

New child welfare group aims to catch problems early on

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A new program starts up today that will attempt to tackle one of the county's biggest problems: Too many children in foster care.

Child Abuse Listening & Meditation, more commonly known as CALM, is starting a program called "Front Porch" that will enable social workers and others to reach out to parents when they are first reported to Santa Barbara County's Child Welfare Services.

Typically it takes six or seven calls to the county's hot line (800-367-0166) for professionals to intervene, "when by that time, the child is usually being removed from the home," said Anna Kokotovic, executive director of CALM. "By then it's too late."

There are roughly 600 children living with foster parents in

First call to hot line could result in visit

■ CHILDREN

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Santa Barbara County. The number has increased by one-third in the last two years.

The rate of children referred to Child Welfare Services is up by 23 percent (1,480 more kids in 2005 than 2004), radically reversing a downward trend from 1999 to 2003. The most common reason is "general neglect," according to Kids Network, a group of social services agencies that annually compiles a scorecard on how Santa Barbara County is treating its children.

Under the Front Porch program, a CALM worker will now visit the parents, with their permission, the first time a neighbor, friend, relative or child calls the county hot line for help.

It could just be that a mother or father has had a bad day. Or it could be something more serious, like a child is covered in bruises and there are methamphetamine pipes scattered about.

Social workers say it's difficult to judge the seriousness of a situation over the telephone.

"Seeing the home is very important," said Elizabeth Rumelt, a social worker and clinical director for CALM.

The nonprofit organization has been in Santa Barbara since 1970. After a stressed father killed his 8-week-old son, a nurse named Claire Miles started the organization that offers parents group classes and professionals with whom they can talk.

CALM professionals and volunteers provide support for foster children, foster parents, parents in distress, and a host of other services, but their focus over the years has slowly shifted to prevention — stopping the problems before they start.

County workers say early intervention is crucial.

"We have found that programs like Front Porch are extremely successful in stemming the tide (of kids in foster care)," said Bill LaRocco, division chief of Santa Barbara County's Child Welfare Services. "Most families realize they're at risk, and will make contact with (a social worker or other professional)."

HOT LINE

To report a problem involving the welfare of children, call 1-800-367-0166.

There's a lot of shame and guilt involved when parents are accused of being bad parents. What's worse, children often feel like the perpetrators and not the victims when abuse occurs, social workers say. Often they are shut out by extended family members, particularly if the parent is sent to jail, Ms. Rumelt said.

The goal of Child Welfare Services, however, has always been to keep kids with their parents whenever possible. The new Front Porch program aims to make that happen, particularly because figures show that the first hot line call usually involves a minor incident.

According to the county "scorecard," about 4,000 calls were made to the hot line last year. Of that number, 1,628 involved unfounded claims, 796 claims were inconclusive, 1,036 were assessed on the phone only, and 879 complaints were substantiated (which means action was taken by a county social worker).

If someone calls the hot line, there's probably something wrong, CALM workers say. Even if it's a minor problem, the organization hopes to help.

Through a grant from the county, two workers will now devote 10 hours a week to the Front Porch program. "We can do a lot more at the front end to prevent abuse," said Cecilia Rodriguez, associate director of CALM.

The Front Porch program was implemented in Santa Maria and Lompoc about a year ago and has proved successful, Mr. LaRocco said. Most of the county's abuse calls — minor and serious — derive from the North County, according to the "scorecard."

Still, in the city of Santa Barbara, county workers investigated 909 cases of abuse in 2004.

"We can do a lot more with education," Ms. Rodriguez said. "It's tough being a parent. We know that. Everyone needs support."

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