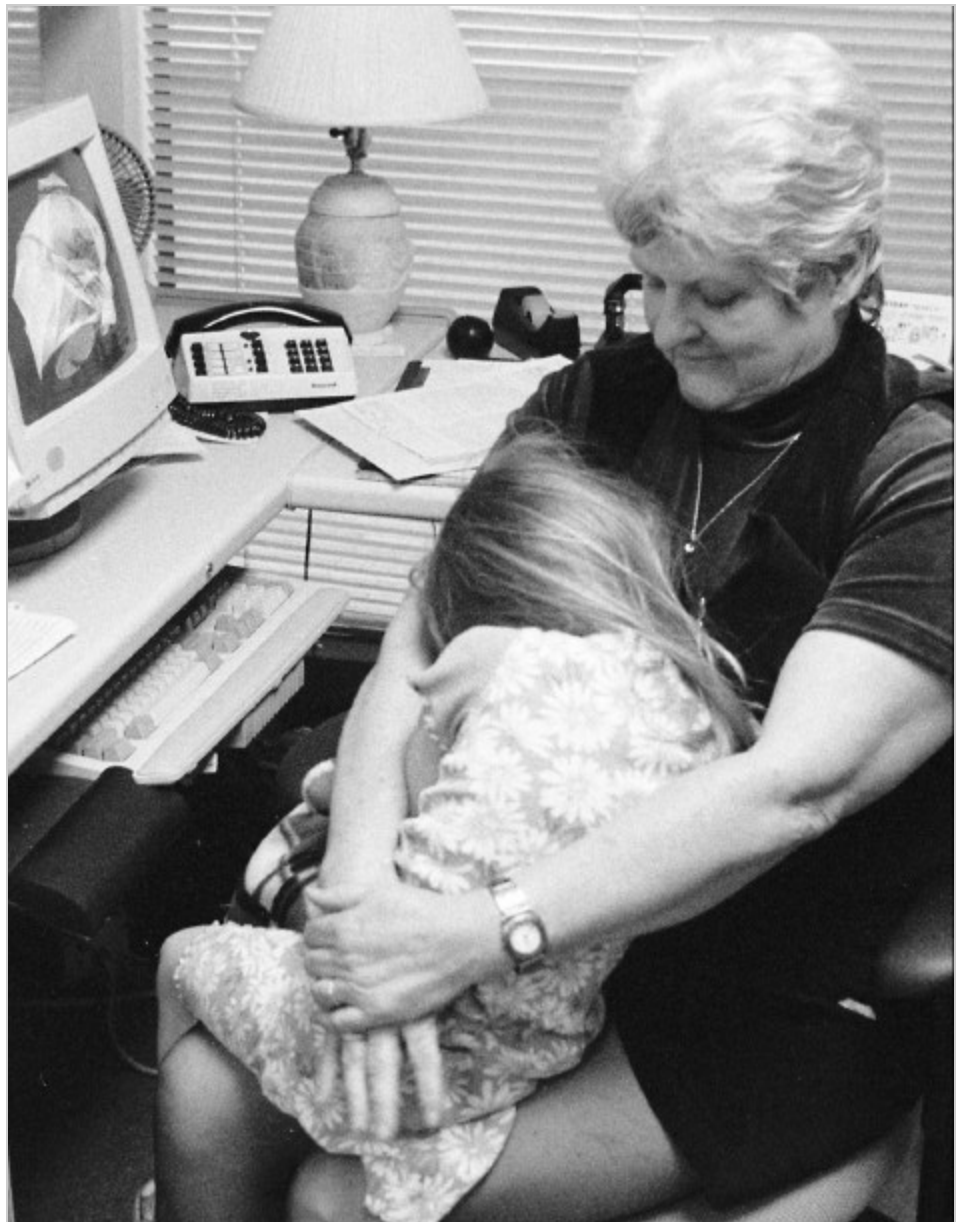
EDNA HANSEN
EMERGENCY RESPONSE
MONTEREY COUNTY

“I get to see a lot of different families and help them by providing service to keep their kids from going into foster care. Our goal is to keep children at home whenever possible because children thrive best in their own families. However sometimes that is not possible, and in severe situations we have to remove the child, at least temporarily.”

When Hansen started 13 years ago, caseloads were much smaller:

“We used to have a lot more time to better assist families and do follow up visits, and at that time the amount of drug use and mental health problems was not as great. The pressure on families from losing their jobs because of downsizing and lack of resources is putting a lot more stress on parents trying to provide for their children.

“The clients used to have fewer problems and we had more resources to give them. We could refer clients to family maintenance workers, who could evaluate the case, write up a case plan and work with the family. Now we have to write up the case plan and we’re lucky if we have two hours to spend with the family. That is not enough time to write a comprehensive plan. That isn’t enough time to build up the trust necessary for them to open up enough for us to assess them. We can do some things for them, but not a thorough job.”



Edna Hansen comforting a child the court ordered picked up. The agency had been working with the mother, but it became obvious that she was lying about her drug use when she gave birth to a drug-exposed child. The mother has a long history of drug use and criminal behavior. She grew up in a family with a long history of drug use and criminal behavior. The court ordered the child taken to protect the child and to break the pattern.

“If we had lower caseloads, we would have more time to engage our clients and help them get therapy.”



TERENCE RICE
EMERGENCY RESPONSE
COMMAND POST
LOS ANGELES COUNTY

“It’s tough because sometimes it’s a losing situation. Regardless of what’s happening, you’re taking a child from the mother, and the child is traumatized by that. Even a bad mother is sometimes better than our best foster mother because the child is bonded and there is that attachment.

“When I was out there, I thought that maybe it could have been a fall, but there is a hand print, linear bruises and a black eye that goes from the ear to the middle of the forehead. We did the right thing in this situation because we had a history of child abuse. We had a

“Sometimes it’s a losing situation. Regardless of what’s happening, you’re taking a child from the mother....but there is a hand print, linear bruises and a black eye that goes from the ear to the middle of the forehead.”

baby that was apparently born with an illegal substance in his system. We have an extremely severe injury to a critical part of the body, the head.

“I feel really bad for the parents, because I really believe that on some level they love their kid and just want to do what is best, but they are just so wrapped up living in so much pain

themselves they just can’t get beyond that to see the other person. And at this particular time in their lives, until they are able to do that, you know the child really shouldn’t be there. So, like I say, I don’t feel that the job is too fun in the sense that you are dealing with a lot of pain and a lot of sorrow and a lot of kids who deserve a lot better.”

