

Child abuse on the rise

By John McReynolds Contributing Writer Santa Maria Times | Posted: Saturday, January 8, 2011 10:32 pm | (0) Comments



[Buy this photo](#) Capt. Larry Ralston of the Lompoc Police Department takes a call in his office at the police station. He and the department hope to help stop the rise in child abuse in northern Santa Barbara County as funding and volunteer corps shrink. //Leah Thompson/Staff

James Lujan has disappeared from the front page, at least until Feb. 17 when he will be sentenced for second-degree murder in the death of 4-year-old Diego Calles. Before Lujan, readers were told about Robert Anthony Garcia, and before him, Jason Gomez.

In June 2009, only two months before Diego Calles perished, Garcia was sentenced to 71 years to life for second-degree murder in the death of 2-year-old Isabella Cortes, who was slammed against a wall in February 2008.

In January 2006, Gomez was charged with manslaughter for rolling over on infant twin girls in his bed and smothering them. Lompoc police said at the time that they suspected five other infants had died over the previous three years at the hands of their parents.

Child abuse is on the rise, and for every case that makes headlines, there are many others that the public never hears about, said Ann McCarty of the North County Rape Crisis Center.

"Everybody knows that child abuse is out of control," said McCarty. "Child abuse occurs at an alarming rate. You only hear about it when there's a severe beating or a death or a child is locked up in a closet. For those of us entrenched in the work, we know it's happening every single day."

McCarty estimated that she receives five calls a week inquiring about or reporting child abuse. Statistics support her observations.

According to police, since 2008 child abuse cases in Lompoc have risen 25 percent.

At the end of 2009 the Center for Social Services Research in Berkeley ranked 86 census tracts in Santa Barbara County for child abuse allegations per 1,000 children. Of the 10 worst tracts, five are in Lompoc.

Santa Barbara County's Child Welfare Service reported in 2009 that a whopping 80 percent of its open child abuse cases were located in North County. They didn't tabulate separate totals for Lompoc, Santa Maria and Guadalupe.

Familiar causes

The causes of child abuse are well documented — the forces that put tremendous pressure on parents.

"The more stress, the harder it is to stay on a steady path," said Katharina Zulliger of Santa Barbara County Kids Network. The group was chartered by the Board of Supervisors 20 years ago to coordinate services for children.

Delfino Neira, of the county Department of Social Services (DSS), also cites family stress: "No extended family networks, high unemployment and poverty. That's what tells the tale."

There is nothing like a stack of bills to tighten family tension. The same day that James Lujan's jury returned its verdict, it was announced that Lompoc's highest-in-the-county unemployment rate had clicked up to 16 percent.

Drugs also contribute to child abuse in Lompoc, but methamphetamine is no longer the epidemic it was just two years ago, according to Police Chief Tim Dabney. "Meth on the street is much more expensive," he said, with a hint of a cautious smile. "A tighter border and law enforcement have done a good job of reducing it."

Preventative effort lacking

Compounding the pressure-packed abuse problem in Lompoc and Santa Maria is a preventative defense that is weaker than elsewhere.

"There are less services for families in the North County and greater stresses," said Zulliger, pointing to dozens of nonprofit groups in Santa Barbara which provide human services of all description in the southern portion of the county, often to a population which is aging.

"There are more services per capita, more nonprofits and more funding. Many South County foundations serve only the South County."

Neira of DSS, who moved from Kern County only a year ago, said he soon noted another tendency of Santa Barbara-based foundations, a certain aversion to family support.

"For the amount of foundations we have, the support for those who work with stressed families is low," he said.

Further, the defense against child abuse in the North County is not only limited in resources but is poorly coordinated.

"There's not a whole lot of communication between legal, family service, and health agencies," said Barb Finch, chairperson of the Santa Barbara County Child Abuse Prevention Council. "The systems are not talking to one another."

