

*A publication of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Santa Barbara County — because their world depends on us!*  
Member of the Coastal Tri-Counties Child Abuse Prevention Council

## *Voluntary Family Maintenance: Helping Families Help Themselves*

We continue to explore what happens after a report of suspected child abuse is made with an interview from Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services (CWS) Supervisor of the Family Services Unit, Christine Farro.

### **Tell us about your background, and your role in CWS.**

My background is in mental health; I studied clinical psychology, early childhood education, and developmental psychology. I've been working with Social Services since 1997, and supervising for the last five years. In my current role as Supervisor for the Family Services Unit, I oversee the work of Voluntary Family Maintenance social workers and case aides.

### **Tell us about who your clients are, and how they come to work with your unit.**

When a social worker receives a referral for a family, we hold a Team Decision Making Meeting (TDM) to see if Voluntary Family Maintenance (VFM) services would be appropriate. We determine whether VFM will be enough to maintain children at home with their family, which, if the home is safe, is the best way to go. If so, the family and the worker sit down and create an appropriate case plan to help them develop protective factors. We meet with families at least twice a month in their homes. We help them utilize available services in the community to address the concerns that brought them to the attention of CWS.



We typically stay involved with a family for 3-6 months; sometimes this is extended up to 12 months. We try to have a family meeting or TDM every few months to be sure the family is progressing with their case plan, and to help them get rid of any barriers to meeting their goals.

### **Tell us about the role of the Voluntary Family Maintenance program.**

Our role is to engage the family in a solutions-focused approach, using their strengths to help address areas of concern. It's an opportunity for a family to address their problems in a voluntary manner, rather than having to go to court. We look to see that the children's safety and well-being are considered and attended to, and that families are making progress toward their goals. We have a great working relationship with both the AIU (Assessment and In-

vestigations Unit) and the Court Services Unit. We collaborate with Probation as well, meeting to discuss what might work best for a family. Creative problem-solving is our forte.

### **What happens during home visits?**

We meet with the family, talk over concerns they have or we have, and modify the case plan as needed. It's about helping families help themselves. We try to help bring services to a family's home as much as possible.

### **What are some of the issues VFM social workers face in their work with parents and families?**

Parents we work with are overwhelmed. Maybe two parents are not working as a team. Maybe they don't know how to set limits or provide structure. Many parents have to overcome the shame or guilt they're experiencing. They may all experience reluctance to participate, but ultimately it's their behavior that defines their success. The majority of parents work with us and take responsibility. Sometimes we have to get families over their denial. Our workers are consistent and persistent. Right now we have about 104 cases.

### **Could you explain the voluntary nature of a family's participation in this program?**

While we're a strength-based, voluntary program, we let people know that if they decide it's not right for them, or if they initially agree to participate and don't

follow through with their plan, other options will be back on the table should we get subsequent referrals for the same problem. These options can include detention of the children or non-detained family maintenance through court-ordered services.

### **What do you think are the greatest struggles facing parents in Santa Barbara County today?**

Poverty, untreated mental illness, substance abuse and a fear of reaching out for help. A lot of parents have lost hope. There are also language and cultural barriers families are facing. Cultural differences can be an impediment to the way people in communities view some families. We try to blast through any potential barriers to get services for families.

Poverty itself is not a crime and can present as general neglect of children. For example, sometimes we receive referrals for children with symptoms like ill-fitting clothes, poor hygiene and academic issues. That kind of referral may be considered for Voluntary Family Maintenance. Our voluntary cases do not have to be substantiated (that is, the referral alleging abuse or neglect does not have to meet the legal definition of child abuse). We do a needs analysis before we create a case plan with a family, and are able to consider services for cases with a risk level of moderate or above.

### **What advice do you have for mandated reporters who fear that reporting may greatly disrupt a child's life, or result in removing a child from his or her home?**

As mandated reporters, if you have a reasonable suspicion, make a referral. Let go of the fear that recording your concerns in the form of a referral is going to tear a family apart. We absolutely

recommend reporting. There will not be just one person making decisions for a family. Referrals are staffed with colleagues and supervisors, and a research-based Structured Decision Making tool (SDM) is used to assess safety and risk factors. Thus, decisions made as to whether to detain a child, offer a VFM, or recommend court-ordered family maintenance are not made in a vacuum. Focus on your mandate, and trust that there is a system that prevents kids from being removed if at all possible. Know that there is a program that can help prevent court intervention and removal of the child, and that can help parents work on developing protective factors. Family preservation is at the core of our work. When we remove a child from a home, it's because it is the only way to protect that child and keep them safe.

