

Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission
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ICAN has focused on system wide responses to child abuse and neglect including:

- ❑ Review of child deaths from preventable causes. This review has included families both known and unknown to DCFS. Cases include child abuse fatalities, preventable accidents and child suicides.
- ❑ Collection and analysis of data and information on child abuse and neglect from 15 agencies and from special programs and projects.
- ❑ Systemic issues related to pregnant and parenting teenagers.
- ❑ Substance abuse affected families.
- ❑ Children in homes with domestic violence.
- ❑ Grief and mourning of children suffering loss of a family member.
- ❑ Prevention.

There have been some tangible improvements since the last Little Hoover Commission Hearings. These include improved adoptions, emancipation and inter-agency collaboration. Examples of this collaboration include:

FCI: The ICAN Family and Children's Index required legislation to implement, and provides a unique and effective means by which to identify and serve children at risk before they are seriously or fatally hurt. The index was inspired by our "52 contact" child death case. It is a computer-based system that allows professionals in the child protection system to determine whether or not a child they are responding to has previous relevant contacts. Based on index information, a multi-disciplinary team is formed to consider how best to protect and serve the family. The index is now being implemented in the Department of Children and Family Services, Sheriff, LAPD, Mental Health, Office of Education and Probation.

File photos of children: Each DCFS case file includes a photo of the child. This seemingly minor, but critically important step was taken with the support of the Dependency Court and the ICAN Child Abduction Task Force. There are hundreds of children missing from foster care, and until this year, most case files did not include a photo of the child to assist law enforcement and others find and recover them.

Prevention: Clearly, prevention and early intervention represent the greatest hope for children and families at risk. We are working with the First 5 LA Commission which is now developing a major \$50 million systemwide child abuse prevention initiative which I will be pleased to discuss at the Hearing.

Children in Homes with Domestic Violence: Traditionally, child abuse and domestic violence have been handled on separate tracks. Seven years ago, ICAN and the Domestic Violence Council formed a task force to address the effects of violence in the home on children. Since then, a great deal of research has confirmed that the effects of witnessing any form of violence in the home can leave lasting scars, often affecting the long range mental and physical health of the child. ICAN advocated for passage of SB 1745, effective 1-1-03, requiring counties to develop protocols for the response to children in homes with domestic violence. This protocol will be critical to our ability to protect children from within the foster care system and in the community. DCFS, law enforcement, domestic violence advocates and community programs should actively participate in this process.

Substance Abuse: Pre-natal substance abuse continues to represent a major issue, for which we have little data. Although a state mandated risk assessment form for identifying newborns at risk from pre-natal substance abuse has existed for years, compliance by Health, CPS and Court systems is arbitrary and often inaccurate. The Health Department and DCFS should combine efforts to create a joint system for detecting, evaluating, tracking and serving these newborns, who often end up in the foster care system as infants or later as medically challenged children.

Grief and Mourning: The need to address the grief and mourning of children suffering the loss of a sibling to death is critical. When a child is placed in foster care because a parent or sibling has died or been killed, there must be assurances that the surviving children receive grief counseling and are allowed to attend the funeral or participate in whatever ceremonies or services are meaningful to the child or family. The need to address grief and depression in foster children extends to addressing the losses they feel when uprooted from their families, school, neighborhood and friends.

Social Workers with grief and mourning: In addition, cumulative grief and depression suffered by those who work with violent families must be addressed. The burnout of staff could be greatly diminished by assuring an effective system to provide "critical incident debriefing" and grief counseling to workers.

Social Worker status: The effectiveness of our response to abused and neglected children is profoundly affected by how the professionals are regarded and what importance is placed upon their work. The status and self-esteem of Children's Social Workers must be raised. This will be greatly aided by a better public understanding of what they are expected to do, maintenance of high standards, and recognition of their accomplishments.

Foster child status: Foster children deserve status in our communities and schools and heroes in the media. Group homes and institutions remain unwelcome in many neighborhoods, and children with multiple placements often do not have friends. If they do, they may not bring them home because they feel they don't have a "real" home. Schools and DCFS should focus on helping foster children meet other foster children, and to integrate into the social and extracurricular aspects of their school experience.

We have learned how to do better work, generally working with multiple agencies on a single team.

Multi-agency teams similar to child death review can provide energy resources and accountability to address many of these problems. The model of child death review can be extended to multi-agency placement failures, pregnant foster children, and children hospitalized for non-fatal injuries. The multiple agencies working together can add case information, new prospective and new resources to carry out action items.

ICAN's years of case review have resulted in multiple insights and actions for prevention and daily intervention based upon the team's findings: Team members learn more accurately how to work with the other and when and where to ask for help. Agencies learning to address the deaths of infants also learn to work with live infants. Case information from one agency is more understandable to another. The quality and continuity of work improves. Children benefit.