

CPS ignored, erased messages from child abuse line

AN EXCLUSIVE NEWS LEADER INVESTIGATION

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The messages could have been combed through, and an overworked CPS team could have admitted the mistake and called in help.

The office could have assigned every case — old or not; involving still ongoing abuse or not; facing the career consequences or not.

But Child Protective Services didn't do that. Instead, according to an official account reconstructed by the News Leader and documents acquired through the Freedom of Information Act, they listened to a few calls and erased the rest.

"It was a mistake to delete the messages without first reviewing all of them, and the department acknowledges it as such," local Social Services director Elizabeth Middleton told us, after we worked for a few weeks to pull together the story. "No wrongdoing was intended."

A supervisor approved deletion of the messages. Middleton wasn't told for weeks.

It's not clear if Middleton — who announced Tuesday that she's leaving for a similar job in Orange County — ever reported the matter to her bosses, the state or to anyone in the local governments who help finance CPS.

According to county administration, officials there weren't told at all. They had to discover it on their own.

It was only when a chance phone call by a pediatrician surfaced a wider phone system problem that Augusta County investigated and also found out about the erased 200 messages.

The public never was notified. All the abuse reporters who left their stories on voice mail and never called CPS back may have wrongly thought the children involved were being protected.

TRYING TO REPORT ABUSE AND FAILING?

In 2014 and prior, if you called during office hours to report child abuse and none of the handful of people at the busy operation were available, you were sent to voice mail.

Anyone with concerns about a minor's safety could call the hotline, if it wasn't a crisis that required 911. The messages were supposed to be checked daily.

The office is staffed with fewer than a dozen people and works on behalf of Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta County as a joint bureau under the state's Department of Social Services umbrella. The employees are paid and managed by Augusta County through a joint agreement.

One person had the job of checking messages and making sure a caseworker was assigned.

But the employee in charge of monitoring the intake line left the agency in April 2014.

A new procedure was then established for the nine CPS caseworkers to take on the added duties of checking messages.

"In the transition, the responsibility for checking the voice mail messages on the intake line was re-assigned to multiple employees, on a rotating basis," Middleton said. "But due to a failure in communication, the voice mail messages went unchecked."

Spring turned to summer, and unheard calls kept stacking up.

"Caseworkers are very busy and they are not always available to take calls as they come in," Middleton said.

Messages can be left anonymously, although the CPS office hopes for a phone number and a caller's name.

Christine Walker, a private psychotherapist in Charlottesville, has previous experience working with CPS in her area and with child welfare cases.

Walker said the Department of Social Services is "legally obligated" to answer anything that is reported.

If you leave your contact information, the office has to call back, Walker said. "(They must) respond and assess," she said. "That assessment could be their own judgment whether it deems investigation. They have to consider it."

There are times when messages could be deleted and not answered, if there was a repeated complaint even though the case had already been investigated, Walker said.

But the messages have to be listened to, said the psychotherapist.

MORE THAN DOUBLE THE SUGGESTED WORKLOAD

As the count of ignored calls reached triple digits, the local Child Protective Services office struggled to do its work, by several accounts.

Valley Children's Advocacy Center Executive Director Dennis Baugh said his non-profit program to help child abuse victims works closely with CPS caseworkers.

"CPS is liked and disliked — there's no middle ground, because of the nature of their job," he said. "Protecting children is a very strong issue."

"I have very good relations with CPS," Baugh said, although he said an account of the voice mail issue troubled him. "We've had no problem with them whatsoever. ..."

"In some people's eyes, having hurt a lot of families, (CPS is) the enemy. But (to me), they haven't overstepped. If anything, they don't have the staff."

There are now 11 people working under CPS — one supervisor, nine caseworkers and a clerical support person.



(Photo: File/The News Leader)

Each Augusta County area caseworker averages about 40 cases at a time, Middleton said. The average caseload in Virginia is 17 cases per worker, according to the state.

"The Child Welfare League of America recommends an average caseload of 12 to 15 cases per worker," said Virginia Department of Social Services spokeswoman Necole Simmonds.

Valley Children's Baugh said his biggest issue with CPS is the lack of staffers to accommodate the workload.

"The citizens of the area need to step up and say they need more CPS workers, just like they are beating their drum for mental health issues," Baugh said. "They ought to demand more people to get the job done."

Other local organizations wouldn't comment on CPS, concerned it would interfere with their working relationship.

EVEN PROFESSIONALS STYMIED

By the time the tally of neglected messages hit 200, and was probably still growing, a local pediatrician had been trying to report a case of potential child abuse.

This doctor ran into a new issue. It wasn't that a caseworker failed to call back. It was an infinite phone loop at the Augusta County area CPS office.

Emails secured through News Leader FOI requests outline the problem:

"It took me about 45 minutes to speak with someone at Augusta County CPS," wrote the physician in an Oct. 29 note to politician Marshall Pattie, an Augusta County supervisor. "The phone number I tried was ... the Verona office. The phone tree there puts you in an infinite loop.

"A social worker tried the day before me and got nowhere. So I tried. After a few failed attempts, I went to the state hotline number. I left a report with them, but they said they (had the same number). The Augusta County Sheriffs office said the same thing.

"Ultimately I bumped it up to administration, who was somehow able to get through."

