

**The Honorable Nikki R. Haley
Office of the Governor
1205 Pendleton Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201**

Dear Governor Haley,


Please allow me to introduce myself. I am a retired pediatrician volunteering in Hilton Head at the Volunteers in Medicine Clinic for the past six years. Having been involved many times in my career in the treatment of abused children, I was interested in how the procedure regarding reporting of suspected child abuse is handled here in South Carolina, so I asked the Nursing Director of the clinic how we at the clinic could become familiar with reporting. To that end, before she stepped down from her position with DSS, Julie Schneider, then Beaufort County Director in the DSS, came to make a presentation to the staff at Volunteers in Medicine in Hilton Head on how activity is meant to unfold when there is a report of suspected child abuse to the DSS. To a person all were distressed at how the first encounter with parents or care givers is made. In particular the first responders to the report are law enforcement officers whose lack of experience and training in child abuse may leave them at a disadvantage in handling such delicate matters. It is disarming for a parent or parents to be confronted by a uniformed officer as the first person of authority to whom they must answer. The first encounter should be with a social worker with training in the abuse field, thus making that encounter less stressful and less accusatory. Anyone's reaction to a uniformed officer would be horror and invoke a defensive, if not combative, posture. We as health professionals are required only to report a suspicion of abuse based on what we see and hear, and we are not to be judgmental. A parent when confronted by a police officer first is bound to assume that the decision as to what happened, and how, has already been made. The stigma of having been suspected of abuse is damaging and lasting even if the findings do not bear out the allegation, and the trauma of being confronted by a uniformed officer may leave psychological scars that will never heal. When Ms. Schneider made her presentation it was apparent to all that once her department does get involved there may be difficulties stemming from that first encounter with the law enforcement officer and from her Department itself. Case load per case worker is too great, thereby

compromising a thorough and unbiased (to the parent) investigation. From a parent's perspective a fair outcome might not be achievable.

As a group we urge that a number of steps be taken by the State to correct what we feel is a system in need of upgrading. Firstly we recommend that the approach be changed such that a trained social worker is the first official to encounter the parent(s). Well-trained social workers are much better equipped to defuse the situation and ease tension in the family. Law enforcement officers need not be involved unless there is danger of immediate physical harm to the child and/or to the reporting professional(s). Secondly, case workers should have a defined number of clients and not be burdened with an overload. Thirdly, a dedicated "Hot Line" should be established at the State level to screen calls reporting suspected abuse, staffed by senior advisors familiar with abuse cases and protocol. These advisors would then funnel the information to the county case workers' supervisor who would in turn mete out the cases to social workers in the department. Decisions regarding disposition of the child would be made at the local level based on the social worker's evaluation at the time of the first encounter, be it hospitalization, foster care, or continued parental care under supervision by the case worker, etc. These changes would require an increase in the number of qualified social workers and support staff obviously, but the investment would be one well worth the expenditure.

If there is not a change to be made, we would recommend a comprehensive tutorial of all law enforcement officers as to how cases should be approached, a tutorial that would be conducted by seasoned social workers in conjunction with experienced officers who have dealt admirably with abuse cases in the past. At the least, if law enforcement officers are to be involved, they should not be in uniform. Those of us who heard Ms. Schneider were impressed with her professionalism and candor, but we came away feeling that the system needs overhaul. We hope this can be accomplished. I would welcome the chance to work with Lois Richter, new Beaufort County Director, in implementing any changes.

Respectfully,


Theodore I. Putnam MDCM