

Press-Telegram

Response to child abuse is immediate

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By Trish Ploehn

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There were several erroneous claims in "The child-abuse scandal" (Editorial, July 2) that must be corrected. There appears to be a misunderstanding on your part of the time frame under which suspected child abuse and neglect allegations are investigated in Los Angeles County.

Our Child Protection Hotline receives more than 160,000 reports each year, which result in more than 70,000 face-to-face child abuse and neglect investigations annually. The fact that state regulations allow social workers up to 30 days — and now 60 days in Los Angeles County — to investigate reports of child abuse or neglect does not mean that no action is taken on an allegation for 30 days, as your editorial implied.

Department of Children and Family Services policy is to respond immediately to allegations of urgent danger to a child, without exception. In fact, our social workers are required to respond to the most urgent cases before they are permitted to leave work for the day, around the clock, 365 days a year. Our department's record when it comes to making an immediate home visit on an urgent referral consistently exceeds the state guideline. We also far exceed the state guideline for responding to referrals that are deemed non-emergency. Most importantly, any child whose immediate safety cannot be ensured is removed from the home.

In recognition of the quality of our work and the extensive child safety and quality enhancements we have implemented over

the past year to our emergency response system — enhancements that increase the amount of time it takes to close an investigation — the California Department of Social Services recently extended from 30 to 60 days the guideline for closure of an investigation in Los Angeles County.

The higher number of ongoing investigations in L.A. County referred to in recent media accounts is a result of several factors, but most directly stems from a commitment to quality and thoroughness in our investigations. We have implemented improved measures that enhance the present safety of children, as well as an increased emphasis on assessing the potential for future risk to a child. Additionally, we have experienced a nearly 10 percent increase in Child Protection Hotline calls and resulting referrals this year as compared to last year. Most of all, quality takes time and our children deserve nothing less.

Our department improves the lives of thousands of children and their families each year. Unfortunately, our most highly visible cases involve children whose lives end in tragedy. When this happens, grief tears through our communities and our

department. With every emergency response interaction, we strive to ensure child safety and strengthen families so that they can safely care for their children.

I have the honor and responsibility of overseeing a department that has more than 7,300 caring, committed employees who are dedicated to the more than 32,000 children we serve on a given day. If an employee in my department is not on the front lines investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect, then they are actively working in a multitude of other ways to ensure the safety and well-being of our young people and families.

Los Angeles County, through DCFS, is responsible for preventing child abuse, promoting well-being, and working with other agencies to help care for children. The challenges of child welfare agencies are many and complex and the fiscal impacts of budget cuts require us to do more with less. Even with these challenges, Los Angeles County is nationally recognized for its leadership in creatively and innovatively serving the children and families we help each and every day.

Trish Ploehn is director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.