"In addition, the mom (had) tried to call herself and had a hard time. The mother's lawyer also had a hard time finding any additional info."

Pattie, an elected county supervisor, then tried to call himself.

After time stuck in the loop, "I was totally confused as to what my own name was," Pat Coffield, Augusta County administrator wrote in an email the next day to Pattie.

Coffield was also the chairman of the board for CPS in 2013, a rotating position between leaders of the participating governments.

He investigated, and the phone loop would later be solved with a new system installation.

CASES PER WORKER: The average caseload in Virginia is 17 cases per worker at a time. The Child Welfare League of America recommends 12 to 15 cases. Valley caseworkers juggle an average of 40 cases at once, three times what is

recommended.

But a response he first received from the state Department of Social Services may encapsulate the challenges faced by the public and professionals in getting help and attention for child abuse reports.

"I have asked (a technician) to look at the message on our phone system for possible improvements," wrote one Virginia official in an Oct. 30 email. "... (But) it appears that (the doctor) was able to report the CPS issue. ... Your suggestions are appreciated."

WHAT NO ONE KNEW

The phone loop crisis would lead Augusta County to eventually discover that more than 200 reports on the abuse line were deleted without being listened to, as well as a CPS decision to cover it up, Coffield said.

The agency has been run in a very hierarchical manner, he said, suggesting that staffers felt like they could not speak out.

Coffield confirmed that it was the phone loop that broke open the deletion issue. "This little can of whoop-ass opened a bigger can of whoop-ass," he said.

Pattie, county supervisor for the North River District, confirmed that things got rolling after he told Coffield about the phone system issues.

But Pattie said on Tuesday that he was never told about the deleted voice mail discovery.

"I have not heard anything from that. I'm assuming that's because this is a joint association from multiple localities — it's always a bit tricky," he said. "I'm not the point person on any of this."

Coffield and county administration never publicized the destruction of the messages after apparently learning about it last fall.

"I spoke to HR about having the (supervisor who ordered the emails deleted) reprimanded," he said. "They ended up putting a letter in the person's file."

When The News Leader later confirmed the mass voice mail deletion, the only supervisor at the local CPS office, Nenita Fisher-Cromer, did not respond to requests for comment about it.

CALL TO ACTION: After deletion of the hotline messages, no attempt was made to find or help the children who might be in distress. Can you help? If you reported something between April 2014 and October 2014 to the local CPS office and worry your call was deleted, call the state at (800) 552-7096.

Middleton said CPS made the decision to delete the voice mails after listening to a few of them.

"The CPS supervisor stated that given the age and content of the initial messages that staff heard ... clearing the inbox would allow new messages to be addressed with greatest speed," she said.

Middleton also said the few voice mails listened to were not from citizens.

"Given the prevalence of this pattern ... the CPS supervisor indicated that she thought it unlikely that a person making a CPS complaint would just leave a message and not call back if the message was not quickly returned," Middleton added.

"Case workers are very busy and they are not always available to take calls as they come in," she said. "Callers frequently call soon after leaving voice messages, in an effort to reach a live voice."

Middleton, the official that Augusta County CPS workers report to, said it took her almost two weeks to discover the deletion had taken place.

At the direction of the CPS supervisor, an IT worker erased the messages on Oct 28 or Oct. 29. It is unclear if anyone later tried to retrieve the deleted voice mails.

According to Middleton, no approval of an outside authority is necessary in order to delete messages.

"State guidelines provide that voice mail messages may be deleted when they are 'no longer administratively useful,'" she said. "Nevertheless, as acknowledged previously, it was a mistake to delete these particular messages without first reviewing them."

"The situation was addressed," Middleton said. "Our agency cannot disclose whether disciplinary action was taken against a specific employee."

Middleton also said she is unaware of any cases that have been left unattended due to the deletion.

"The agency has no information that would suggest that this decision left any case unreached," she said. "We are reasonably sure, but we cannot be absolutely certain."

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Virginia Department of Social Services spokeswoman Necole Simmonds said local social services follows Augusta County policy and procedures and are paid employees of Augusta County.

The voice mail deletion was deemed a personnel matter, which would be handled at the local level, Simmonds said.

"SVDSS is governed by a board made up of representatives from Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta County," she said. "All local departments of social services receive some funding from the state. All personnel matters including hiring, firing, discipline happens at the local government level."

Currently, Steve Rosenberg, Staunton's city manager, is the chairman of the board.

New protocol was put in place by CPS to avoid another mishap, Middleton said.

"Measures have been taken to ensure that the occurrence is not repeated," she said. "A new procedure was implemented in November 2014, which requires the hourly retrieval of messages on the intake line during business hours."

Coffield said that he has no idea why no one listened to the voice mails.

"Part of the problem is people have information, but they don't get in the position to share with us," he said.

— Staff writer William Ramsey contributed to this report.

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A previous version of this article, published May 14, had the incorrect year for Pat Coffield's tenure as chairman of the joint board of Shenandoah Valley Department of Social Services. Coffield, Augusta County administrator, was chairman in 2013. The original article also should have attributed this quote to Coffield, writing to county supervisor Marshall Pattie: "I was totally confused as to what my own name was," after being caught in a phone system loop at CPS.

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