GIVING KIDS A NEW HOME AND A NEW START



Having someone to talk to who understands what they have been through can make the difference between abused children healing and becoming healthy, functioning adults or turning to violence and self-destructive behavior.

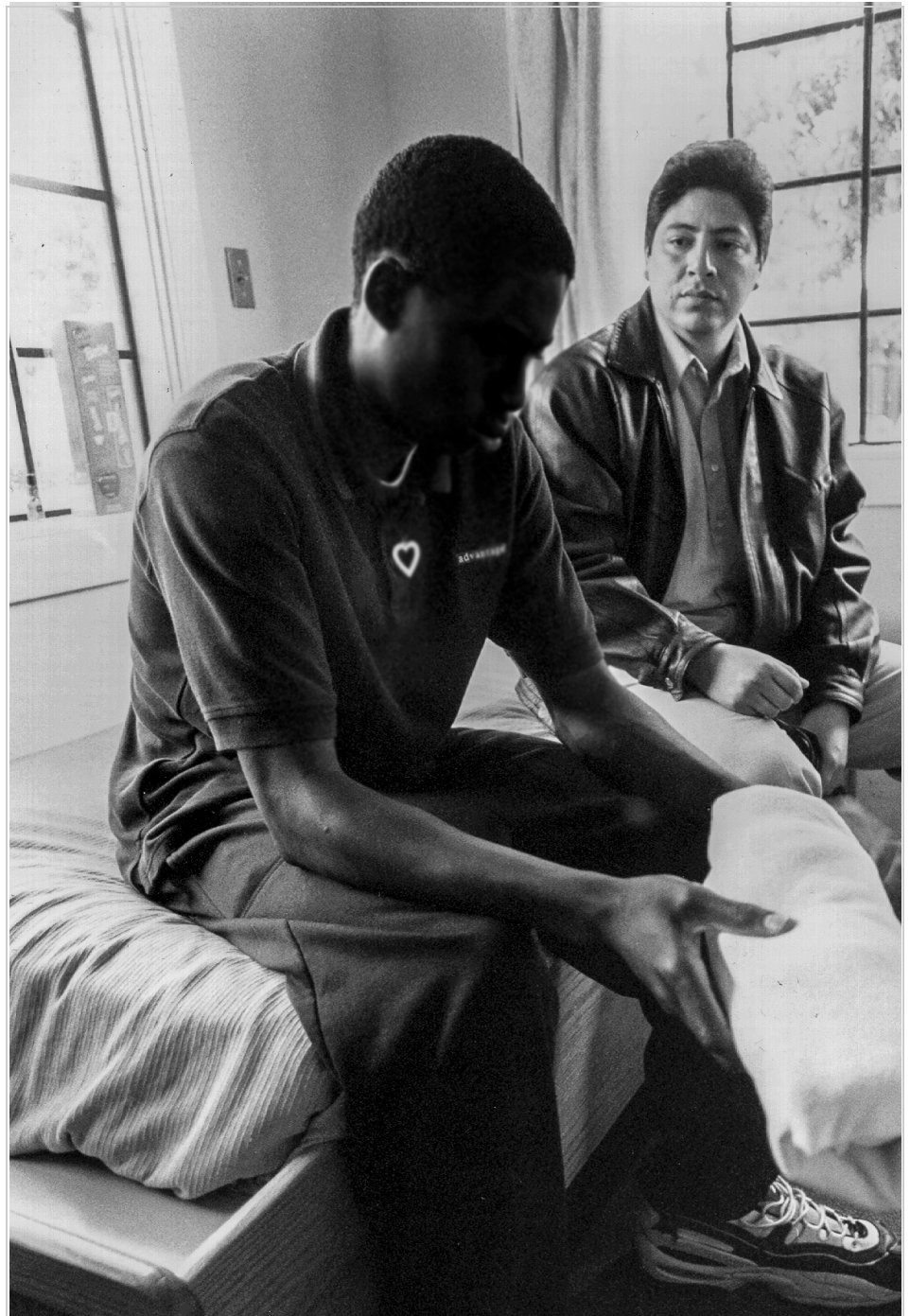
JAVIER CHAVEZ
SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER
ORANGEWOOD CHILDREN'S
HOME.

Orangewood is an emergency shelter in Orange County, where ER workers can take children who have been removed from a home. Emergency shelters are intended as temporary housing until children are either returned to the parents or placed in long-term placement. Chavez enjoys the program because he is able to spend time working with his clients.

"I try to give kids the necessary tools or equipment so that they can find their place in life. They aren't bad kids. They are just trained to act a certain way. A large number of the kids' parents are in jail. If you look at their genealogy, they were physically and emotionally abused, their parents were physically and emotionally abused, and their grandparents were physically and emotionally abused. It started somewhere and never got fixed. They are survivors, but now those survival techniques are getting them in trouble with the system. Old techniques are hard to change. So I try to open them up to new experiences, to put that idea in their head that there is more to life than gang-banging.

"The biggest problem is the kids have no training. They have no one in their life to tell them the importance of education, no one who can teach them the importance of careers, no one to get them thinking about what they plan to do long term. I apologize to them and tell them I'm sorry that this is all they have seen. I show them brochures from colleges, the military, and other vocational programs. If a kid expresses an interest in a field, we try to show him how to get there. We take them on tours of colleges and universities. The bottom line is to expose them to something other than the dysfunctional home experience they came from.

"Now a lot of the kids coming through Orangewood are more aggressive and assaultive. They are not afraid to carry and use weapons. Many of the kids here have already been shot. One kid was even paralyzed in a gun fight.



A teenage boy has just realized that he will never be able to return to his mother's home. His mother had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized. He is the star of his high school basketball team, and the coach has found one of his friends to take the boy in. He will stay in Orangewood until the coach's friend can get a foster license.

We are supposed to be a temporary shelter, but the severity of their problems makes many of the kids hard to place. They may bounce from foster homes and group homes and then end up back here, so it is no longer just

temporary housing and the population is getting rougher."

