

How to Effectively Communicate with the Public

PREAMBLE

This document has been written to help children services agencies effectively communicate with the public through the media. The children services agency exists to serve the public and therefore has a responsibility to ensure the public knows its actions, roles, and responsibilities. Without the support and involvement of the community, the children services agency cannot fulfill its mission- keeping children safe from abuse and neglect.

This publication contains valuable information which was obtained from the general public and a dedicated group of media reporters. While the recommendations are many, they can be summed up in several words:

For the children services agency to be effective in protecting children from abuse and neglect, it must have an impeccable reputation and the support of the community.

The public values the safety of children and supports the work of the children services agencies when they have the information upon which to gauge its effectiveness. It is our duty to provide them with accurate information transmitted through the media and through personal contacts with community groups and individuals.

A good reputation is the most important possession we have. It takes years to build and can be destroyed overnight. Since we are 88 counties, what occurs in one county can affect the reputation of another. We have a mutual obligation to each other and ultimately to the vulnerable children of the state to achieve a positive reputation so we can be as effective as possible in pursuing our mission of protecting children.

INTRODUCTION

With the financial assistance of the Ohio Department of Human Services and the technical support of Triad Research Incorporated, the Public Children Services of Ohio (PCSAO) launched an effort to determine the general public's attitudes and perceptions about the abuse and neglect of children and the child protection agencies which serve these children and their families. The purpose of this effort was to:

1. Identify the general public's attitudes and perceptions concerning these critical issues.
2. Use that information to assist counties to develop and implement a comprehensive public education and awareness campaign.
3. Accurately inform the populace of the critical issues facing children, families, and the agencies which are charged with serving those families in crisis.

During the period from March, 1995, through September, 1996, a total of seventeen focus groups were held across the state in a variety of locations ranging from the rural communities of Appalachia and Ohio's farming belt to the urban centers of Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus. The reason for conducting focus groups in these divergent communities was based upon the assumption that there would need to be regional messages developed for children services agencies to use in their public education efforts due to the fact that Ohio's demographics and cultural make-up varies from region to region. Our research indicated, however, there were few significant perceptual differences with regard to region of the state, age, gender, or race with two exceptions:

- Focus group members from more rural areas appeared to place a slightly higher value on keeping families intact; and

- Focus group members who said they had first-hand knowledge of children services agencies, be it personal or professional, appeared to have a slightly more negative opinion of the agencies.

This project was completed in three phases. The first phase was used to assess the public's general attitudes and perceptions toward child abuse and neglect and the children services agencies which deal with child abuse and neglect. During this first phase, the focus group participants not only provided a wealth of information concerning these issues, but also generated a number of additional questions concerning child abuse and neglect, foster care and adoption, children services agencies, and the role of the juvenile court in child abuse and neglect cases.

During the second phase of the project, detailed answers were provided to each of the questions raised by participants of the first phase. Using the system of Q Sort Methodology which requires individuals to rank in order of importance the information contained in each of the four areas, Phase II participants ranked the information by order of importance to them. Again, the results of this exercise for each focus group held were identical.

The third phase of the project was designed to use the information from the first two phases to assist children services agencies to improve communications with the public. With this objective in mind, the groups were structured to:

- Explore how the "job description" of children services agencies should be presented to the public;
- Determine which types of responses to critical incidents have a positive or negative impact when presented to the public; and
- Gain an understanding of the public's perception about the agency's need and the slogan it uses.

While the information obtained from the focus group initiative is vital, it represents the "what" of what needs to be communicated to the public. This manual was developed, in cooperation with the public information officers from county children services agencies; leaders of the broadcast and print media who cared enough about children and families to volunteer their time to provide valuable information; Clarence Jones, author and consultant; and members of the PCSAO staff. Its goal is to provide the "how" to most effectively promote the information necessary to keep the public, elected officials, and media informed. This document should be used in conjunction with the PCSAO Media Handbook which was authored in 1991 and updated in 1996.

