

Itemizer-Observer
Dallas, OR, January 8, 2003

Abuse study: More questions than answers

BY JUSTIN CARINCI

scarinci@eaglenewspapers.com

POLK COUNTY — Across the state, most reports of child abuse aren't looked into. But in Polk County 97 percent of reports are assessed, according to a Children First for Oregon study.

That should be good news, right? Not necessarily.

While Polk County looks into reports at one of the highest rates in the state, it receives reports at the lowest rate in the state.

In the end, Polk County has a very low rate of confirmed child abuse victims. But that doesn't mean child abuse is less of a problem than in neighboring counties, said Liz Smith, Children First for Oregon's policy director.

In fact, a high rate may indicate a job well done. "Counties like Lane have a higher victim rate, but they're supposed to.

"It means they're doing a good job."

That's because where there's abuse going on, officials should be finding victims. Otherwise, it means children are going without help.

It all gets down to who's handling the reports. And that's the state Human Services child-welfare offices.

Each office might consider a report to

be something different. And abuse to one might not be abuse to another.

"There is a state standard," Smith said, "but there's variation between counties on how to interpret that standard."

Polk County, for instance might be more likely to report abuse than Multnomah County, said Sue Ball, a resource developer for the Polk County child welfare branch. "Different counties determine the seriousness of a report based on the tolerance of the community.

"A very small community where everyone knows everybody can be less tolerant of some things than in Portland where people are more or less invisible." Smith also pointed to a possible different "cultural standard" on what needs to be reported. But she suggested the opposite meaning — that people in Polk County think fewer instances of possible abuse are worth reporting.

The various ways of recording and interpreting data makes for some confusion, said Candy Solovyov, executive director of the Liberty House evaluation center. But the Children First study is still helpful. "It's one of the few sources we have about child abuse."

Liberty House is one of two centers that interviews and examines Polk County children who have been sexually

abused.

"You have to always be cautious that different branches or counties track things a little differently," Solovyov said. "Multnomah and Polk might not be apples to apples."

While Polk and Marion counties had widely different scores in the study — only 41 percent of Marion County reports were assessed — that gap could close soon, said John Meade. Meade is the child welfare program's protective services supervisor for Polk County.

Since last September, both counties' calls have gone through the same screeners. "There was some matter of discrepancy of whether it constitutes a report of abuse," Meade said. "We've got it addressed now."

Meade said he pays attention to studies like Children First's. But he considers other statistics — most notably child deaths and serious injuries — more important.

"We're paying attention to this and all the internal processes on how we can do this work better. But the day to day feedback from the community, school professionals, mental health professionals and families is the most critical to me."

As chair of Polk County's Multi-Disciplinary Child Abuse Team (MDT), District Attorney John Fisher said he ex-

pects "many prolonged and fruitful discussions" to come out of the study.

One of the MDT's roles is to train mandatory reporters — officials such as physicians or peace officers — who must report child abuse by law. A county with few abuse reports might have poorly-trained mandatory reporters, Fisher said.

But getting reporters better trained could show little benefit if no one can handle the new reports.

"In general, child welfare is underfunded and they can't handle as many cases as they'd like and they maybe can't do as good a job as they'd like to on cases they have.

"If my child welfare office is working as hard as they can to handle the cases they have, how much sense would it be to get more training to bring them in more cases if they're not going to be able to get to them anyway?"

On the other hand, he said, maybe some cases that really should be reported are not. But the numbers don't tell you that.

"Interpreting the data is more complex than it might seem on the surface," Fisher said. "If you're going to do an analysis of the data, you have to be careful with all the kinds of conclusions you can reach."