Orangewood was designed to house a maximum of 220 kids, with a ratio of one worker to three residents. It now averages about 300. Orangewood tries to

give kids entering the system some extra services that workers with high caseloads are unable to provide. But as it nears 150% capacity and houses kids with more severe problems on a long-

term basis, Chavez fears that they will soon have little time to do quality work with the kids. He poses the question: If workers in special programs become as over-worked as normal social workers,

will they try to solve the problem with another level of special programs? Why not just lower caseloads and give social workers the time to do quality social work?

“I try to give kids the necessary tools or equipment so that they can find their place in life....They are survivors but now those survival techniques are getting them in trouble with the system.”



Senior social worker Javier Chavez with a former gang member. The teenager, whose only family was a gang, asked for help. “I was out living with friends and they got me involved in gangs and I was doing stuff that was bad,” he said. “I saw my friends get busted ‘cause they were following duties, and I was starting to do that stuff myself. I got scared that I would end up in juvenile hall or dead.” He never met his father, and his mother died when he was six. He was staying with his aunt and uncle, but they had their own kids to take care of, so he starting living on his own. After hallucinating on methamphetamine, he turned himself in to the police. He has started attending classes at Orangewood and now wants to go to college and become an attorney. “I like arguing and sticking up for people,” he said.

JANN NODDIN
FAMILY PRESERVATION
ALAMEDA COUNTY

Having someone to talk to who understands what they have been through can make the difference between abused children healing and becoming healthy, functioning adults, or turning to violence and self-destructive behavior. For many abused and neglected children, their social worker is the only one there to listen and help.

When social worker Jann Noddin first met 13-year-old Erica, Erica had been abandoned by her mother and left without food for 4 days. Jann was able to find her a new home with her aunt and uncle. With the love and support of her new parents, and Jann's counseling, Erica started to trust the world again and was able to confront the painful experiences of her past. After a year, she revealed that her last step-father had repeatedly molested her.

ERICA: "Me and my little brother don't know who our dads are, so my mom would use other guys to be our fathers. She'd go to bars every night and invite a lot of guys over and all of a sudden they were our new dad. Finally she quit that and all of a sudden we were church-o-mania. We would go to church all the time. But her last husband, he would beat her up, and he molested me from when I was 7 years old until I was 11. And then after a while, I told on him. To clue that I was molested, I acted kind of strange. And I didn't do a lot of my homework, and I was off in my own land, my own planet."

JANN: "Erica's reaction of being in her own world is a typical reaction of children who have been abused. It is similar to a woman who has been raped. She feels that she somehow deserved it, that treatment. So that what a child will do is cut that off, continue to isolate themselves.

"When I first met her, I introduced myself and explained to her what she was about to go through and validated that what she'd already gone through might have been scary or traumatic. I



Social worker Jann Noddin sharing a moment with her client, Erica.

"It's sad when I hear little kids get molested and nobody pays attention to them. It makes me so mad that nobody's giving them any attention. That is what social workers are for, and why they need them."

ERICA
ONE OF JANN NODDIN'S CLIENTS

don't expect a child to trust me right away, especially an abused or neglected child, but I work to earn their trust over a period of time. I tell them I will meet with them as often as I can, and try to let them know that I am a person they can talk to when they feel comfortable about talking about things."

ERICA: "At first when she came along I wasn't sure of her. She was like, 'Hi,' and I was like, 'I don't think so.' I

didn't want her for my counselor or a social worker. It took a while to get to know her better and trust her, and now she's like one of my best friends. She always tries to be there for me as much as she can.

"It's sad when I hear little kids get molested and nobody pays attention to them. It makes me so mad that nobody's giving them any attention. That is what social workers are for, and why they need them."

Foster Care Kids Want Time

PEGGY STEVENSON
PERMANENT PLACEMENT
RIVERSIDE COUNTY

“Up until February my caseload was about 79, which is about twice the standard. Normally we are required to see each kid once a month, so I had to get a waiver so that I only have to visit permanent placement kids every three months. I prefer to see them once a month, but there are just not enough hours in a month.

“My caseload was about 79, which is about twice the standard... 21 court reports in one month... figure 3-5 hours for the average report...that is easily over half my time...for court reports. That doesn’t count the other paper work, narrative reports, foster care reviews...I need to be out there seeing the kids, not strapped to the desk.”

“In January I had to write 21 court reports. Researching a court report can take an hour per kid to contact caretakers, schools, therapists, doctors, and that is if you reach people right away.



“I can be getting 30 phone calls per day, and each call is more work.”

Often you have to keep on calling them. Typing the report can take one to three hours.

“If everything works, that is two and-one-half-hours so far, and then another half-hour to copy, staple and collate the report, which we have to do ourselves. Then if I’m lucky I can get the report into a little box that a court runner will take over to the court.

Otherwise we have to drive the report to Riverside, which can take three hours of driving in rush hour traffic to get the report in at 5 PM.

“So figure three-five hours for the average report, and I’m writing as many as 21 court reports per month, so that is easily over half my time, and that is just for the court reports. That doesn’t count the other paper work, narrative reports, foster care reviews, which can take three or four forms per kids. And then changing a placement. I’ve had five or six kids show up at the office in one week needing a new placement.

“Then while I’m doing all that, I can be getting 30 phone calls per day, and each call is more work. My supervisor suggested that I switch my phone to voice-mail and refer emergency calls to the duty worker of the day. But if you are researching a report and have people calling you to give you information, you have to answer the phone. I have teenagers who call everyday, who feel they have urgent needs. They have no one else to talk to. The trouble is I need to be out there seeing the kids, not strapped to the desk.”



“I’m fed up with my social worker, Peggy. She’s not available. I have to leave her messages, and the only way to get her is to yell at her, and then she calls me back.”