FIRST AMENDMENT OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

THE OHIO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

Any document, device, or item, regardless of physical form or characteristic, created or received by or coming under the jurisdiction of any public office of the state or political subdivisions which serves to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the office." is public information.

RC section 149.43 is known as the "Public records Act" and is the general records law governing the status of state and local government records when requested by a third party. The statute previously contained language applying its guidelines only to records required to be kept by any public office. For a full explanation of the act, please refer to the appendix of this document.

BUILDING BETTER MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS

There are a number of things children services agencies can do to build better relationships with the news media. Here are some of them. The pages which follow will describe these steps in more detail.

Create a Written News Media Policy

Every children services agency, no matter how small, should have a written news media policy. All staff members should be familiar with it. The executive director, in addition, must explain what exactly he/she expects in this area. If there is no policy, staff members tend to take a conservative tactic that evades or avoids reporters and can often result in negative media coverage. A sample policy is reproduced in this manual on pages 15-19.

Establish Personal Contact

The Executive Director (and perhaps others in the command staff) should be a familiar name and face to editors and reporters who will be covering the agency. This can be done in several ways --

1. Call the local editor(s) and tell him/her you would like him/her to know who you are; what you do; and that you want to work with him/her to make it easier to cover your agency. This can be accomplished by:
 - Lunch, where the only objective is to get to know each other
 - A meeting at the newspaper or broadcast station
 - A visit to the agency by the editor
2. Let the reporter know you appreciate it when he/she writes a story that is accurate, fair, and shows insight into your agency or children services issues. Tell the reporter you will let him/her know if and when there are possible followup stories.
3. Learn how reporters and editors do their jobs. Ask to spend a day or half-day with a reporter or in the news room. This will not only give you insight into how the news is produced and the problems journalists face, it will also establish more personal contacts and convince them you want to do a better job of news media relations.
4. Meet regularly with reporters and editors. This can be lunch or a more formal meeting, to keep them abreast of the issues you are facing. Most newspapers have an editorial board which you need to visit periodically--especially if you are dealing with a crisis or major issue.

Educate Your Staff

Train your staff to recognize the importance of media coverage. They need to understand why communication with the public through the media is critical to your success. If you expect them to be interviewed, they need to learn how to do it. Invite media people to meetings with your staff to answer their questions.

Create a 24-Hour Media Hotline

Establish a 24-hour-a-day method for answering reporters' questions. This must be set up so it will work effectively with both the news media and your staff.

Invite Reporters to Ride Along with You

Invite reporters to watch your staff do their work. This is the only way outsiders can truly understand the

problems you face and the skill they require. This is especially useful in times when you are under attack. Negotiate with the reporter terms which will protect the confidentiality of clients.

Develop Graphics to Clearly Explain Statistics

One of the most difficult things to measure in children services is how well we are doing. Tax payers want to know how their money is being spent, and how local services compare to other counties and states. Numbers are meaningless unless they are given perspective. Virtually every computer word processor today has an easy-to-use graphics capability that can convert dry, hard-to-understand numbers into concepts that are easy to grasp. Always make these graphics available to reporters who are writing about your agency.

Learn Your Media Market

Every media outlet reaches a different audience. You do not sell cemetery plots by advertising on a hard rock radio station; or acne medicine on an oldies-but-goodies station. A local advertising agency can draw a fairly accurate demographic profile of the people who read, watch, and listen to each local media outlet. Once you know that, you can target your message to a specific media group.

Air Your Own Dirty Laundry

When you have made a mistake or have a problem, it is always better for you to tell the media about it before they hear it from someone else. The media will often forgive those who confess their mistakes and make amends. The news media and the public will not forgive those who lie, evade, or refuse to accept responsibility when things go wrong. If nobody accepts responsibility, and does nothing about it, the error will be repeated.

