



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES

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CHILD WELFARE FOCUS – FROM MANDATED REPORTING TO COMMUNITY SUPPORTING

County Family and Children’s Services encourages family support to help keep children safe and families together

The County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department’s (HSD) Family and Children’s Services (FCS) Division and the Child, Youth & Family Well-Being Partnership are transforming the way children stay safe and families are supported in Santa Cruz County. To do so, they are collaborating on a shift from a historic “mandated reporting” model that focused on investigation first, to a “community supporting” approach. This enhanced focus on prevention and early connection better center’s the agency’s work to help families access the resources they need before challenges become the kind of crisis that require intervention by FCS’s Child Welfare Services (CWS).

The Child, Youth & Family Well-Being Partnership is at the center of this enhanced focus to connect families with community-based support services such as housing, food, childcare and mental health resources. A key goal is to keep families together by linking them to the right resources at the right time, reflecting a broader movement toward family well-being and prevention-focused child welfare. Locally, the movement is intended to build trust, reduce stigma and strengthen community support networks across Santa Cruz County.

“We want to strengthen and keep families together, not separate them,” says Dr. Gloria Carroll, Director of Family & Children’s Services. “By offering early support and reducing fear around seeking help, we’re creating a system that’s compassionate, equitable and focused on keeping children safe.”

In Santa Cruz County and across California, over half of reports made to the child welfare hotline do not meet the legal threshold for abuse or neglect. However, many at-risk families still need support. To help deliver the message that “needing help is OK,” the Child, Youth & Family Well-Being Partnership encourages trained professionals, including “mandated reporters,” to connect families with United Way, Santa Cruz County’s 2-1-1 program for support services.

PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE ♦ PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY ♦ ALLEVIATING POVERTY

STRENGTHENING OUR COMMUNITY BY IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF ALL COUNTY RESIDENTS



Instead of automatically launching a CWS investigation when abuse or neglect is suspected, trained professionals are now encouraged to first explore supportive options, when appropriate, that address the root causes of family stress – many of which stem from poverty and limited access to basic needs.

The shift to a supporting-first model benefits families, children and the professionals who work with them in several ways:

- For families, the initiative aims to reduce fear, shame and stigma associated with asking for help, while building trust and making resources more accessible.
- For children, this change addresses root causes – such as poverty and unmet basic needs – without the stress and trauma of foster care, while avoiding unnecessary intervention from CWS in their families.
- For professionals who are mandated reporters, including educators, healthcare providers, case managers and others, this shift will enable more meaningful collaboration with families where the professional can serve as a partner rather than an enforcer, helping build stronger, trust-based relationships.

“Prevention starts when people feel safe asking for help,” said Yvette Brooks, CEO of United Way Santa Cruz County. “The 2-1-1 service connects individuals and families to support early, confidentially and without judgment, strengthening community wellbeing before crises occur.”

ABOUT THE CHILD, YOUTH & FAMILY WELL-BEING PARTNERSHIP

The Child, Youth & Family Well-Being Partnership in Santa Cruz County brings together County agencies and nonprofits to provide coordinated mental health, social and family support services with a focus on preventing crises, supporting education and strengthening families.

ABOUT FAMILY & CHILDREN’S SERVICES

The Human Services Department’s Family and Children’s Services division provides services to children who have been abused, neglected, or who are at risk of abuse or neglect. Child welfare services focus on child safety, child and family well-being, and permanent homes for children.

Learn more: <https://santacruzhumanservices.org/FamilyChildren/ChildWelfareServices>

