

Painting the Picture: Ohio's 2002 Aggregate Data Report on Worker Safety

The field of child welfare is often panned as being deficient and inadequate in its service to children, families and communities. While we take active steps to correct this faulty perspective by educating the general public, law makers, and the media on the difficulties of protecting our nations most vulnerable children and families with inadequate funding; under paid staff; overwhelming and complex caseloads; and a lack of sufficient services for our nation's most vulnerable -- this perspective persists.

However, Ohio now has an additional information to assist our child welfare system in painting a clearer picture of what the needs of the system are and the dangers inherent in the work we do. Ohio might just be the ONLY state in the nation that is collecting and reporting data on Worker Safety Infractions. Another example of Ohio's Child Welfare Systems' pro-active quest for Systems Excellence! PCSAO recently released the 2002 Ohio Aggregate Data Report on Worker Safety Infractions.

The PCSAO Worker Safety Committee is comprised of executive directors from the following counties: Cuyahoga; Franklin; Greene; Lucas; Marion; Scioto; Summit; and Trumbull. As a result of this Committee, the Ohio Worker Safety Incident form and process were created and the PCSAO membership signed off on this approach at the December 2001 Exec's Only Meeting. In January 2002 Ohio, through PCSAO's leadership, began to collect and report on Worker Safety Infractions across the state. In 2002, 62 of Ohio's 88 local child welfare systems participated in reporting on Worker Safety. From this data gathering process, we have learned the following.

Worker Safety Incidents occurred in all CPOE county cohort groups. The data indicates that verbal and written threats were the preferred mode of striking out (309 reports); clients were predominantly the aggressors (288 reports); and the top three locations where infractions occurred were agency grounds (165 reports); the homes of our clients (65 reports); and though phone/email (50 reports). The predominant Worker Safety Infraction triggers were primary a result of removals (125 reports); custody discussions (60 reports); and as a result of C/AN investigations (42 reports).

In 2002, workers experienced dog bites; they endured being kicked, punched, and shoved by clients both at the agency and during home visits (32 reports). Workers were verbally attacked and threatened (309 instances reported) with death; poison; and bodily harm. They routinely were exposed to the use of vulgarity by their clients and had threats made to their home; car; and personal belongings. There were also several instances in which clients and client paramours threatened to blow up the agency and/or other public buildings (such as the court house). There were 15 reports by staff having had their car tires slashed, car windows broken and cars damaged. Out of 32 physical assaults to staff, staff sought medical attention in only 13 instances. Attention was sought through the ER room, the worker's doctor or an Emergency Ambulance. In these instances, staff were treated and released the same day.

There is no doubt that Ohio's children at-risk of abuse and neglect, and their families deserve excellence in service. But, let's be clear, for children at-risk and their families to receive the very best services we have to offer, our nation's child welfare professionals need to be supported and feel safe when in the line of duty. One does not occur without the other. We hope that this data, gathered as a result of Ohio's pro-active efforts is useful in continuing to paint the picture of what we do, and what is needed to safeguard our children at-risk and their vulnerable families. For a complete copy of the report please contact PCSAO. ■