Brief the Media Often

During a crisis, keep the media informed. This can be done with fact sheets faxed or hand-delivered to the media; media briefings with reporters; an answering machine (on a dedicated phone line that only reporters know about) with a message which gives the media up-to-the-minute reports and announcements of upcoming events; or an Internet web site that may be available to the general public, with certain pages restricted to journalists who know the password.

Never Underestimate a Crisis

At the beginning of a crisis, most managers are tempted to minimize the problem. If you do this with the media - and it turns out to be worse than you said - you look like a liar or an incompetent. If you overestimate the crisis, and it is solved quickly, you look like a masterful manager. On the other hand, do not cry "Wolf" unless you are sure the wolf is at the door.

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

A lot more is able to be accomplished if we have an ongoing relationship with those from whom we need assistance. We, as children services professionals, must establish and maintain relationships with a variety of key groups-- boards, county commissioners, judges, legislators, foster parents, other public and private agencies, law enforcement officials, and the media to name a few. Relationships are based on trust and positive experience. Maintaining the reputation of an organization or individual is a never ending process. We rely on the media, in great part, to assist us in building our reputation in the community. They are a key stakeholder in our efforts to protect children from abuse and neglect.

Maintaining a positive, ongoing relationship with the media depends on several important elements:

Establishing the Relationship Itself

Take a Journalist to Lunch

In general, the media representatives felt that children services agencies were not full partners with them. Media relations is a full-time effort which is never completed. Just as we cultivate, educate, and work with other key actors, we must do the same with the media. When asked if they would go to lunch with a children services professional, the answer from the media representatives was a resounding yes!

During the first meeting, do not have an agenda other than to get acquainted. Exchange business cards and home phone numbers. Provide information on the general operations of the agency. Let the reporter know that you will help them cover your agency.

Develop a protective services guide for the media.

Within it include, the child protection continuum; a case log; agency table of organization; agency spokespersons by topic area with office and home telephone numbers; key definitions; agency funding sources; and a local agency version of the data produced in the PCSAO Fact Book e.g. caseloads, funding, children in care, reports of abuse, neglect, etc. (keep the information updated).

Be Available 24 hours, Seven Days a Week

Make sure the reporter knows that you are available to provide information on any questions or concerns s/he may have on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis.

Put the Reporter in Contact with a Social Worker

In subsequent contacts, introduce the reporter to a social worker who can take the Journalist out on actual cases. Again, the media representatives said that they would accompany a social worker in the field "in an instant." The reporters said that they would be willing to sign a written agreement with the children services agency not to divulge a child or family's identity and if any videotape was shot, the family members' faces would be electronically masked. This "hands on" experience is oftentimes worth a hundred pages of written information. The same approach could be used with the reporter visiting the juvenile court and observing its proceedings in child abuse and neglect cases.

Learn the reporter's job

As we would like the reporter to know what we do, we must, in turn, learn the reporter's job. What are the reporter's deadlines? When asked if a children services worker would be welcome in the media newsroom so that the daily activities and deadlines associated with creating a news broadcast or newspaper could be studied and learned, again the answer from the reporters was an "of course."

Keep the reporter(s) informed

Keep the reporter(s) informed on an ongoing basis. Information can be exchanged at regular meetings. The general preference for receiving news releases was by facsimile. What may seem to be important to the children services agency may not be important for the media due to the market or the fact that there was a heavy news day and your story did not rank as important as others (see section, What is News?). Nevertheless, maintain the flow of information and the contacts. Over time, your stories may be run and you may be sought out as an expert when a national or international situation requires a local opinion or news peg.

Improving the Internal Concept of Media

Some people in the child protection profession believe the media is our enemy; the media cannot and

should not be trusted; has poor motives; or lacks competence. People with those attitudes cannot foster a positive relationship.

Understand the media has a job to do. Invite them to meet with your staff to discuss roles and responsibilities, perceptions, and mutual concerns. The more we understand each others' jobs, the further ahead we both are.

