

**FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES—  
A STRESSFUL WORK ENVIRONMENT**



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## **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES— A STRESSFUL WORK ENVIRONMENT**

### **SUMMARY**

The Family and Children's Services (FCS) Branch of the Monterey County Department of Social Services (DSS) provides Child Protective Services (CPS) within Monterey County. The Monterey County Civil Grand Jury (MCCGJ) received a complaint about this FCS Branch claiming that the work environment was overly stressful. The complainant also stated that morale was very poor, there was a lack of employee training prior to assignment to new positions, and there was insufficient staffing especially in certain units. Therefore the MCCGJ decided to investigate.

Based on this investigation, the MCCGJ determined that FCS *does* have a stressful work environment. Factors contributing to this environment include insufficient orientation and training prior to new assignments, low office morale, poor communication between supervisors and staff, lack of transparency, and shortage of staff.

### **BACKGROUND**

The mission of FCS is to prevent the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. Service goals are to keep children and youth safe and within the protection of a permanent family.

FCS has several units, which cover many different facets needed to provide all components of child protective services. The agency staffs a training division that supports all of the units.

The CPS function starts at the Intake unit, where a staff social worker receives calls on an emergency hotline. The social worker determines whether the call is appropriate for FCS response. If it is not, the caller is referred to the appropriate community-based agency. If the social worker determines that FCS should handle the call, the call is referred to one of two Emergency Response (ER) units. Once a social worker in the ER unit receives the referral, he or she must determine the urgency of the response needed; that is, whether a social worker needs to go to the site immediately or if the situation can wait, in which case the social worker must respond in ten days. As part of this emergency response, there may be also be cross-notification with law enforcement.

The FCS offices are located in Salinas. Before September 2014, the Department had three offices: Salinas, Seaside and King City. The Department is now centralized and operates solely out of the Salinas office. This change of office locations in and of itself produces stress, but this type of stress should be time-limited. This reorganization was the result of an administrative decision to improve efficiency in the services provided.

## METHODOLOGY

To determine the validity of the complaint, the MCCGJ conducted an investigation that included the following:

- Evaluation of procedures and protocols of FCS
- Interview of complainant
- Interviews of supervisors
- Interviews of line staff
- Review of personnel files
- Review of training records and tabulation of actual hours spent in training.

## DISCUSSION

As the MCCGJ looked into the complaint received, some questions were postulated as a guide for research:

- Does the Monterey County FCS Branch provide sufficient training and appropriate staff assignments that create a work environment that effectively supports the function of the Department and the services it provides?
- Do all supervisors know how to work with staff, bringing out each one's talents and abilities, especially with new and inexperienced workers?
- Do new supervisors receive similar support and assistance from their program managers?
- Are the program managers receiving adequate and timely reviews by their own supervisor, the branch director?

In order to answer these questions, the MCCGJ reviewed the training requirements and opportunities available to the employees and evaluated how well FCS communicates information about these requirements and opportunities. The MCCGJ looked at what methods of supervision were employed by the FCS Branch; what they were doing to promote a good sense of team, and how they were working with employees whom they felt needed extra help.

## GLOSSARY

**Child Protective Services (CPS):** The governmental function that responds to reports of child abuse or neglect. Child Protective Services are mandated by Federal and State law to investigate and respond to all allegations of suspected child abuse and neglect.

**Core Training:** Standardized curricula in the Core Training Program ("Core") to be used statewide for the mandatory training of child welfare social workers and supervisors.

**Emergency Response (ER):** Section where reports of possible child abuse are received from Intake and responded to within 10 days.

**Emotional Intelligence (EI):** The ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, label them appropriately, and use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.

**Family and Children Services (FCS):** The branch of the Monterey County Department of Social Services which offers child protective services, foster care services, and adoption services to children and youth in Monterey County. The mission of FCS is to prevent the occurrence of child abuse and neglect.

**Intake:** Hotline where calls reporting possible child abuse or neglect are taken and evaluated against CPS standards.

**Team Decision Making (TDM):** Family and Staff meet to determine the appropriate means to keep the child safe and to begin the appropriate treatment program.

**9-80 Work Schedule:** When an employee works 80 hours over nine, rather than ten, days in a two-week period.

All line staff and supervisors that were interviewed appear to be dedicated social workers who are passionate about the work they do. They care deeply for the welfare of the children of the county.

## **TRAINING**

When the FCS Branch hires a social worker who is new to the field, that individual must attend standardized training, known as Core Training, which is given by the Bay Area Academy in Oakland. The Bay Area Academy is a Federal Title IV-E funded agency whose primary clients are agencies, such as FCS, that serve children in or out of the home. A six session training program is required for all social workers on a one time basis. This training is supplementary to the basic requirement for individuals to be hired into a Social Work classification which is a Bachelor's Degree, as well as a Master's in Social Work. Newly promoted supervisors go to an additional set of courses given by the Bay Area Academy.

