

# **Becoming an Anti-Racist Organization: A Call to Examine Law Enforcement Accompaniment Policies within the Sonoma County Human Services Department**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) provides protection to vulnerable children, seniors, and dependent adults through supportive social services. Both the Adult Protective Services (APS) and Child Protective Services (CPS) programs routinely utilize local law enforcement to enhance worker safety during home visits. Given what is now well-known about disparate adverse impacts associated with law enforcement intervention, clients, particularly those with marginalized identities, are at risk of trauma, criminalization and arrest, and possible injury or fatality when officers accompany social workers on these visits. Additionally,

social work outcomes can be negatively impacted. In some cases, law enforcement officers misunderstand or disagree with social work goals for a client, which can create hostile situations, damage rapport, and even result in injury. Resources like law enforcement alternative programs, behavioral health clinicians, and community-based interventions are available in Sonoma County. The Human Services Department has committed to being an anti-racist organization and can act on this commitment and improve client services and outcomes by investing in these alternatives to law enforcement accompaniment.

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## Introduction

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, large protests against police violence took place in cities all over the United States during the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin. As protests made way for policymaking, municipalities began to investigate ways to shift social problems out of the hands of the criminal justice system and into the social and health services system. County-based social work and the intersections of Adult Protective Services and Child Protective Services with law enforcement have a place in this conversation.

The Sonoma County Human Services Department's (HSD) Executive Team has made a commitment to racial equity, stating in a 2020 email to department employees that "HSD builds upon its mission to empower, support, and protect all members [of the community] by committing to being an antiracist organization and eliminating racial disparities in all HSD programs, policies, practices, and services." This commitment requires the examination of those programs, policies, practices, and services from a racial equity perspective. Bringing law enforcement into the homes of clients is one area where racial disparities play a role in the execution of services, as there are substantial racial disparities in police use of force and severity of force, even when controlling for variables like type of crime (Goff et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to a 2018 policy statement by the American Public Health Association, "The impacts of physical violence likewise extend beyond injuries and death, affecting individuals' and communities' ability to achieve positive health outcomes in the short and long term and compounding extant

health inequities." HSD serves vulnerable communities already experiencing inequities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, residency status, and health status. "Police interventions...exacerbate health inequities and expose marginalized communities to extreme risk of harm" (Jacobs, et al., 2021). HSD's mission to "Empower, Support, and Protect" is in conflict with these outcomes.

## Current Landscape

The question of whether county-based protective services programs can begin to shift current practices on law enforcement accompaniment has not been answered locally or nationally. A survey of Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) counties and research into national practices found no existing models. This creates an opportunity for the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) to lead. HSD has two social work programs that enter client homes with law enforcement accompaniment: Adult Protective Services (APS) and Child Protective Services (CPS). HSD also has a Special Investigations Unit (SIU) which hires law enforcement officers, but the activities of SIU are beyond the scope of this project. The APS and CPS programs employ front-line social workers to investigate reports of abuse against vulnerable populations. Child Protective Services also takes children into protective custody when it is determined that certain types of abuse have occurred. Both programs involve law enforcement when persons in the home are determined to be a threat to worker and/or client safety, or when a crime has occurred.

The decision on when to include law enforcement is made by weighing a variety of factors. APS relies on reporting parties, types of allegations, criminal background

checks, law enforcement dispatch, and APS history to determine when to have law enforcement accompaniment on a home visit. Workers are sometimes reluctant to bring law enforcement on a home visit, as law enforcement presence can be triggering to clients and others in the home. A collaborative effort between law enforcement officers and APS social workers can be dependent on the accompanying officer's knowledge and understanding of the APS client population. Involving law enforcement can heighten emotions and increase the complexity of a home visit (Woodcock, N., personal communication, April 6, 2022) (McCarthy, J., personal communication, April 7, 2022).

Despite the challenges presented when collaborating with law enforcement, APS views law enforcement as ensuring worker safety in volatile circumstances. In those situations, law enforcement takes the lead, knocking on the door and initiating the visit. Officers are often present to assist when an alleged abuser is in the home so that the social worker can gain access to a private interview with the client (Woodcock, N., personal communication, April 6, 2022).

CPS brings law enforcement to provide civil standby when removing a child from their home and bringing them into protective custody. The social worker almost always leads the visit, with the officers at a distance. If a family is known to have weapons in the home, an officer may be asked to take the lead. Law enforcement is rarely involved with CPS during the investigation of alleged abuse. CPS experiences similar challenges to APS when collaborating with law enforcement. Because of these challenges, CPS social workers are encouraged to team with each other for physical and emotional safety, and to discuss their safety concerns with a supervisor (Honey, N., personal

communication, April 6, 2022) (McKay, J., personal communication, April 27, 2022).