When the media calls and is asking for information from the wrong person, politely "take" them to the right person. Remember the good feeling you had when you were shopping, could not find what you were looking for, and an employee "took" you to the item instead of pointing in a direction or just saying, "I don't know". Do not use the jargon of our profession unless you know the reporter fully understands the terms. A prime example is the term "family preservation". This term is widely misunderstood. It is often misinterpreted to mean that we will preserve the family even if it harms the children in that family.

The Agency Contact Person

The media representatives felt that a Public Information Officer was critically important to media relations. This person provides a "road map" to the agency. The PIO can direct the reporter to the right person with minimal delay and frustration. The media knows this person and how to reach her at all times. The PIO knows the deadlines that the reporter is facing. The PIO provides the reporter with ongoing information which may be positive or negative. We often feel inadequate in dealing with the media and view public information officers as a luxury. Many agencies may not have the financial resources to be able employ a PIO, yet every agency should have at least two individuals on their staff who understand the media and can serve as part-time PIOs. Two staffers are essential so that one is always available if the other is on vacation or otherwise away from the agency.

Reporters said that it would be prudent for all agencies to develop worker comfort and expertise in dealing with the media in areas of risk assessment, sexual abuse, physical abuse, administration, financing, and other areas of the children services operations. While reporters stated that a public information officer was very important to getting them to the right person and assisting them to meet their deadlines, focus group findings indicated that the public information officer tended to be viewed as a "spin doctor" by the general public. They much preferred a social worker, supervisor, or the agency director to provide information because these people were viewed as "closer to the case." Focus group members agreed that County Commissioners should not be spokespersons. They said that County Commissioners were "too far from the action" and thus "really did not know what they were talking about." In addition, group members felt they were "too political."

Confidentiality

The ethics of our profession are often not valued by the media even though the professional media places a very strong value on their own ethic of confidential sources. Agency lawyers often close up the agency for fear of a lawsuit. The public and media view this silence under the cloak of confidentiality as political CYA. In this day and time, "No Comment" is a dirty word.

We must rethink this position. If the information is out there and incorrect, we have an ethical responsibility to set the information straight. One should correct, but not add to the information that is out. Media representatives unanimously stated they favored, "maximum disclosure, minimum delay". They understand the state and federal confidentiality laws and also understand the Ohio Public Records Law. The media expect to be provided with the information it is entitled to. Our reputation depends on our knowing what can be provided and what cannot.

When information is shared, share as much as you can in writing. If a record is a public one, give the reporter a copy. If you have an agency policy or procedure, share it in writing, this adds tremendous credibility to your position when you provide written information. Obviously, when a situation necessitates an immediate response, make the verbal response and follow it up in writing.

All calls should be returned to the reporter within fifteen minutes from the reporter's call. In the days of

modern answering services, a statement should be added to the telephone greeting which provides the media with a direct number if they urgently need to make contact. Remember reporters have deadlines to meet. If you want your side of the story shared with the public, you had better be accessible and respond fully and quickly.

Handling Crisis Responses

In times of crisis, many have a tendency to "shell up" and underestimate the problem. As the story is pursued, it keeps getting larger and larger and runs for several days or more. The general rule of thumb in a crisis is to always overestimate the problem. It is usually worse than you originally think. When we later know the extent of the problem, your credibility is extremely enhanced. On the other hand, if the problem is not as large as stated, you come across as a genius for solving it so quickly. Always agree that things are bad if they are. Remember the credibility e.g. reputation of the agency depends on what you say. Never, but never, say "No Comment". Inform the reporter that you will find out any details s/he is seeking, ask when the deadline is, and set a time to call the reporter back.

Children services agencies are often loathe to speak up for themselves when a case has gone bad due to an action by the county prosecutor or juvenile judge. When this occurs, the agency usually says little for fear of alienating the elected official and the agency looks inept or incompetent. A better response might be, "we worked hand in hand with the following agencies, A, B, C, etc.