State Law requires that every social worker receive an additional forty (40) hours of training every two years. This training can be accessed through a variety of sources including the aforementioned Bay Area Academy, the Kinship Center on River Road, UC Davis Extension, and Hartnell College. FCS employs a training supervisor who facilitates making this training available, either on-site or at one of these facilities. The training supervisor meets with other department supervisors to determine which subjects are needed in particular. That person communicates to all staff what courses are available. A list of these courses is also posted in a prominent place as a current reference point. This allows staff, including management staff, to be aware and to choose courses that are meaningful for the particular need at the time.

In the FCS Branch, training is important for both staff and supervisors as each of the diverse functions of the Branch requires specific skills and knowledge. For example, when a person is assigned to a specific unit, that person needs to know necessary protocol, tactics, and guidelines in order to manage potentially volatile crisis situations with families. FCS also has staff referred to as "floaters;" that is, personnel who go between units as needs and conditions dictate. It is even more crucial that these "floaters" have adequate training for the myriad of tasks that their jobs may involve.

In spite of this formal training, some line staff reported that they did not receive sufficient hands-on orientation when they were placed in a new position. They did not feel prepared or confident to make decisions required of them in new situations. Many felt this was a major issue in how their work proficiency was judged.

The need for adequate training applies to supervisors as well. The MCCGJ uncovered evidence that some new supervisors have inadequate experience and/or knowledge and abilities for their specific areas. Line staff stated that this added to a lack of consistency in some areas of agency performance.

## **WORK ENVIRONMENT**

Several factors contribute to the stressful work environment at FCS.

The Branch is short staffed. Some units have unfilled positions and/or employees out on extended leave. These leaves are due to a combination of issues. This situation can result in a very high workload for the remaining employees.

The crisis nature of the work can be stressful in and of itself. For example, if a training is scheduled in-house and a worker is needed to respond to an emergency, that emergency takes precedence over the training and the worker loses out on that particular course or team meeting. Emergency calls also interrupt lunch breaks. Employees state they frequently work through their breaks because of the nature of the work. It is incumbent on supervisors to observe whether or not their staff take their lunch breaks, and to get them the help they need so that they can get away for their half-hour respite.

In addition to the problems associated with short staffing and the nature of emergency response work, the scheduling of assignments lacks transparency. Employees in the ER units rarely know who is going to be called next to go out into the field. This makes personal client scheduling and organizing of work time very difficult for these employees. Also, the individual social workers state they are not informed as to what cases their co-workers are assigned, which leads to perceptions of unfairness and stifles open communication in a team unit that should otherwise foster camaraderie.

This transparency problem could be addressed in the team meeting that supervisors are supposed to hold monthly as a means of facilitating communication with employees. However, these meetings are not held regularly, and employees do not feel scheduling issues are adequately addressed in a way that encourages team building. Some report that they do not feel encouraged to express their opinions. They would like a give and take dialogue.

## **SUPERVISION**

Management and supervision issues can contribute to the stressful work environment in the FCS branch. Managers (this term is being used to include all levels of supervisors) need to train and support their staff to maintain a positive work environment. Good communication between supervisors and employees is paramount in establishing a good environment.

In the FCS Branch, there is a requirement that managers meet one-on-one on a monthly basis with those they supervise. In the course of the investigation, however, the MCCGJ discovered that these meetings often do not take place on a regular basis. Information obtained through interviews revealed that the lack of regular monthly meetings leads to communication problems. During these meetings, the supervisee should receive feedback about his/her general performance. Case reviews and strategies for the individual's assignments should be addressed. At these times, the individuals should discuss with their supervisors any leave time that they may need, for any personal reasons. The schedules can be worked out at those times, so that the affected staff do not feel later that there was insufficient communication about time off, which, without sufficient planning time, can cause an inconvenience for office responsibilities. These monthly meetings provide the backbone for yearly evaluations. They also provide documentation in case any corrective action is needed.

A performance review should contain no surprises and communication throughout the review period is critical. Monthly meetings provide a forum for the employee and supervisor to resolve

any problems or conflicts developing because of such issues as the scheduling of personal time, punctuality or teamwork issues, or any workload deficiencies. If there are any problems developing, the worker will be informed in a timely manner so that he/she may get sufficient help to address any of these issues promptly. In the course of this investigation, the MCCGJ found employees who contend that they were made aware of problems only during the annual performance review.

Effective employee scheduling is a mark of good management. Today's work environment has a wide diversity of workers, as well as office functions with differing needs. The FCS Branch gives employees the option of having a "9-80" work schedule; that is, the employee works nine nine-hour days for a total of 80 hours in a two week period, and has one extra day off during that period. In the FCS Branch, there have been situations where the manager had taken away an individual's "9-80" work schedule, citing tardiness and absenteeism. Managers have threatened employees, using this schedule as reward or punishment. Scheduling should not be used as a reward nor should it be used as punishment. Putting an employee back on a traditional eight hour day work week does not cure tardiness or absenteeism. Alternative work schedules, such as "9-80," are proven management tools. They are a means of providing a flexible work environment that benefits employees, and allows the FCS offices to be open later hours and be more accommodating for the public. Although this Branch policy provides the 9-80 work schedule as an incentive and retention tool, its use is beneficial to the entire Branch function, as well as a morale builder among the line staff.

