

Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury

Child Welfare Services in Calaveras County

Striving for Success: Doing More With Less

June 30, 2024



SUMMARY

The Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury chose to examine the Child Welfare Services division of Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency. The Grand Jury looked for ways in which services to our most vulnerable population, our children, could be improved and made more efficient with the intent of ensuring that no child was overlooked, neglected, or underserved. The Grand Jury also sought to understand the interdepartmental cooperation among the various county agencies and non-profits charged with protecting the vulnerable youth of our county, including Child Welfare Services, the District Attorney's Office, the Sheriff's Department, the Resource Connection, and the County Office of Education. The Grand Jury's findings were mixed but encouraging.

GLOSSARY

CCCGJ – Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury

CCSO – Calaveras County Sheriff's Office

CWS – Child Welfare Services

ECDD - Calaveras County Economic and Community Development Department

HHS – Health and Human Services Agency (Calaveras County)

METHODOLOGY

Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury (CCCGJ) conducted interviews with staff at multiple county agencies, conducted research using websites, Board of Supervisors' meeting minutes, the Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) Employee Handbook, brochures, newspaper articles, flyers and directories, and toured facilities that serve county youth.

BACKGROUND

Newspapers across the country are riddled with tragic stories in which the agencies charged with protecting children have failed a child. Historically, Calaveras County has not been immune to these types of stories. Keeping this in mind, CCCGJ looked for gaps in the process of serving Calaveras County's abused, neglected, or at-risk children.

Research shows that there is a nationwide shortage of people entering the field of social work. According to the Columbia School of Social Work, "The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a substantial deficit of 74,000 social workers each year for the next decade, highlighting a critical need for solutions....Rural areas and specific states, in particular, grapple with the acute shortages."

A National Study of Licensed Social Workers found that "... because more than half of healthcare social workers work in hospitals in metropolitan areas, providing comprehensive services to people living in rural areas is an additional challenge."

California “has the highest number of Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) areas in the nation, meaning a grave shortage of mental health service providers in many parts of the state” according to SteinbergInstitute.org, an independent, nonprofit public policy institute dedicated to the issues of mental health and substance use.

Senate Bill 964, introduced by Sen. Scott Wiener in 2022, would have offered “financial stipends to students pursuing a master’s degree in social work while creating a fund to increase pay and set bonuses for current licensed professionals. Under SB 964, the California Community Colleges, California State University and University of California systems would have been required to develop accelerated programs for social work degrees, such as allowing students to combine their last one or two years of undergraduate study with their graduate work in order to complete both programs more quickly”.

The bill passed the Assembly and the Senate in August 2022, but was vetoed in September 2022 by Governor Newsom.

A recent Compensation Study for Calaveras County interviewed county employees regarding job satisfaction. Although they expressed a need for higher compensation, employees reported several positive factors that contributed to job satisfaction. These included the county’s benefits, work culture, mission, work-life balance, and location. This report could be used as a tool, as part of an ongoing collaboration of agencies and community partners, such as the Calaveras County Economic and Community Development Department (ECDD), to attract qualified candidates, along with high school and college career days, job fairs, expanded advertising, and internet promotion of the opportunities within our county.

DISCUSSION

Calaveras County HPSA is under new leadership in recent years, and their commitment to accountability and protection of children is clearly evident. However, other factors can alter the effectiveness of the department, and if those can be improved, it will benefit our entire community.

Like many rural counties in California, the various departments of HPSA, such as Child Welfare Services (CWS), are understaffed. CWS is currently short six social workers and one management position. High employee turnover occurs, in part, due to the lack of competitive compensation when compared to larger urban counties. Burnout is also an issue, because existing workers must take on more responsibilities than are required in their job descriptions. In addition, this worker shortage forces the agency to hire employees that are sometimes less than fully qualified for this important job. Agencies are able to obtain waivers from the State to allow this. All of these factors necessitate a constant cycle of new-hire training.

There is a need to promptly provide health-related services to CWS families within our county. Contracts with service providers, such as therapists, can be difficult to procure due to time constraints, a shortage of service providers, and county contract requirements. County policy requires a legal contract to be drawn up - and in place - before the county can utilize the services of any outside professional. This process can take months. Under the current process, each

contract, even if renewed annually, is written “from scratch” and reviewed by three different departments before being approved. If previously approved standard boilerplate clauses of each contract could be accepted without review, and then tailored to the individual needs of each department, this could save valuable approval time for contracting services.

Due to the volatile and emotional nature of their profession, social workers of Calaveras County frequently find themselves placed in uncomfortable, potentially dangerous, and sometimes life-threatening situations. They are often not accompanied by law enforcement. This may be due to the unpredictable nature of these situations, as well as a lack of communication between HHSA and Law Enforcement regarding what level of protection may be needed for a given situation. Further communication between the agencies would improve understanding of when a Law Enforcement presence would be necessary or available to assist.

CCCGJ found that there is an encouraging level of cooperation between agencies thanks to new leadership in HHSA, and there is ongoing effort to increase collaboration in order to improve the services they each provide. These agencies and non-profits serve the children in our community by addressing needs such as legal, mental health and crisis, substance abuse, health and medical, housing, food and nutrition, transportation, education, foster care, child abuse awareness and prevention, and more. These groups come together through several avenues, such as the Calaveras Care Team and the annual Child Abuse Prevention Summit to best serve individuals and the community.