Another way of dealing with a situation like this would be to develop a "case log" which describes the steps that a case goes through from the receipt of a report through the juvenile court. This should be given to the media when there is no crisis and referred to when a situation occurs. Dates and details can be assigned to the time log for the particular case being questioned.

Additionally, competition among the media can result in a particular media outlet moving forward quickly to "scoop" its competition. This competition has the possibility of stories being broken with incomplete facts. Thus, it is important for the children services agency to be on record with its response and to continue to follow up openly with the media. Do your internal investigation of the situation, then issue a statement that reflects your best understanding of the situation and do it quickly. The greater the news competition within the area (metro counties), the more likely this can occur, have a crisis plan in place, train staff on its use and protocol, and use it. In smaller communities, this is less likely to occur because the media outlet has a more intimate relationship with the community. Still, a crisis plan designed when there is no stress or community pressure will be a tremendous help when the crisis erupts.

Develop a Sustained Public Information Campaign

Focus group participants unanimously said that they were irritated that the children services agencies of their communities only communicated with them when they needed money (children services levy) or there was a crisis. They are aware that we do many good things for children and families and want to hear about them.

For the children services agency to carry on a sustained public information campaign, it must know what is newsworthy and what is not. What is newsworthy may vary from market to market. The children services agency must understand the various media outlets and what each values as newsworthy. There are several ways to determine what a media market values as newsworthy and the best outlets to engage to run your stories.

- Determine the media outlet's products. Are they news/talk shows or music? We want to engage the news/talk shows in our public information efforts. Find out how the outlet gets its news. Is the information generated locally or fed through a wire service, a satellite signal, or a combination?

- What is contained in the radio or TV station's Ascertainment Interviews? Many media outlets survey regularly to ascertain what is important for station to cover. The list usually generates up to forty topics. If you make the list, you are newsworthy if you have a story. This concept dates back to the time before deregulation of the FCC and was required for an FCC license. Many stations still use this exercise as a

guide in determining what they will broadcast.

- An advertising agency can give you the demographics of each media outlet-- print and broadcast-- so that you will know their target audience. The sales department within the media outlet can also supply you with this information. Finally, media outlets conduct their own focus groups as to what the public wants to hear on the news. Media outlets may be willing to share this information with you,

- Log the news for a particular station/market for a week and look at the trends. Match the information that you want to get out with the results of your logging. Do this at different times of the year.

- Instead of news releases, use fact sheets which address the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the issue. They should be sent by facsimile or E-mail. These releases are often more welcome in small and medium size counties or markets. Minor stories may make the news because the paper or broadcast needs filler. In the print media, pictures and graphics help a great deal.

- Look for human interest stories that illustrate what your mother taught you: if you work hard, you will succeed; you can be anything you want to be; kids who do the unusual or overcome tremendous odds are usually newsworthy.

- Connect stories with holidays e.g. Mother's or Father's Day, Christmas, etc. Have good pictures for the print media. Establish a partnership with the leading broadcast or print media outlet in the county for a special event or story. Treatment of victims of child abuse, foster parents who go the extra mile, Rising Up and Moving On recipients are possibilities for these types of stories.

Children services agencies have several built-in opportunities to develop a sustained public information campaign. April is Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Month; May is foster parent month, county fairs are held during the summer months, and November is Adoption Awareness month. These are naturals where children services agencies can get media coverage. Other events or stories can be built around these standing events to build a sustained media relations effort. Then when the levy campaign comes up or the inevitable crisis, both the media and public know the children services agency and what it does. This approach tends to give one the benefit of the doubt in many ways.

WHAT THE PUBLIC VALUES IN PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

This information was collected from the focus groups, facilitated by Triad Research Corporation and mentioned in the Introduction to this publication. For more information, please refer to the reports, "Communicating with the Public" and "Communicating with Elected Officials".