The inequities in policing as experienced by those with marginalized identities are being addressed in the community. In 2021 and 2022, two law enforcement alternatives programs became available in Sonoma County. The Specialized Assistance for Everyone (SAFE) program operates in Petaluma, Rohnert Park, and Cotati. The InResponse program operates in Santa Rosa. Both are modeled after the Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) program operated by the White Bird Clinic in Eugene, Oregon. These programs respond to crisis situations that were previously responded to by law enforcement. Both programs are accessible to the public and HSD workers by either calling law enforcement dispatch or a direct line that is also answered by dispatch. The dispatch worker determines by call type whether to send traditional law enforcement, the alternative program, or a combination of both teams. APS has been included in outreach by both teams and sits on the InResponse Operations Committee (Hempel, E., personal communication, March 29, 2022) (Tappon, W., personal communication, April 12, 2022) (Woodcock, N., personal communication, April 6, 2022).

## **Recommendations**

### **Cross-Division Collaboration**

APS and CPS confront similar circumstances and share valid concerns for client and worker safety when entering client homes. While the populations the programs serve are different, the themes of substance use, behavioral health difficulties, and lack of resources are present for clients in both programs. A cross-division workgroup on client and worker safety would allow for managers and core staff in

both programs to share successful methods, discuss challenges, and build common solutions from a broader perspective. The conversation on when and how to involve law enforcement in home visits would be an opportunity to compare, contrast, and collaborate on an issue that impacts HSD and the community. This workgroup could also be involved in the creation and implementation of the following recommendations.

**Program Impact:** It would take an estimated 3 hours per month of existing management and core staff time to meet as a workgroup and work independently on workgroup tasks.

## **Enhanced Data Collection and Utilization**

Neither APS nor CPS currently track when, why, or to what extent law enforcement is involved in a home visit (Woodcock, N., personal communication, April 6, 2022) (McKay, J., personal communication, April 27, 2022). There are counts of cross-reports and the information could be extrapolated by the nature of the visit and if a suspected crime occurred, but there is no direct count of contacts between law enforcement and clients. Data like this is valuable because it can be used to identify if racial bias plays a role in the decision to request law enforcement accompaniment, as well as to determine if efforts to use alternatives to law enforcement are applicable and successful.

HSD values and prioritizes the safety of employees while at the office and in the field. While direct comparisons aren't available, national data suggest that the potential for injury or fatality when bringing officers to a home visit is higher for the client than it is for the worker conducting the visit without an officer present. The Bureau of Labor Statistics counted 4

fatalities and 98 nonfatal injuries of state and local government social workers due to intentional injuries by others between 2016-2020. By comparison, "US police killed or injured an estimated 55,400 people in 2012" alone (Miller et al., 2016). While injury or threat of injury to staff must be avoided wherever possible, the high level of risk of adverse outcomes to marginalized clients suggests that law enforcement involvement should occur only after alternatives have been evaluated. In addition to increased data collection, publicly available data can support informed decision-making about worker and client safety in social services programs.

**Program Impact:** It would take an estimated one hour per month for existing caseworkers to track these elements on an ongoing basis.

## **Structured Criteria Development**

Criteria help remove bias and define safety issues, so that individual perceptions and misunderstandings of cultural norms are less impactful on a given situation (Lange, K., personal communication, April 11, 2022). In CPS, Structured Decision Making (SDM) is used to assess risk to a child. APS uses locally developed risk assessment tools for clients. Law enforcement dispatch workers use call types to determine whether officers or law enforcement alternatives are used in calls for service, and call types are used in the creation of alternatives programs themselves (National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, 2021) (Grolnic-McClurg, S., personal communication, March 29, 2022). Approaching the involvement of law enforcement as a potential risk and developing assessment criteria for that risk is within the scope and expertise of the APS and CPS programs. The criteria could help the social worker and their supervisor determine whether to include law

enforcement or an alternative response or method. This type of criteria can also reduce the risk of racial bias when requesting law enforcement accompaniment on a home visit.

**Program Impact:** It would take an estimated additional 10 minutes per higher risk report for existing case workers to utilize these assessments on an ongoing basis.