Children at risk

Another widely-felt concern is that the last line of defense, the county DSS' Child Welfare Service, once known as Child Protective Services, is not always effective at stepping in to protect endangered children like Diego.

The Grand Jury roundly criticized DSS in a nine-page report in 2008, charging that understaffing and massive personnel turnover undermined its work. Today, some social service professionals privately label the department "under-qualified," and say it practices only "drive-by social work."

One observer alleged that "Diego's father reported (abuse), Head Start reported, Diego's mother's family reported, and still they said it was unsubstantiated. Digging deep just doesn't happen any more. They run from crisis to court to crisis."

Neira acknowledges that his new, younger staff has less experience, but he notes that revolving door turnover has been slowed and he denies that cuts have taken place within reach of at-risk children.

Even the brutal 39.7-percent increase in caseload the department has faced, with the 12-percent decrease in staff, has been handled without Child Welfare cuts. "We've allowed caseloads in other areas to rise to keep investigative services constant," he said. "We have not eliminated investigation positions."

Budget cuts

Whether those front-line workers will have to run even faster in the future, with an almost-certainly reduced county budget for 2011-12, remains to be seen. The lion's share of DSS funding comes from state and federal sources which are under enormous pressure to chop their budgets.

Budget slashes could also shrink new preventative services that have taken place in Lompoc during recent months, services which in a more favorable climate would give rise to hope for the future.

The Child Abuse Prevention Council drafted in 2009 a three-year plan which encouraged more county funding in the North County. As a result, CALM (Child Abuse Listening and Mediation), the widely respected thousand-pound gorilla of the child abuse prevention field, whose base is in Santa Barbara and whose services in Lompoc were limited to quiet work with the police department, expanded its footprint in the North County.

In the last few months the \$3-million agency opened its first office in Santa Maria and initiated a working relationship with Lompoc agencies. It now offers counseling with the Community Action Commission, the Dorothy Jackson Center and others.

"We are certainly trying to provide the needed services," said Zulliger, one of the prime movers behind the shift. "There is just not enough funding to meet all the need."

In coming months the impact of even less funding is likely to stagger the smaller agencies which conduct the bulk of preventative work in Lompoc: presentations at schools, staffing hot lines, etc. They face devastating financial hits as recession-shrunken state and county budgets for 2011-12 are adopted in the spring, this on top of cuts they have already suffered.

Ann McCarty's North County Rape Crisis Center, formerly Lompoc Rape Crisis, is one of them. The agency talks with 12,000 children a year in Lompoc and Santa Maria schools.

With the little ones they use puppets. McCarty's favorite story features a 5-year-old who told her teacher about abuse at home. "The puppets said I should say 'no,' get away and tell someone," the little girl said. So she did.

"We used to have a training budget," said McCarty. "And travel and office supplies." Now the staff and volunteers pay for those themselves.

Besides money, minutes are reduced. Lompoc schools have begun to cut back time available for Rape Crisis programs, from three days to two, or even one. Or they have merged classes into unruly audiences of 90.

Volunteer corps shrinks

At the same time, Rape Crisis' volunteer pool is drying up.

While McCarty can remember marshaling 40 volunteers, she now commands only a remnant of 10. Stay-at-home moms and Vandenberg airmen were once frequent volunteers. No more. The moms are at work and the airmen are gone. "For us the 2011-12 grant year is looking the bleakest," McCarty wrote in a follow-up e-mail. "I don't want another Diego or Isabella."

She said she hopes the public will remember Diego, and Isabella, and the twins, and take action. They could dig deeper and give money to her agency or find time to volunteer. Maybe they could call county supervisors and say, "Child Welfare Services needs help, not more cuts."

Maybe they could grab their cell phones when they see adults abusing children. "People need to not be afraid," said Lompoc police Capt. Larry Ralston.

"When Diego's mother and Lujan were walking through the park and Lujan pushed Diego down the hill, why didn't somebody call the police?"