Information About Child Abuse and Neglect

· The most important piece of information to communicate to the public about abuse and neglect is that the job of children services agencies is to protect children from abuse and neglect when the child's family is unwilling or unable to do so. The public believes this is the mission of children services agencies.

· The telephone number to call to report child abuse and neglect should be included on all communications to the public.

· The public should be told that all reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are thoroughly investigated.

· The public should be told about the stages of a case (see case log). If the children services agency does not find evidence of abuse or neglect, the case is closed. If allegations are substantiated, the children services agency tries to provide or arrange for appropriate services. If the family refuses services, the agency can turn to the juvenile court for help.

- In Ohio, the public believes that children should be kept in their own homes but only as long as they are safe. Communications should include information that agencies are required by law to make reasonable efforts (not extraordinary) efforts to keep children in their own homes. However, you must emphasize that the first responsibility of the children service agency is the safety of the child.

- The public should be told that children service agencies offer services to families. They should also be told what services are available.

- The public should be told that the police and County Prosecutor determine if parents should be charged with a crime as a result of abuse or neglect of their children. This information should include the fact that social workers make a recommendation concerning the removal of a child from his/her home. However, the Judge makes the final decision as to whether the child remains or is removed from his/her home.

- It is important to communicate to the public that casework follow-up takes

place, but if the family situation improves, no further problems arise, and the child is safe, the case is closed.

- It may be beneficial to let the public know that police officers do not accompany social workers unless the situation calls for it.

Information About Foster Care and Adoption

- It is clear that what matters most to the public is a safe and stable environment for children. Therefore, it is crucial to stress that all foster parents are thoroughly investigated before they become foster parents.

- The percentage of children who live in only one foster home and are not transferred to another foster home is an important piece of information to give to the public. The public wants to know that children are living in stable situations. However, it should be remembered that the public is looking for information which can be used to evaluate agency performance. If the percentage is low, it may not be beneficial for children service agencies to communicate this piece of information to the public.

- The public should be told that many of the children who are in foster care are able to safely return home after the children services agency has provided service and education to their parents. The public wants to know that children are in stable situations and their first choice for the child is with the birth parents. Thus, this statement gives them the sense that the "system" is working. However, we suggest that the impact of this statement could be increased by placing greater emphasis on the fact that children services agencies played a crucial role in the safe return of children. The statement could be strengthened by replacing "many" with a percentage figure.

- The public would like to know that children who are eligible for adoption are being adopted. Therefore the numbers eligible and the numbers placed should be communicated to the public. Remember the public is using this information to evaluate the performance of the agency.

The public is not particularly interested in the specific number of foster homes needed. However, this is an important piece of information for potential foster parents. It is recommended, however, that you shift the emphasis away from the number of foster homes needed to the number of children needing foster homes.

Information About Children Services Agencies in General

- The most important information to communicate to the general public is the competence of social workers. The public believes an important proof of that competence is the number of hours of in-service training that social workers receive initially and each year after they have been hired.

- Caseload ratios, when compared to the Ohio standard, have high importance for most of the public. However, there is risk in using these figures. While the ratios may demonstrate need, they may also indicate that the social workers may not be doing a good job if they have a high caseload. If the ratios are used, they should be coupled with information demonstrating worker competence such as in-service training.
- The percentage of agency workers with MSW's has importance for many people, because it is accepted as a measure of competence. Information on the percentage of staff with MSW's should be included if the percentage is high. The number of professionally licensed social workers also seems to be important if the percentage is high.
- Statements about the workers' years of experience seem to carry little weight in demonstrating competence because the public does not appear to equate years of experience with competence.
- People place intermediate to low importance on the four-year requirement because they think four-year degree programs are "too general" to ensure worker competence. However, the absence of this information can create additional doubts about worker competence. It is best to stress in-service training, the percentage of MSW staff and/or licensed social workers (providing the percentage is high).
- The annual budget figure should be included in all communication campaigns. However, the figure only has intermediate or low importance, so it will do little good to emphasize it. The source of funds appears to serve little purpose because the public feels that these are all their dollars no matter where they originate.
- The fact that the services provided by children services agencies are not part of welfare should be emphasized in communications campaigns to eliminate any confusion that might exist in the public's mind.