The MCCGJ uncovered multiple examples of employees leaving one supervisor's office in tears. Employees stated they were talked down to, and treated harshly and abruptly. Another supervisor was reported to have yelled at subordinates in an unacceptable manner. There was no evidence found by the MCCGJ of written plans for improvement or documented progress reports in place to address these problems.

The supervisors and their staff need better communication skills to create a more respectful and positive work environment. They can receive training in order to improve their communication techniques.

Emotions appear to be complicating communication. There seems to be a lack of understanding and practice of emotional intelligence (EI). Originally coined in the 1980's, the term EI connotes the ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions and to adapt them to changing circumstances. In the twenty-first century, EI has rapidly become part of the mainstream, has been incorporated into numerous work environments and can be taught. It is a skill set whereby individuals who have developed it learn to keep their own emotional reactions under control, and are then able to interact with their co-workers with less conflict, more understanding, and mutual respect.

There are other specific courses and sessions that can be utilized to improve staff interactions with each other, both with co-workers and supervisors.

The more positive interactions there are among all staff in an agency, the more a coherent, efficient team is built.



## **ASSIGNMENTS**

Appropriate assignment of personnel is important in any organization because it is paramount that the right person be assigned to the right job at the right place. This applies to supervisors as well. Some FCS staff expressed concern that supervisors don't have adequate experience or training to properly guide staff in casework. For example, some supervisors are assigned to assist staff although those supervisors appear to have neither the training nor the experience to be a leader in that area.

The appropriate assignment of duties can also affect workers trying to prioritize their workloads. Bi-lingual employees, for example, stated they find it difficult to schedule time to meet with clients because they are often pulled away from their assigned tasks to translate in the Intake and ER units. They then get behind in their regular work, and state they get bad evaluations from being "pushed and pulled" more than other staff.

## **LOCATION**

The office location, 1000 S. Main St., Salinas, is difficult to find as the building has a large sign for the entity that owns the building—"The Life Foundation"—and no signage indicating the FCS offices are housed there. This causes stress for the public. There is also very limited signage within the building, indicating the office that families may be looking for. Families then arrive to appointments set up to discuss their childrens' placement and welfare with increased anxiety in an already distressing situation for them.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1.** The FCS Branch may place staff social workers in new positions without sufficient and necessary orientation and training.
- F2.** The FCS Branch may place supervisors in assignments without sufficient orientation or training.
- F3.** Conditions and priorities in the work environment make it difficult for staff to attend training sessions if the training is on site.
- F4.** There are some supervisors who communicate to subordinates in an unacceptable, demeaning manner.
- F5.** Some supervisors use the removal of the 9-80 schedule as punishment for work issues that could be handled in a less threatening manner, and in a way that wouldn't compromise office function.
- F6.** FCS Branch talks about team building but does not uniformly implement it in a pragmatic manner.
- F7.** There appears to be a lack of knowledge and application of emotional intelligence in the FCS Branch.
- F8.** Social workers within FCS are passionate about their work but don't feel supported or appreciated by some supervisors and management.



- F9.** Emergency calls often interfere with lunch breaks; often these breaks are not taken because of the amount of work required of each employee.
- F10.** FCS Branch and the Monterey County DSS offices are difficult for the public to locate due to lack of both exterior and interior signage.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1.** The FCS Branch implement a “Zero Tolerance Policy” for anger in the interactions between all staff.
- R2.** The FCS Branch provide training for emotional intelligence, work stress, and communication skills for all staff.
- R3.** The FCS Branch enforce the policy of requiring supervisors to meet with employees one-on-one on a monthly basis.
- R4.** The FCS Branch provide time for employees to devote to training without interruption.
- R5.** The FCS Branch assign supervisors to units only after those supervisors have had experience and training in those units.
- R6.** The FCS Branch assign supervisors and staff to jobs that reflect individual abilities and provide training and sufficient orientation to develop and support those abilities.
- R7.** The monthly supervisory meetings be used, and documented, to resolve all individual matters such as personal leave, workload efficiency, and general progress. There should be no surprises at evaluation time.
- R8.** Staff meetings, both for individual units, programs, and all staff be held regularly. Program managers should attend these. The agency director should also attend “all staff” meetings, and solicit input from line staff so that they maintain an awareness of the morale of the office.
- R9.** FCS Branch require transparency in procedures and case assignments.
- R10.** The FCS Branch management be observant regarding whether employees have had a half-hour respite at appropriate times.
- R11.** The building at 1000 South Main Street in Salinas be provided with signage to clearly inform the public that it is the location of the Monterey County Department of Social Services and the FCS Branch.
- R12.** The building be provided with interior signage to help guide the public to the appropriate offices.

## **RESPONSES REQUIRED**

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the MCCGJ requests responses to all Findings and Recommendations as follows:

- Monterey County Board of Supervisors