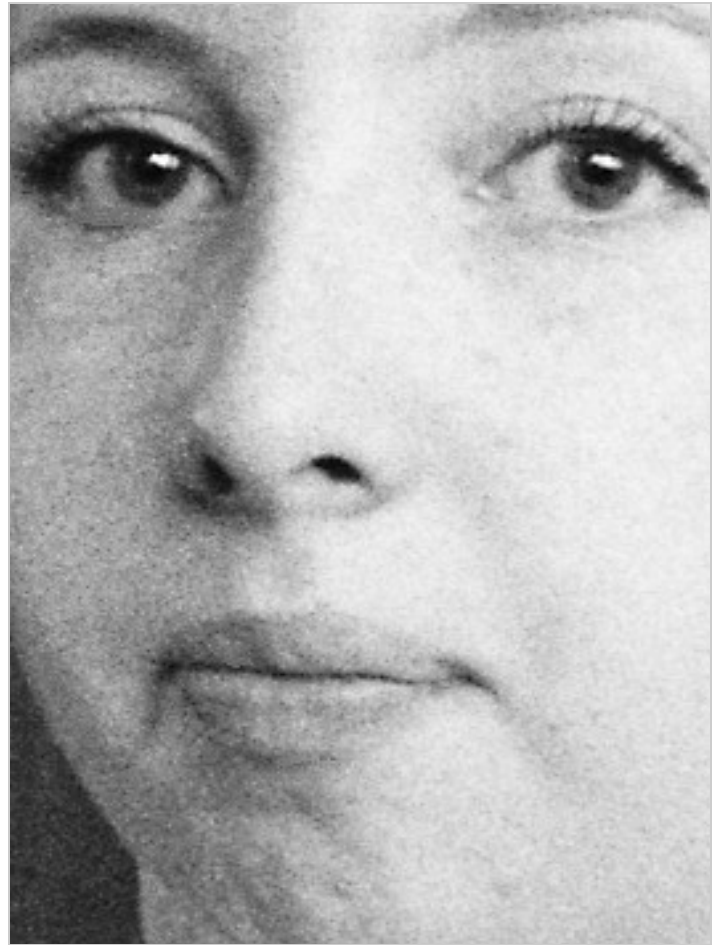
ONE OF PEGGY STEVENSON’S 79 KIDS

ONE OF 30 PHONE CALLS A DAY

ONE OF THE CALLS THAT DIDN’T GET RETURNED

“I’ve been in this foster care for 3½ years. The process sucks, because the rules make me different from other kids, and my social worker doesn’t get things done.

“I feel like I have no control over my life. The court has control over my life. And it really frustrates me. I wanted to go to Yosemite with my friend and her family, and my mom [her foster mother] knew her family and it was okay with her for me to go, but we had to go to the court since it was far away and I was going to be with her family for a week. I can’t go out of state, I can’t go horseback riding, I can’t drive a car, because I need court approval because they are responsible for me. I’m fed up with not being able to go with friends. I’m fed up with my social worker, Peggy. She is not available. I have to leave her messages, and the only way to get her is to yell at her, and then she calls me back.”



Stevenson visits a 14-year-old girl who was removed from her drug-addicted mother when she was 18 months old. The teenager has gone from foster home to home. She has been diagnosed as suffering from manic-depression and has never bonded with any of her foster parents. Stevenson has placed her in an enriched foster home where she gets extra services. Stevenson has just met with the girl’s mental health worker/therapist for an hour. The foster home is an hour from the Riverside office. The girl is just one of 79 cases.

REPAIRING FAMILIES



Steve and Paula with four of their five kids. They attended one of social worker Diane Brown's parenting classes. Brown (center) is part of a special program that stations workers in the community.



"Ever since I started practicing what the social worker taught in her class, my crazy life has become somewhat manageable."

“I knew that in business you had to be consistent to make money, and I always thought I ran my household like a business. But I learned the bottom line doesn’t matter. In the household it is the consistency and the message you are sending the kids.”



STEVE AND PAULA
FAMILY REUNIFICATION CLIENTS

Steve is the manager of a fast food restaurant. They have five children and completed a parenting class as part of a reunification plan.

STEVE:

“I learned that it was okay to have emotions as a parent and that children are work.

“I knew that in business you had to be consistent to make money, and I always thought I ran my household like a business. But I learned the bottom line doesn’t matter. In the household it is the consistency and the message you are sending the kids. Ever since I started practicing what Diane taught in her class, my crazy life has become somewhat manageable.

“The unmanageableness came from the size of the family. We have twin five-year-olds, a three-year-old baby, and our oldest is nine. It puts a lot of stress on us and we reacted with our children. We let anger rule our feelings, we let kindness rule our feelings. Now we don’t let that come into play. What is right for the child and wrong for the child is what matters. My emotions would vary from day to day and my kids, not being stupid, would pick up on dad’s highs and



lows, and they weren’t identifying with my message statement.

“I already knew the difference between abuse and non-abuse. They focused on consistent behavior and giving children a consistent message.

“The kids were taken from us because of bad judgement on my part, allowing my brother to live here. He was involved in illegal activities and the worst repercussion was my kids taken away by the state. We did out-patient treatments, and we got associated with NA, which is a support group for us since we did drugs in the past. That is a life style we left behind.

“I refocused on what my job is, the passion for parenting, and accepting change and learned to ask for help if I need it and not to let pride get in the way.”

“I was raised in a family where I would get spanked, but I found that spanking my kids only makes them angry.”

PAULA:

“Before, we had a lot of chaos and mayhem. I was raised in a family where I would get spanked, but I found that spanking my kids only makes them angry. So spanking wasn’t working and I didn’t know the other alternatives. I learned to set limits, not sweat the small stuff, but to set limits and stay focused.”

Family Maintenance on an Emergency Budget

SHERI BLACKLEDGE
EMERGENCY RESPONSE
RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Emergency response investigators respond to reports that children are in danger. Their caseloads are based on making an initial assessment either to remove a child from a home or to refer the family to a worker who can do longer-term social work, such as family maintenance.

Voluntary family maintenance allows the family to receive social work without removing the child, going to court, and setting up a mandatory reunification plan. The program builds

“I had a homeless mother last month I ended up helping her find a home. Then I helped her move in and buy furniture, and then found her a plumber.”



healthy families and is cost effective because it keeps children out of the system. Unfortunately many counties have drastically cut back on the number of FM-V workers.

“I used to be able to transfer a case to Family Maintenance-Voluntary and they would work with the family for 3 to 6 months, getting them in counseling, or we would transfer them to Family Preservation,” reported Blackledge. “But now we have only a

few workers in the division and they have twice the caseloads they are supposed to. So as ER workers, instead of making two or three contacts with a family, referring them to the appropriate services, and moving on, we are doing the social work as well as the ER work, but with an ER caseload.

“I worked with them for 6 to 7 hours a week for 4 weeks. During that time, the family really blossomed. The father never knew that you can just remove children to another room.”