*"We help parents become the parents they want to be."*

### **With respect to privacy, can you tell us about a family who has benefited from a report being made and the services your unit or others were then able to provide?**

We received a referral for general neglect in the case of a child living with a single father. The father was depressed, and there was enough concern to remove the child that night. A TDM meeting was held the next day, where we offered to return the child home if the house was clean enough, the electricity turned back on and if the father agreed to a VFM plan. The father took part in SafeCare, a home-visiting parent training program, and the family received frequent visits from a worker to check on progress. The case was closed after the father graduated from SafeCare. Seeing

the father with his child at home, it was clear that an extended separation would have been devastating to them both. He's since obtained a job, has excellent child care, has received help with pain management and is caring for his family.

### **What are the outcomes of participation for most families?**

Like this family, most of our clients meet their case plan goals and very seldom come back through the system. They learn that they have protective capacities they didn't think they had before. Some parents initially feel coerced, and start out going through the motions reluctantly. When we sit through a TDM and come up with a family's strengths, parents begin to feel hope. Once they start engaging, they realize that we are there as a team to work with them to get the services they need, not just to keep an eye on them or pass judgment. They learn what skills they already have and how to build on them; they learn to access community resources. A lot of them learn that asking for help is okay. Each family engages in creating a case plan that's specific to their family's needs and concerns. We help parents become the parents they want to be. We work with families to help prevent them from resorting to old behaviors if they run into a bump in the road once a case is closed. We try to hook them up with free aftercare if they need or want it.

I'm so excited about the Voluntary Family Maintenance program, because we are CWS in a different light. Maybe once people build trust with us, they will see that social workers in general are there to empower parents to be the best parents they can be, so they can keep their children at home or have them returned by working on the issues that have put their children at risk.

## SPOTLIGHT ON THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS: CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

In order for families to thrive, it is essential that they can meet their basic economic needs for food, shelter, clothing and transportation, and that they are able to access services such as health care, childcare and mental health services as needed. In times of crisis, such as situations of domestic violence, substance abuse or mental illness, having services and supports in place can provide the stability, treatment and help a family may need to navigate the crisis and ensure the safety and well-being of their children.

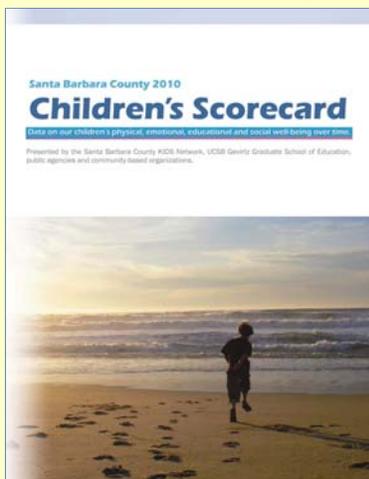
To help reinforce this protective factor in your environment, familiarize yourself with the resources in your community. Learning about local family resource centers, food banks, health clinics, resources for children with special needs, and other supports that can benefit families will enable you to provide information or referrals to families in times of need. Connections to concrete supports can make the difference between safety and stability versus escalating stress and unmet needs.

For more information on the protective factors, visit [www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/promoting/protectfactors](http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/promoting/protectfactors).

## Children's Scorecard Provides Data and Insights

The KIDS Network, a division of the Department of Social Services, has recently released the Santa Barbara County 2010 Children's Scorecard, a comprehensive summary of data related to children's well-being. Knowledge of emerging trends can help steer the community toward programming and services that enhance the lives of youth and their families.

To check out this objective, fact-based summary of how children are faring in the areas of safety, health and education, visit [www.countyofsb.org/kidsnet](http://www.countyofsb.org/kidsnet).



## Parents and Prevention



Barbara Finch (center), Child Abuse Prevention Council Chair, with two of the honored parent leaders (Yoly Monzon, left and Brenda Lopez, right).

This July, the Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council honored a special group of parents who have stepped up to do their part to prevent child abuse and neglect. Three parent leaders received certificates of commendation signed by their district's County Supervisor for spending many volunteer hours creatively developing strategies for how best to teach other parents some simple ways to strengthen a family and prevent child abuse and neglect.

The parent leadership group, Parents Forever (Padres Para Siempre), is using the Protective Factors approach to promote their message of prevention. With printing costs funded by a grant, the parents created a booklet they plan to use as a basis to teach this information to their peers. To get involved, call 805.346.8222 or email [k.zulliger@sbcsocialserv.org](mailto:k.zulliger@sbcsocialserv.org).

