County of Los Angeles
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

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June 2, 2006

To: Mayor Michael D. Antonovich
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From: David Sanders, Ph.D.
Director

OFFICE OF INDEPENDENT REVIEW FINAL REPORT: SARAH C. INVESTIGATION

The Department of Children and Family Services (Department) has reviewed the final report regarding the Sarah C. investigation conducted by the Office of Independent Review (OIR). The Department is committed to providing the children and families we serve with the utmost quality of service and we are in agreement with the findings regarding the Department's actions identified by OIR's investigation. The Department found the process that OIR structured throughout this investigation very useful in that it enhanced our ability to have a thorough and fair investigation of our departmental actions. We believe this experience and our continued work with OIR will help us to continue to improve our departmental investigative practices.

We strongly believe for there to be comprehensive learning and significant improvement in the overall system's ability to effectively serve children, all key staff actions, both within and outside DCFS need to be reviewed and recommendations regarding all key systems need to be included. We are concerned, therefore, that the report was almost solely focused on the role DCFS played in this case, and does not adequately address other key systems or their staff's role in the events that occurred. Nor did the recommendations include specific suggestions for improvement in the operation and accountability of the entire system or of the other key staff from entities outside of the Department. This larger systemic overview and analysis is needed to have truly effective systemic change.

The three recommendations raised by OIR regarding the systemic changes in the following areas Internal Affairs, Communication between DCFS and agencies in the Child Welfare System and Policy and Training echo some of the same issues raised in the Department's internal investigative report, notably, the concerns relative to case work performance.

The Department has moved forward in addressing a number of these issues. As noted in the OIR report, the Department had concerns regarding the actions taken by the staff involved in this case and had begun our internal investigation into the services provided to this family prior to OIR's engagement. As noted by OIR, overall, the Department's internal investigation was thorough and "scrupulously" fair. They agreed with many of the findings our investigation revealed. Also, as noted above, the Departrment found working with OIR very helpful in the investigative process and we support the recommendations made by OIR to improve the investigations conducted by Internal Affairs, including ways in which the investigative reports can be strengthened to include relevant evidence that is summarized in a thorough yet objective manner. The Department will continue to work with OIR to explore training options and other steps to improve the process currently used during an internal investigation.

The Department is reviewing the policy recommendations made by OIR and has already made changes as a result of what we have learned during this investigation. The Department has already taken steps and made revision of its existing Procedural Guide Adverse Court order/Decision Policy which provides clarity and set forth procedures staff must follow when they believe an order or decision made by court compromises the safety, or negatively impacts the child's achievement of timely permanency. The revised policy was provided to staff on May 12, 2006. We will work with County Counsel in the regional offices to provide training and guidance to staff on the changes made to this policy.

A second area where we believe we have already made significant systems changes that address the recommendation regarding SCAN exams is the development of the medical Hubs. As the Hubs become operational, we are mandating staff to bring detained children to a medical Hub for a complete evaluation. In addition, we have worked with County Counsel and the Court to include language in the court orders that require the use of the Hubs. We believe the Hubs will provide both the consistent and comprehensive medical examinations needed to ensure appropriate medical evaluations, services and mental health assessments are provided, and that there is a timely receipt from the Hubs of critical medical information to assist in our case management. We will be incorporating the mandatory Hub use into the SCAN Exam policy. We will continue to work to make this important operational change, along with the necessary policy change to support its usage.

The Department has already begun the development of the more detailed Corrective Action Plan (CAP) in response to the findings and recommendations of the OIR investigation. We will provide our completed CAP and additional information on the progress that we have made on needed changes within 30 days.

In conclusion, we are hopeful that as we move forward with the OIR process, we will continue to learn from OIR and improve our internal processes. We are also hopeful that future investigations and resulting findings and reports will be expanded to include any needed broad system changes beyond the Department to truly achieve improvement in outcomes for our children.

If you have any additional questions, please call me or your staff may contact Helen Berberian, Board Relations Manager, at (213) 351-5530.

DS:JS:vm

c: Chief Administrative Officer
County Counsel
Office of Independent Review