“I had a homeless mother last month, and instead of referring her to Family Preservation, I ended up helping her find a home. Then I helped her



move in and buy furniture. Then I found her a plumber. We are talking about spending days working with her, while I am still carrying a caseload above standard based on just seeing them for an ER visit.”

SEEING FAMILIES BLOSSOM

“I had another family where a 13-year-old daughter was reported to have bruises on her bottom. Upon investigation, I discovered that the father had been spanking her since she was young. Now an adolescent, she was becoming more rebellious and the spankings had progressed from using a hand to a paddle that the father kept on top of the refrigerator like his father had. The paddle caused the bruises. I explained to him that bruises are caused by internal bleeding and can do damage. So I worked with them, 6 to 7 hours a week for 4 weeks. During that time, they really blossomed. The father never knew that you can just remove children to another room. I taught them about adolescence, that their daughter



was acting out to establish her own identity. They didn't understand that.

“They didn't spank their child for that whole month, and they said they might never spank the child. 'We may

never have to spank our other two children,' they said. That may have changed the lives of those children. When I entered this business I said if I can make a difference in one child's life it is worth my entire career, and I have done that. I get letters from clients thanking me.”

Although Blackledge enjoys the FM work, it makes it difficult to see all of her ER cases in a timely manner. ER workers report they are not able to meet the mandated deadlines and are forced to triage their work loads. They live in fear of children being injured before they can visit. Recently a child was murdered by a parent. The ER investigation had not been conducted within the mandated time limit, in part because the worker was out on stress leave.



Monterey worker Wren Atilano-Bradley (left) with Maria, a former client, with whom Atilano-Bradley spent many months working as a family reunification worker. Atilano-Bradley would not have had as much time to devote to a case today. See story page 26.

Because of high caseloads, family maintenance and family preservation workers are not always available. This forces emergency response workers to spend time working with families when they need to be doing investigations, and this places children at risk.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Community social worker Diane Brown drives around looking for children and families in need.



"Some kids, when I first got them, I saw every single day...Just having someone in their lives to look up to and who cares about what they do can make all the difference."

“Every social worker has been with a family and thought, this situation is so unmanageable. If only I had met these people before, when their problems were less intense and when they still had a sense that they could do better, rather than after they became entrenched in an anti-social environment.”

CHRIS OAKS
DELINQUENCY PREVENTION
MONTEREY COUNTY

New programs that station social workers in the community and allow them to spend much more time working with children and families have been found to be effective. The programs attempt to reach at-risk kids and families before they become ingrained with anti-social behavior. Chris Oaks is a social worker in the delinquency prevention unit of Monterey County.

“The majority of kids I work with are 11 to 13 years old. That population is much more changeable than when you get a child 16 or 17, after their criminal behavior has become more ingrained. The kids live everywhere from Carmel and Pacific Grove to East Side—the very affluent to the very lower income.

“We have incredible successes. I had one case of an 11-year-old girl who was sniffing paint, being sexually active, and was out of school. Six months later she is going to school, not using drugs, and she has reined in her sexual acting out.



“What we do is hook up with a kid or family and stick with them much longer and work with them more intensively. Some kids, when I first got them, I saw every single day, and after that I try to see them a few times a week.

life to look up to and who cares about what they do can make all the difference.”

These programs have been found to be successful because social workers have been able to devote quality time to

“Kids tell me that when they are out with their friends, and maybe thinking about ripping something off, or about getting high, they’ll have second thoughts. ‘I knew I’d have to talk with you about it next week,...’ they say.”

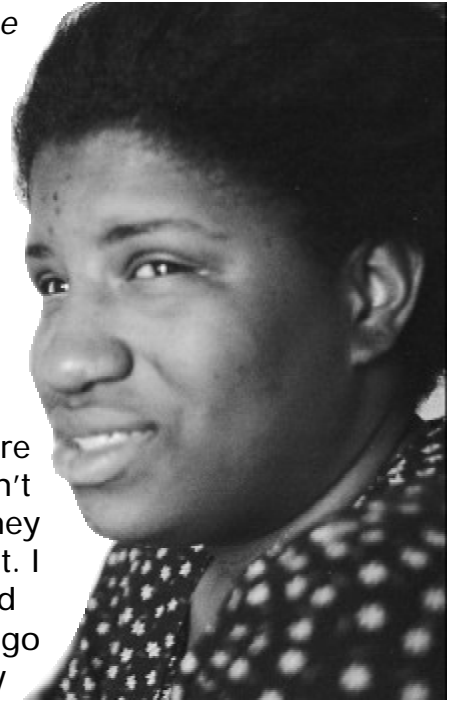
“One thing my colleagues have found is that although we would like to believe it is the magic we bring to a family, what really makes the difference is just being there with some consistency and setting some standards, and accountability.

“Kids tell me that when they are out with their friends, and maybe thinking about ripping something off, or about getting high, they’ll have second thoughts. ‘I knew I’d have to talk with you about it next week. And you are going to ask me all these questions,’ they say. Just having someone in their

their clients. Unfortunately, because of budgetary restraints, these programs have been played off against lowering the general caseloads. What has happened is that we have a few workers who are able to devote quality time and do real social work with a small number of clients, while the rest of the workers are forced to short change the overwhelming majority of families and children in the system.



Pookie (right), the mother of three children, lives in an abandoned building with her crack-cocaine addicted mother (left). Pookie is fighting an addiction problem and hopes to get into a drug recovery program. Social worker Diane Brown arranged for a responsible friend of Pookie's to become legal guardian of the children. Pookie: "The kids don't need to be in this situation. We are in the process of moving and don't know where we're going. Now they are in a better home I can go visit. I need to get myself straightened out, get my own apartment, and go back to school. I just need to stay away from certain people."



"The kids don't need to be in this situation. We are in the process of moving and don't know where we're going."

DIANE BROWN
COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORKER
RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Diane Brown works the community and tries to find creative solutions for at-risk families. She first became aware of a problem when she noticed a child eating from a dumpster, and the child's face was bleeding from dermatitis. She located the mother living in an abandoned building with the grandmother. Both adults were addicted to crack-cocaine. Although clearly an unhealthy environment for the child and her two siblings, Brown was reluctant to place the children in a foster home. She feared that with the personal hygiene and other problems the children had, it would be hard to find a foster mother who could relate to the kids' lack of development.



"I had a six-hour talk with the mom, and she signed over legal guardianship," said social worker Diane Brown (right).

