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Budget cuts force layoff of JFS' sole child-abuse detective

Agency, law enforcement to compensate for lost manpower by restructuring

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LANCASTER -An on-site detective at Fairfield County Job & Family Services often would be a first responder to the scene of a child-abuse incident.

He would accompany the Child Protective Services worker with whom he investigates the case. That way, the case worker could arrive and protect the child, and the detective could start an investigation before the suspect gets rid of the crime's evidence or comes up with a false alibi.

Well, not anymore.

The agency eliminated the position of its sole detective when it announced the layoff of more than 40 employees, effective May 1. Local officials found the need for layoffs when faced with a \$2.4 million cut in state funding.

"The adverse effect is the increase in cases for the Sheriff's Office and (Lancaster) Police Department; that's natural," said Pierce, who began his position at JFS in October 1999.

The Sheriff's Office and Lancaster Police Department forward more than 100 child-abuse cases to Pierce a year.

Now, those cases fall directly on the shoulders of investigators at both detective bureaus, in addition to the cases Pierce would handle that aren't forwarded to him from other law enforcement agencies.

"They're all cases that require a great amount of time and look to solve," said Lancaster Police Sgt. Mike Peters, who heads the Detective Bureau. "It's not a burglary where you either have evidence or you don't. It requires a lot of interviews and assistance from doctors and sometimes other medical examiners."

And not all detectives are trained to handle child-abuse cases. The Lancaster Police Department has four, but only two do it on a regular basis. The Sheriff's Office has only one.

The agency also will lose five case workers with Child Protective Services, and those employees already struggle to keep up with the increasing number of child-abuse cases, said Child Protective Services Director Rich Bowlen.

The agency has experienced a 75 percent increase in the number of calls they receive from 2003 until 2008.

In all, his department will lose 12 employees, making it necessary for restructuring to ensure all the department's responsibilities are covered, Bowlen said.

The economy is the culprit behind the layoffs, and also the increasing number of cases social workers handle, he said. Bowlen wants the investigators to handle 10 or 11 cases a month, but most take on 15.

"All families have struggles and challenges they face every day when you see a downturn in the economy," he said. "And when it lasts for as long as this has been lasting, it has the potential, and research shows, to create a volatile environment for a family."

Bowlen hopes the restructuring will help the department keep up with the increasing number of cases coming in now that they have less manpower to combat them.

He said the elimination of Pierce's position will take some adjustment among law enforcement and case workers.

"We're just going to be a little more proactive when doing the initial contact," Bowlen said. "We'll just call local law enforcement and ask for them to go out with us and meet us at the scene. It'll just be a different way of approaching it."

Pierce, a retired Lancaster Police Department detective, said he's pleased with where his career has taken him. The job has been challenging, but he wouldn't change his career choice if he had the chance, he said.

"They are the hardest type of cases to work because they are children," Pierce said. "They don't have the experience adults have, so when you interview them, because they're so bashful, you might not get the information you need out of them."

Fairfield County Sheriff's Office Lt. Gary Kennedy, who heads his agency's Detective Bureau, said Pierce's know-how and expertise has been a valuable resource for the county.

"He's thorough. He's knowledgeable. I mean, he's a great asset to have, and I think he's going to be missed a lot by not only Child Protective Services employees, but the Lancaster Police Department and ourselves."

Additional Facts

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, and Fairfield County Job & Family Services wants residents to help recognize the shared responsibility to offer hope to those who've been victims of abuse and neglect.

JFS will host the Eighth Annual Candlelight Walk Event to recognize Child Abuse Prevention Month. The agency would like community members to gather at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the main entrance of Job & Family Services, 239 W. Main St., Lancaster.

And as part of the Fairfield County Family Festival, JFS will host its annual Circus Night from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Thursday. It will feature a reptile show, balloons, clowns and K-9 unit from the Fairfield County Sheriff's Office, among other attractions.