Despite the challenges, CCCGJ found that Calaveras County CWS employees are a dedicated and caring group of professionals. They will often go beyond what workers in other counties are willing to do, sometimes at great personal sacrifice and risk, in order to best serve their young clients.

In summary:

- There is a shortage of people choosing to enter the field of Social Work.
- Rural counties cannot compete with larger urban counties’ salary and benefit offerings.
- When fully qualified employment candidates are unavailable, agencies are allowed to obtain a waiver from the State to hire less than fully qualified employees.
- The county’s contract practices require a legal contract to be drawn up and in effect before the county can utilize the services of any outside professional. This is often a lengthy process.
- Social workers must often face hazardous or unsafe situations in the scope of their daily work.
- There are many agencies and organizations serving the needs of children in our community.

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, RESPONDENTS

Pursuant to Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury requires responses within 60 days from elected county official(s), and within 90 days from governing

bodies. In order to be included and published in the next Grand Jury report, invited responses must be received within 90 days. After conducting interviews, reviewing reference documents, and touring facilities, the Grand Jury findings and recommendations are as follows:

F1. The current level of staffing at Child Welfare Services risks decreasing the department's ability to properly meet the needs of our community due to employee burnout and turnover.

R1a. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury recommends that, by December 31, 2024, a task force be established by Calaveras County Health and Human Service Agency, with representatives from Child Welfare Service, and Calaveras County Economic and Community Development Department to create a campaign to attract and recruit qualified candidates for Social Work positions in Calaveras County.

Required Responses

Calaveras County Board of Supervisors

Invited Responses

Child Welfare Services

Director of Calaveras County Economic Development

Director of Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency

R1b. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury recommends the resulting Health and Human Services task force implement the campaign by March 31, 2025.

Required Responses

Calaveras County Board of Supervisors

Invited Responses

Child Welfare Services

Director of Calaveras County Economic Development

Director of Calaveras County Health & Human Services Agency

F2. Operating under the current county contract procedure can sometimes delay or prevent the ability to provide prompt access to health providers, which can be detrimental to clients in need of services.

R2. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Calaveras County Health and Human Services create standardized contracts with language previously approved and then tailored to the requirements of each individual division of Health and Human Services Agency by March 31, 2025.

Required Responses

Calaveras County Board of Supervisors

Invited Responses

Director of Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency

F3. A shortage of pre-approved service providers can delay access to much-needed services for clients.

R3a. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury recommends that, by December 31, 2024, HHSA establish a process of prequalifying and pre-approving anticipated health care providers prior to an immediate need.

Required Responses

Invited Responses

Director of Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency

R3b. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury recommends that, by December 31, 2024, HHSA streamline the process of renewing contracts with established service providers prior to contract expiration dates.

Required Responses

Calaveras County Board of Supervisors

Invited Responses

Director of Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency

F4. Child Welfare Services and Calaveras County Sheriff's Office have different understandings of what security is needed for social workers in the field during volatile or hazardous calls.

R4. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury recommends that, by December 31, 2024, representatives from Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency, Child Welfare Services, and Calaveras County Sheriff's Office meet to establish a mutual understanding regarding these anticipated situations and meet quarterly thereafter.

Required Responses

Calaveras County Board of Supervisors

Calaveras County Sheriff

Invited Responses

Child Welfare Services

Director of Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency

Commendations

C1. Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury commends the many organizations and services available to serve the youth of our county. Under new leadership, effort is being made to improve efficiency and cooperation among county agencies, and we feel confident that those working in these agencies are devoted to supporting and serving our children to the absolute best of their ability.

C2. Throughout the review and investigative process by the Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury, the Grand Jury was impressed and pleased to have been introduced to personnel within multiple divisions of the Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency. The Grand Jury encountered dedicated professionals who extended their time and full cooperation to help us understand their mission and functions in providing health and social wellbeing support to the citizens of Calaveras County. They have been tasked to do so much with fewer resources than many comparable counties. The Grand Jury applauds their efforts and can comfortably suggest that Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency is in capable and amply qualified hands.

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

REFERENCE SOURCES

Calaveras County Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes

Calaveras County Office of Education Website and Brochures, www.ccoe.k12.ca.us (See Student Support Services)

Calaveras Enterprise articles

Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, nexusyfs.org/casa/

Health and Human Services Handbook

Health and Human Services Website and Brochures, hhsa.calaverasgov.us

Resource Connection Website, Brochures, and Community Resource Directory, rr.trcac.org

Calaveras Youth Mentoring Program, www.calaverasmentoring.org

Gutierrez, Melody, "California Has Too Few Behavioral Health Professionals. Lawmakers Propose Fix." *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 2022

Weiner, Jocelyn, “Why California Is Facing a Mental Health Care Worker Shortage”,
CalMatters, September 8, 2022

“Bridging the Gap: The Urgent need for Social Workers” Columbia School of Social Work,
September 29, 2023

“Social Work Profession Faces Impending Labor Shortages, Study Finds” *Philanthropy News
Digest* , March 13, 2006

“Classification and Compensation Study for Calaveras County, CA” conducted by Evergreen
Solutions, LLC, March 21, 2024

<http://steinberginstitute.org>

www.sierrachildandfamilyservices.org