"The kids are safe, they are thriving, they are happy, and they have a chance. It's about getting kids into an environment where they will thrive, not about getting them into the system."

"I was afraid they just wouldn't appreciate the kids and understand their habits," Brown explained. "They don't eat with a fork, they won't act the way a foster mother would expect."

After gaining the family's trust she discovered that the mother had a friend

who occasionally cared for the children and was willing to take care of them for the time being. After meeting with the friend and deciding she could be a loving parent to the children, Brown brought the children to her. But when she did a legal records check she found the friend had a high school conviction that would prevent her from getting a foster care license. Brown describes what she did next:

"So my job was to be creative. I had a six-hour

talk with the mom, and she signed the kids' legal guardianship over to the lady.

"Then I had to go down to AFDC and get waivers. The guardian will get a lot less money than if she were a foster care parent, but she didn't care. It wasn't about money for her. So then I had to get social security numbers for all the kids, because the mother didn't know them. I found out one of the daughters had a stroke when she was 18 months old, so I filled out the forms to get her SSI for that.

"It took 9 visits altogether. I was there almost every day the first week, and some of those visits were for 3 or 4 hours. After that visits were a couple of hours and eventually down to a few minutes. But that doesn't count the time I spent doing paper work on the case. When I get home I usually spend 2 or 3 hours on the computer writing up cases."



SHAMEKI
THE GUARDIAN

"I felt I could make it better and help the situation. I didn't want to see her kids go into the system. The living conditions weren't that great. The house was dirty, the building roach infested. Her kids didn't have beds. They needed a room of their own.

"I've had some rough times in my life, but my family gave me a lot of support, and I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to see her get it together, too, and give the kids a safe environment. It all happened so fast. Before, her older daughter wasn't even going to school, and now we're helping her to adjust to that."

CREATING A MONUMENTAL COMPUTER SYSTEM *REQUIRES A MONUMENTAL EFFORT*



The federal government is encouraging social service departments to computerize. The California Department of Social Services has implemented the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System computer system with the hope of providing workers more accurate

ning into the same problems that many private industries have. Complex computer systems can take years of trial and error and go through many revisions before all the bugs are removed. They require long transition periods during which productivity is greatly reduced. While the staff of the computer project

takes a long time to learn to use the program effectively.

Computer skills and typing were not previously part of many social workers' job descriptions. Introducing the computer system created a massive drop in productivity. Even the most computer literate social workers have reported that they get at least 25% less work done, and many say that using the system has doubled their workload.

During this transition period it has been impossible for workers to keep up with their case work. Even working long overtime hours, workers are not able to investigate all their cases within the mandatory time frame.

When all the bugs in the system are worked out, the system will provide greater information to workers, counties and the state, improving outcomes for children and families. But no matter how well the system works, entering data takes time, increasing the amount of time each case takes and decreasing the number of cases a worker can investigate.

“We used to have only three pieces of paper to fill out for a case....Now I spend at least half a day on a computer.”

and comprehensive information about client histories, and to relieve the redundant record keeping and report writing. When completed, the CWS Case Management System will be the most complex Windows-based software application ever developed.

Unfortunately, the implementation of a major computer system capable of handling the complexity of child welfare information has turned out to be a daunting task. The department is run-

are working diligently with counties and workers to improve the system, it takes a significant amount of time to work through bugs in the system and to train thousands of workers adequately.

The department contracted with one of the largest vendors, International Business Machines, yet the system has been plagued by technical problems, crashes and down times. The system originally had over 300 screens, and even with improvements, it still

WHAT MAKES IT ALL WORTH WHILE

RICHARD MOSCOWITZ
SUPERVISOR
RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Before becoming a children's social worker, he was an Orange County deputy sheriff for 17 years. As a law enforcement officer he saw the correlation between drugs and poverty, child abuse and neglect. Moscovitz helped develop one of the first courses to train police officers on how to deal with domestic violence.

"Kids who grow up in homes where their mothers are battered are more likely to grow up to be batterers," he explained.

"We are just reacting to emergencies on a daily basis. Social workers are just running to put out fires. If we had a more manageable caseload maybe we could spend more time with families doing traditional social work."

TYPICAL SCENARIO

"The typical scenario: we receive a call from a foster parent who complains that the teenager isn't listening to her and wants us to come and get him. Or they will show up and drop the kid off in the lobby and tell us, 'I don't want him any more.' So the worker has to put aside what he or she is doing and spend the next couple of hours finding a new placement for the kid. Or a kid may run away, and after a few days without food or shelter, the kid calls up the worker and says, 'I'm hungry. I'm

"We are just reacting to emergencies on a daily basis, running to put out fires. If we had a more manageable caseload, maybe we could spend more time with families doing traditional social work."

ready to come back.' And of course the foster home will say, 'He ran away and we don't want him back.' The kid may require a special placement. A lot of the kids we see have behavior problems due to the abuse they have suffered. On top of that, run-aways tend to use drugs and be sexually active, with the potential to be sexually abusive to other children."

COURT-ORDERED MANDATES

Court-ordered mandates are also increasing the workload of social workers.

"If a relative in another county

express a desire to get the child, the court may issue an order requiring a worker to stop whatever he or she is doing, drive to that county to evaluate the home, and then run a criminal



What makes it all worth while: Moscovitz proudly looks through the cards he has received from ex-clients, thanking him for all the help and describing their accomplishments.



background check on everyone living there. The court may order visitation between siblings that are in different shelter homes, in different parts of the county. These tasks have nothing to do with the investigation of the allegations the worker is trying to conduct. Yet the worker may have to spend a day driving around, and then return to work, pick up the pieces, and continue analyzing data for a report."

WREN ATILANO-BRADLEY
FAMILY REUNIFICATION
MONTEREY COUNTY

After viewing photos of the bruises on a seven-year-old girl, Monterey social worker Wren Atilano-Bradley understood why the children's protective services department wanted to terminate parental rights immediately. Like many social workers, Atilano-Bradley had witnessed many abhorrent situations, but she had seldom seen a child as badly beaten. The child's body was covered with belt-buckle bruises, and the mother was charged with felony abuse.



Social Worker Wren Atilano-Bradley (right) with one her favorite former clients, who proudly shows off photos of her now-happy family.