# RESOURCES AND LINKS

Understanding the Child Welfare System in California: A Primer for Service Providers and Policymakers

[www.ccrwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/final\\_web\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.ccrwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/final_web_pdf.pdf)

Santa Barbara County Community and Parenting Resources

[www.preventchildabusesb.org/communityresources.html](http://www.preventchildabusesb.org/communityresources.html), [www.preventchildabusesb.org/parentingresources.html](http://www.preventchildabusesb.org/parentingresources.html)

Postpartum Support International

[www.postpartum.net](http://www.postpartum.net)

## Members Corner



As a CAPC we are busy in our communities working with parents and children. CAPC members and supporters contribute stories related to what their organizations are doing and how you can utilize them as a resource. The following features information on the collaborative efforts of several governmental, non-profit and grassroots leaders and organizations.

### *Partnering for Prevention: The Perinatal Mood Disorder and Infant/Toddler Attachment Task Force*

“We know that untreated maternal depression can have negative consequences not just for the mother but for her young children and other family members. The effects on young children may include: attachments difficulties, social emotional challenges, cognitive and developmental delays. Maternal depression has been called the ‘number one obstacle to school readiness’.

Perinatal mood disorders are treatable and we want every woman in our county affected by this disorder to be screened, identified and able to access support, education and affordable mental health services as needed.”

The above excerpt is from a proclamation to the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors by a dynamic partnership called the Perinatal Mood Disorders and Infant/Toddler Attachment Taskforce. The Taskforce is made up of governmental, non-profit and grassroots organizations. The collaborative efforts have been led by Director of Maternal Child and Adolescent Health Sandra Copley, Alcohol Drug and Mental Health Services Clinical Supervisor Sandy Fahey, Associate Director of CALM (Child Abuse Listening and Mediation) Deborah Holmes, and founder of Postpartum Support International Jane Honikman.

Together the team has been working to implement strategies including increasing awareness of maternal depression through countywide trainings, reaching out to new and expectant mothers to reduce barriers to treatment and support, assuring

early identification of mood disorders through screenings at clinics and home visits, network-building and investing in evidence-based interventions by providing therapeutic services and group support. For more information about



Deborah Holmes, Associate Director of CALM, with the proclamation to the Board of Supervisors, May 2011.

the Perinatal Mood Disorder and Infant/Toddler Attachment Task Force or the services and supports that can help increase awareness and provide hope for the women in our community suffering from perinatal mood disorders, please contact one of the Taskforce leaders listed below.

Sandra Copley, [Sandra.Copley@sbcphd.org](mailto:Sandra.Copley@sbcphd.org)

Sandy Fahey, [sfahey@co.santa-barbara.ca.us](mailto:sfahey@co.santa-barbara.ca.us)

Deborah Holmes, [dholmes@calm4kids.org](mailto:dholmes@calm4kids.org)

Jane Honikman, [jane@janehonikman.com](mailto:jane@janehonikman.com)

For more on classes, new parent groups and Postpartum Distress support, visit [www.sbpep.org](http://www.sbpep.org). For free, 24-hour confidential one-on-one support, call the PEP (Postpartum Education for Parents) Warmline at **805.564.3888**.

### *Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect*

If you are a Santa Barbara County mandated reporter and you suspect child abuse or neglect, YOU MUST ADHERE TO THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURES:

1. Immediately call Child Welfare Services at:

**800.367.0166** Santa Barbara County Hotline  
**805.683.2724** After Hours

In the case of an emergency, please call 911.

2. Complete and file a Suspected Child Abuse Report, Form #SS8572 ([www.CTC-CAPC.org/SCAR](http://www.CTC-CAPC.org/SCAR))

3. Retain a legible copy of the SCAR Report.

4. YOU are responsible for making this report. DO NOT ALLOW your supervisor/principal to make the report for you or assume because another co-worker has some of the same information that they will make the report.

5. Do not attempt to investigate, conduct interviews or interfere with the information you hold.

6. Remember that you are to report SUSPECTED abuse—you are not required to have witnessed or have complete proof of the incident. You are obligated by law to report what you observe or what you are told that caused suspicion the child is being physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected. When in doubt, call CWS or law enforcement and get their input about the scope of your report.

This info is also available at  
[www.PreventChildAbuseSB.org!](http://www.PreventChildAbuseSB.org!)

The Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council welcomes your feedback, ideas and requests for training and resources.

Email us at:

[capc.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:capc.newsletter@gmail.com)

The CAPC meets the third Thursday of every month (except August and December) from 10am-12pm at the Santa Ines Mission. All meetings are open to the public. To receive agendas or more information, call the KIDS Network at 346.8222, or email [j.thomas@sbcsocialserv.org](mailto:j.thomas@sbcsocialserv.org).

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