

CPS plan to save kids loses momentum

Most special officers hired by the agency to spot abuse problems have left the job

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE**

Oct. 12, 2009, 6:05AM



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Terry Garza returned to her old job as a Harris County deputy after two years at CPS. While there, she quickly solved a problem that had stumped caseworkers for nine months.

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An ambitious plan to save more children by hiring former law enforcement officers to improve abuse investigations lies in disarray with more than half the investigators leaving Texas Child Protective Services since the program began in 2005, state records show.

Of the 431 special investigators hired by CPS in the past four years to aid in the most complex cases, 273 have left the agency, the Houston Chronicle has found.

And today, the concept seems to have run aground as more than a third of the state's 236 positions sit vacant.

"Certainly we were aware in 2005 that adding the SI (special investigator) job was new for CPS, and we knew it was going to be a challenge," said Patrick Crimmins, CPS spokesman in Austin.

The SI program's apparent shortfalls come at a critical time as the agency confronts even more scrutiny over flawed investigations following four child abuse deaths, three in Houston and one in Dallas, involving families under examination by CPS.

In fact, not one of those cases was assigned a special investigator.

Now, well after their deaths, Austin investigators are reviewing how and why three Houston-area children — Katy infant Amber Maccurdy, Conroe 3-year-old David Tijerina and Spring 4-year-old Emma Thompson — died of abuse after all three had been reported to CPS as possible child abuse victims.

Last month came the case of 1-year-old Darrell "Tre" Singleton III, who died Sept. 3 in Arlington when left in a hot car. CPS had contacted Tre's family many times, including this year, and his mother was a parent with a long history of abuse and neglect.

State officials reasoned four years ago that hiring law enforcement veterans and putting them to work at CPS would not only save more lives but perhaps infect the agency with better and more modern tracking techniques — particularly in complex cases like these.

"The legislature intended to strengthen the skills of all CPS investigation staff by having staff with forensic investigation experience available to CPS," reads a description of the SI job posted on the Web site of CPS' parent agency, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

'Muddled' goals

Lawmakers like state Sen. Jane Nelson, whose 2005 CPS reform bill created the "special investigator" position, have been monitoring the turnover rate for all CPS workers, including that of special investigator. Turnover rates have fallen, in part due to the recent economic downturn, and the special investigator turnover rate has fallen to 18 percent from 36 percent last year.

But a third of the state's special investigator jobs remain open today.

"We will be studying those issues as we continue to look for ways to improve the system for children and families," said Nelson, R-Lewisville.

But according to SIs who left, the program's goals were muddled from the start. Some ex-SIs said they assumed they would eventually be gun-toting officers for the agency, something CPS officials insist was never in the cards. But the position's fuzzy definition helped exacerbate the inevitable culture clash between social workers and police officers.

"Police officers are pretty hard-nosed about things. They see things in black and white," said Steven Ray Rogers, 68, of Weatherford, who worked as a special investigator for 19 months before leaving last summer. "The very nature of their job is to infringe on people's freedom."

CPS caseworkers, on the other hand, are college-educated and tend to be younger and less experienced with troubled domestic relationships. They are not only asked to evaluate the evidence before them, but to make educated guesses about future behavior of parents.

Also, every decision about a child's welfare must be reviewed with a supervisor.

"It just wasn't the job I was led to believe," said Thomas Davidson, a 40-year veteran of law enforcement, who worked for CPS in Houston for two months in 2007. "It's more of a caseworker than an investigator (job)."

Davidson, who also is a former foster parent, quickly found CPS' culture, where caseworkers must get every child removal and placement approved, frustrating.

"You had to go say 'Mother, may I?' to four different supervisors," the 68-year-old recalled. "That was not exactly what I had in mind."

Investigators also didn't have to have a college degree, didn't have to carry as many cases and were paid up to \$16,000 more than their \$36,000-a-year CPS counterparts.

"I was a little disappointed," said Keith Jemison, 35, who left CPS after six weeks and is now chief of the Montgomery ISD police force. "You were being supervised by someone with no law enforcement experience and you're supposed to be advising that person and they see you as a glorified caseworker."

CPS officials acknowledge the culture shock for both CPS and veteran law enforcement officers.

"You had two different cultures, two different communities converging, law enforcement and social work, in a social work setting with its awesome responsibilities, but not the powers and authority associated with law enforcement," Crimmins said.

Naturally, he said, there was some friction.

"What we're hearing from the regions is that the investigative program is stronger with the special investigators than without," Crimmins said. "Admittedly, there have been some bumps and bruises along the way."

Immense caseloads

The agency, which has historically had trouble measuring how well a program works or does not, could not offer an example of how CPS benefitted from the SI program. The agency's data collection rarely provides a qualitative look at how one program contributes overall.

"We can't point to any specific cases in which the contributions of a special investigator by itself protected a child," Crimmins said.

Some former SIs said CPS caseworkers often had the information to solve a case, but because of the immense caseloads, they didn't always see it.

When Terry Garza came to CPS in Houston after 14 years at the Harris County Sheriff's Office, she was handed a case that stumped CPS caseworkers for nine months. No one could locate the family of a 3-year-old girl whose leg was broken by a 4-year-old brother who rode over it with a bike. Without talking to the family, there was no way to determine whether the incident was an accident, negligence or physical abuse.

"The family was just avoiding and avoiding all the requests to call," said Garza. She located the mother's workplace through the food stamp office and dropped off a business card: "She called me back within five minutes," recalled Garza, who since has returned to the Sheriff's Office.

Not all of the experiences were negative, the SIs say.

Gary Hopper, 53, who worked for the Seguin office from 2006 to 2008 and had high praise for his supervisors, said he believes every officer should have to do it and the program should continue.

"It'd do everybody good to do the social services side," Hopper said. "It will benefit you when you deal with families as a police officer."

Garza agrees. She is now often tapped to help with child abuse cases at the Sheriff's Office by her co-workers. And she's even been involved in a case involving a family she first investigated as a SI.

"It's not a bad place, it's just a hard job," Garza said of CPS. "A really hard job."

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