CHILD WELFARE WORKERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Atilano-Bradley prepared herself to meet the mother who had done this to her young child. But instead of encountering the anger and hostility of a vicious parent, she found a very emotional, young Mexican woman who immediately broke into tears. When Maria, the mother, realized that Atilano-Bradley spoke Spanish, she started pleading, "¡Dame una chance!—Give me a chance! I'll show you, I'll prove to you I can change," she begged. Atilano-Bradley's heart opened to Maria. "I told her that if she was serious, I'd work as hard as she

"Give me a chance! I'll show you, I'll prove to you I can change."

worked," Atilano-Bradley recalls. "And we both worked really hard. She signed up for parenting classes and got into therapy right away. She asked for visits twice a week; usually they only visit once a week, but I said, 'If you show up, I'll show up.'" Atilano-Bradley remembers those visits and the attention Maria bestowed on her daughters. "She was so beautiful with those girls. She was like a little mother hen, cuddling

them, grooming their hair, and cleaning their fingernails."

So what had gone wrong? What had caused this mother to beat her daughter so badly?

Atilano-Bradley was the first person in the system to whom Maria, who speaks only Spanish, could really explain her story. Everyone else had spoken to her through interpreters and talked to her only enough to fill out court forms. Now that she had found someone she could talk to, she poured out her story.

When Maria was 19, her youngest daughter died, and then her husband was murdered. She left her two surviving daughters in Mexico and came to the United States to work in the fields so she could support them. But then she found out that her uncle was molesting the youngest daughter, Juanita. So she brought her daughters to the United States to protect them. But Juanita started having problems.

Teachers complained that she was defiant and that Maria couldn't control her. Maria even took the child to a doctor, but he said that the girl was just acting out and Maria would have to learn how to control her better. Maria thought everyone was telling her to discipline the child more, and so Maria began beating Juanita.

Atilano-Bradley was sure Maria could be worked with and could be a good parent. The case plan called for therapy to calm her down and parenting classes to teach her to control her difficult child.

But Maria was not the only one to have trouble with Juanita. Within a few days of getting the case, Atilano-Bradley received a call from the foster home to pick up the daughters because the foster parents couldn't control them. This was the third foster home to reject the kids.

Atilano-Bradley spent almost a week driving around with the kids in the back of her car, checking out different foster homes. Finally she turned to one of her select care providers, a Spanish-speaking grandmother who, like

Maria, grew up in Mexico. The grandmother was especially good with challenging kids. The only problem was that Atilano-Bradley had previously placed a 14-year-old boy with the grandmother. The teenager fomented a neighborhood gang war and caught the foster home in the middle.

After that, the grandmother decided she wanted only preschoolers. "I really had to use my social work skills and tug on her heart strings. I described the girls to her and how the mother was all alone and had no one to turn to. It was a hard sell," Atilano-Bradley recalls.

Finding the right foster care placement for a child is a key element in the art of social work. This foster mother nurtured both the kids and the mother. Feeling relieved that her children were safe, Maria started to calm

down and open up.

So what was really going on with Juanita, the defiant child? Atilano-Bradley instructed the foster mother to report in detail the girl's behavior problems. The girl would roll her eyes and then urinate on the floor when people were talking to her. Atilano-Bradley finally put everything together and guessed what was going on: the child was having seizures. The doctors who had examined Juanita before didn't speak Spanish and couldn't get enough details from Maria's description to understand what was happening. So Atilano-Bradley went with Maria and Juanita to the doctor. Her instinct turned out to be correct. As soon as the daughter was given seizure medication, she calmed down and her behavior became manageable.

So what had gone wrong? What had caused this mother to beat her daughter so severely?

Atilano-Bradley's next task was to keep Maria from going to jail on the felony child abuse conviction. She spoke to the probation officer, who was understandably skeptical at first. "Did you see those photos?" the probation officer asked. "Yes," Atilano-Bradley responded, "but you should see how loving she is with those kids." Atilano-Bradley conveyed to the probation officer, and later to the court, the potential for change that she saw in Maria. "I felt like I was really going out on a limb with the department. Everyone thought I was crazy. If something happened to those kids, it would come back to me," she recalls. With her recommendation, the court sentenced Maria to in-home detention for six months, which meant that every time Atilano-Bradley took Maria anywhere she had to get permission and then check in and out with her probation officer, a time-consuming process.

For Maria to become a self-sufficient mother, she needed to learn to function in her present culture. Mentoring clients is another social work task. Atilano-Bradley helped Maria



through the system, taking her to doctor appointments, showing her how to get health insurance, and explaining how to be assertive in the bureaucracy. "Letting clients see how difficult raising a child and functioning in the system is for everyone is an important part of empowering them to be good parents, so they don't get overwhelmed thinking that they are the only ones who have trouble," Atilano-Bradley explained.

Through therapy Maria was able to come to grips with her troubled past and learn how to control the anger and frustration she had suppressed. According to Atilano-Bradley, Maria was like a sponge, soaking up every bit of knowledge and experience she was offered.

Today Maria nearly comes to tears as she reflects on her past. "In my home I wasn't abused," she said. "In fact my father never hit us, and he even told us girls to never let any man hit us. But when I was 13, a car ran into our house and killed my five brothers. After that my mother went crazy, and we had to move away from the area because she couldn't be near the house. She was never okay after that. That is when my dad got very sick and would even cough up blood. I took care of him for two years until he died because my mother was incapable."

Shortly after her father died, Maria married and began a new family. "I had a good husband and a good marriage." But unfortunately her happiness was short lived. When Maria was 19, her youngest daughter died and her husband was murdered at a fiesta. "All those things in so short a time, I couldn't handle them," she explained. "I had never worked before, so now I had to go to work in the grape fields. My mother would wake me up and say, 'Come on m'ija'— and I would sit on the edge of my bed crying, 'I can't do this one more day, I just can't do this.' Finally I came to California so I could work here and make a better life.

"I never had anyone to talk to about this and I think it built up inside me, the anger, the fear, the nervousness. So I would get frustrated and yell and hit my kids. The first time I told anyone about this was when I saw the therapist. Every time I talked to her about it, I felt more liberated from my



"I felt like there was no one there to listen to me. Now I know someone is there."

pain and suffering.

"I know I committed errors. I made a mistake, but I have changed. The therapist taught me not to get so frustrated, and when I was feeling frustrated or angry, how to do things so I wouldn't expose my children to that. Some times I would go to the resource center and leave my children there if I felt like I was going to explode.