Information About the Juvenile Court

- The public should be told that the decision to remove a child from the home is made by the Juvenile Court, not the case worker. However, they should also be told that a caseworker can remove a child in an emergency situation, but a judge still hears the case within 24 hours.
- The public must be told that the Court demands proof of abuse and neglect prior to removing the child from the home. The public wants assurance that the decision to remove the child is not made unless there is proof that the allegations are true. Many focus groups members expressed concern that children were removed from their homes based on "hearsay" or because of a misinterpretation of a situation.
- The public should be told that if parents are unwilling or unable to change the pattern of abuse and neglect, the Court can decide to remove the child from the home. There are several important points to this statement. Above all else, the public wants to know that children are safe. However, they also want to know that the families have the opportunity to solve their problems, if the family cannot solve their problems, the public wants to know that the child will be removed from the home because a judge has proof that the situation is unsafe for the child. Finally the public wants to know that the Court, not the social worker, has the final say in this type of decision.
- It should be emphasized to the public that any decision made about the removal of a child from the home is based upon the best interests of the child. This is what the public cares most about-- the child.
- The public should be told that when a case appears in Court, the judge listens to all sides of the story and all parties are represented by legal counsel. Both the social worker and the parents are allowed to present their viewpoints.
- Many focus group members said that information given to them in the focus groups about the juvenile

Court surprised them. Prior to reading the statements, they did not know anything about the Court's role in situations involving abuse and neglect. This information tells us that the Juvenile Court's role should become a standard part of any communications effort.

The Use of Numbers

- In using statistics about abuse and neglect, it is important to remember that the public does not see much value in numbers, particularly if the numbers lack context or meaning for them. As examples:
 - The number of families now able to safely care for their children because of help from the children services agencies meant little to the public because they did not know the total number of families involved with children services agencies. Thus they could not judge whether the children services agencies were doing a good or bad job of helping families. **ALWAYS USE COMPARATIVE PERCENTAGES WHEN COMMUNICATING STATISTICS.**
 - People did not particularly care how many allegations are substantiated or how many cases are referred to Juvenile Court. They do not think this tells them much about the quality of the job being done by children services agencies.
 - Other than the fact that it is "alarming" or "interesting," the public has little interest in the number of calls received concerning abuse and neglect. What they care about is what happens as a result of those calls. For example, a statement about the number of calls received might have a much greater impact if the statement included the fact that every allegation is investigated and the numbers of allegations is increasing or decreasing.

In summary, the public does not trust statistics. They do, however, value comparative percentages or numbers. Remember, the public is constantly looking for information upon which they can evaluate the agency's performance. Finally, the most important thing to the public is the safety of the child and that all decisions are made based on the safety and the best interests of the child.

Recommended Job Description for a Children Services Agency

The majority of focus group participants chose the following statement as one which best describes the mission or "job" of a children services agency:

The job of a children services agency is to help children have a safe and stable place to live. It is best if children are raised by their birth parents, because we know they are damaged when they are removed from their home. However, sometimes children are at risk of being harmed by their families. When we receive a call about a suspected case of abuse or neglect, we thoroughly investigate the situation. If we find abuse or neglect, our primary concern is for the safety of the child. If parents agree to get help and the home is basically safe and stable, we leave the child in the home and monitor the parents' progress. If there is serious risk of harm to the child, we ask the juvenile Court to remove the child from the family and place the child in a safe and stable foster home. If the parents' behavior improves, the child is returned to his/her home and the family is reunited. If the parents' are still unwilling or unable to change their behavior so that the child can safely return to the home, we petition the juvenile court for the permanent custody of the child so that s/he can be placed in a safe, stable adoptive home.

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