"I come from a culture that does a lot of yelling and screaming. That is how we were raised to take care of our kids. But when I talked to the social worker and started taking parenting classes, I started to understand that you can take care of your children without yelling and screaming. You can become a more united family by talking things out and trying to understand the problems. You can still have discipline with your children by taking away privileges, and that way they learn about having consequences to their bad behavior. I don't have to get angry at them.

"Right now my life is very good because I have all of my children with me. They are almost adults, yet when I

tell them that they can't do certain things because they are dangerous, or they can't go to dances in San Jose because there is a danger, they listen. We are very involved as a family. If one of us wants to go to the beach, we all go to the beach. If one of us wants to go to the park, we all go to the park. We go as a family. I'm very happy with how my life has turned out, and I know it is that way because of all the help I got and the parenting skills I learned. My family is the most important thing to me. We are all we have, so we have to be together."

Maria is one of Atilano-Bradley's inspirational cases. The case closed almost five years ago, but they still keep in contact. Maria has become a booster for children's services, referring her friends in need. She said, "When I meet with my friends or talk to the neighbors over the fence, and they tell me about problems with their kids, I tell them, 'No, you don't have to do that. Here is where you should go. Go talk to these people before you explode. They will help you.' Because that is what happened to me. I felt like there was no one there to listen to me. Now I know there is someone there."

But will someone be there for Maria's friends and neighbors? Maria was fortunate. Atilano-Bradley fears that if she had a client like Maria today, with the high caseloads, the outcome might have been different. She was able to see Maria as often as every other day, spending several hours per visit. Workers don't have that much time anymore.

Maria and her family were not the only beneficiaries of Atilano-Bradley's efforts. Maria's case required about six months of reunification services and then six months of family maintenance services. Had Maria gone to jail, the case would probably have taken at least 2 ½ years. Maria could have been so devastated from incarceration that her children would have spent the rest of their childhoods in foster care. The total cost to the taxpayers could easily have exceeded \$100,000, and the family could have been shattered rather than healed.



"I came from a good family... My dad had nice cars and airplanes. But that is the thing about crack-cocaine... When you are smoking you aren't even aware of your kids...I couldn't see my future. It took someone like Valerie to show me the way."

STEPHANY
A CLIENT OF SOCIAL WORKER VALERIE GOLDEN

RESTORING THE FUTURE

VALERIE GOLDEN
CHILDREN'S SERVICES
MONTEREY COUNTY

When children's services worker Valerie Golden got Stephany's case, Stephany felt that she had no future left. She had already lost her first set of kids, and was about to lose her last remaining son, whom she had voluntarily given up to the system because she felt she was unable to take care of him. "I was doing so much drugs that I didn't want my son around. I brought up my other two kids in a drug environment and I didn't want him in it." Her ex-husband had fled the state with her first two kids to get away from her. "I was using crack-cocaine and alcohol and he wanted to take them away from that. I had no clue at the time what was happening to me. I couldn't see my future. It took Valerie to help me find it."

Unlike many of the people in the system, Stephany came from a wealthy family. Her father owned an electronics business. "My dad had nice cars and airplanes. We used to go flying. But that is the thing about crack-cocaine. It doesn't matter where you come from. You get introduced to it and it will bring



Children's services worker Valerie Golden (right) congratulates her client Stephany on her successful reunification with her kids.

you down. When you are smoking you aren't even aware of your kids. You can be smoking right in front of them, or lock yourself in a room and leave them out there with no food, no clothing, no nothing. You don't care."

Stephany had already failed a previous reunification attempt and a drug recovery program. "I had other social workers before, but they were all rushed and didn't have time for me. I went through other programs and

fooled people,” Stephany reflected. “But Valerie was really there for me. She was real harsh at first. I had to see her once a week, and she let me know I had to get serious if I wanted to have my kids in my life.”

“When I first met Stephany, I didn’t feel she was being honest,” recalls Golden. “But then I saw her change and a different Stephany emerge. She would come in crying and tell me what was going on. Then she started to become more genuine and to look more healthy.”

As in many social work cases, the turning point was a crisis and Golden’s ability to be there for Stephany in her moment of need. “I was having a conflict with my partner, a domestic dispute, and the sheriff was there,” Stephany explained. “I called Valerie and she came right over to make sure my child was safe. Having her support, right there in the moment, it really made a difference.”

With Golden’s help Stephany continued therapy, completed a residential drug treatment program, and was able to reunify with her children.

Stephany was lucky. Before becoming a social worker, Golden had administered a drug rehabilitation program for women and had worked as a probation officer. She had a wealth of professional experience dealing with drug addicts. And as a new worker, she was eager to put in whatever time it took to help her client. But the pressure of a high caseload and the anxiety of being there for all her clients is starting to take its toll. She describes the pressures of her caseload:

“In one day I had a 14-year-old kid run away from a placement, get picked up and taken to a hospital psych unit. As I was about to leave for the hospital, I got a call that one of my borderline substance abusing clients was going off on a foster parent she had tracked down. Then another foster mom called demanding I pick the kids up. She no longer wanted to keep them, because she was mad at the parent. (The kids had been placed with a relative.)

“It is like riding a monster. Those are just the fires. On top of that I have court reports that are due, documentation that needs to be done, meetings

“It is like riding a monster....I can’t find a balance between court reports and seeing clients. Most of my clients have major mental health issues and substance abuse issues. I’m constantly living in fear that something will blow up because I’m not there. I’m scared.”

VALERIE GOLDEN
CHILDREN’S SERVICES WORKER
MONTEREY COUNTY



constantly living in fear that something will blow up because I’m not there. I’m scared.”

Golden brings to the job an enormous amount of experience. Like many social workers, after working other jobs she chose social work because of her dedication to helping children and families. But counties are having trouble keeping these workers. Burnout is a major problem facing children’s services departments. Social workers are leaving at a rate of 11% per year statewide. In many counties the average children’s social worker lasts only two years before leaving for another job.

scheduled. It is not healthy. I have only been here nine months. I’m a new social worker and I have 28 kids to keep up with. They live all the way from Fresno to Susanville. I can’t find a balance between court reports and seeing clients. Most of my clients have major mental health issues and substance abuse issues. I’m