## **Enhanced Relationship Building**

APS has developed relationships with Petaluma SAFE and InResponse by sharing information and sitting on the InResponse Operations Committee. CPS can also develop a mutually beneficial relationship with these programs. Given the time to develop additional collaboration, these alternatives could be utilized for some home visits instead of law enforcement. Both alternative response programs are staffed with behavioral health workers who can help in situations where a client or household member is in crisis, and this kind of assistance could be leveraged in partnership with a social worker who can connect the client to community resources. Additionally, HSD's community engagement efforts can work to identify new opportunities for collaboration as more law enforcement alternative programs are created.

HSD can continue to engage the community on macro and micro levels. Outreach and engagement with people of color, low-income individuals, those with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ people, justice-impacted individuals, and community organizations that serve and organize these groups is an essential part of service provision and understanding criminalized communities. Social workers can be trained in practices that “elevate community voices, community practices, and community problem solving” when

working with individual clients (Jacobs, et al., 2021). These practices are in alignment with HSD's mission and goals, as well as the social worker's code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). The existing HSD Racial Equity Learning Program could address training needs for workers looking for alternatives to police interventions utilizing existing resources.

There are also new opportunities for HSD to support community-based organizations in creating and piloting targeted community engagement and alternative response models. Community Response Initiative to Strengthen Emergency Systems (C.R.I.S.E.S.) Grant Pilot Program funding is becoming available through the State of California C.R.I.S.E.S. Act of 2021. This act awards funding to counties and other local governmental entities to work with community-based organizations to “create and strengthen community-based alternatives to law enforcement.” One area of priority for the state is that grantees work with community-based organizations that have the ability to “coordinate with health, social services, and other support services” and implement “local stakeholder engagement.” A partnership between HSD and one or more community-based organizations serving “historically marginalized populations and...communities with a demonstrated need for community-based alternatives to law enforcement” could address home visits where law enforcement has traditionally been involved and provide new avenues to engage with impacted client communities like “young people of color, people with disabilities, people who are gender non-conforming, people who are formerly incarcerated, people who are unemployed, people with immigration status issues, and people who are unhoused or homeless.” With this funding, a collaborative program



could be designed to use community-based de-escalation specialists and behavioral health workers to partner with APS and CPS in circumstances where law enforcement officers have traditionally been involved.

**Program Impact:** Relationship-building learning activities would take an estimated 3 hours per quarter for core and leadership staff. Enhanced community engagement activities would require a minimum of 10 hours per quarter, and could be as much as 20 hours per month depending on the depth of the engagement. Grant application would require an initial investment of 25 hours and 8 hours per month of ongoing management for reporting and other activities. The up-front investment could lead to overall system improvements, making some existing activities less challenging.

### **Mental/Behavioral Health Liaisons**

Historically, APS contracted for a Department of Health Services Behavioral Health Clinician who acted as a liaison to the program. This Mental Health Liaison was used to accompany social workers on home visits to assist with clients and other household members experiencing mental or behavioral health challenges. The Liaison had access to behavioral health information that the APS worker did not and could suggest or enact an approach based on that information (without disclosing confidential information to others involved). The Liaison could also help get clients and household members connected to services more quickly, even in programs with long waitlists. Having a counterpart with a specialization in behavioral health was a benefit to the APS workers and the program as a whole (Woodcock, N., personal communication, April 6, 2022) (McCarthy, J., personal communication, April 7, 2022). CPS could reap similar benefits from this

type of collaboration as well (McKay, J., personal communication, April 27, 2022). While this program was discontinued several years ago due to budget reductions, there are many cases when it would still be beneficial, especially as an alternative to bringing law enforcement into client homes.

**Fiscal Impact:** Both APS and CPS could benefit from a full-time Mental Health Liaison. Each Behavioral Health Clinician position costs an estimated \$200,000 per year in salary and benefits, for a total cost of approximately \$400,000 per year.

### **Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Director**

In order to manage the projects in the above recommendations, create department-wide policy, and analyze current policy and practice, HSD will need a new executive-level role. This individual would report to the Department Head and work with each of the Divisions to enact the above recommendations, as well as other HSD racial equity efforts. It is necessary to have this level of leadership and authority to create and maintain the changes the Department has committed to making. This Director would work with the County Equity Officer as a partner in efforts so that HSD's goal to become an anti-racist organization can be achieved without delay and be targeted to the unique needs of HSD's client population with an understanding of the existing requirements for service provision. The position would also hold responsibility for culture change efforts, policy development, legislative advocacy, and human resources initiatives as they relate to racial equity. Becoming an anti-racist organization means questioning and analyzing existing structures, continuously learning about new efforts and practices, and consistently implementing best practices at

all levels of the agency. A Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Director would lead these efforts and provide an equity vision for the Department.

The use of law enforcement in APS and CPS is one area of focus that would be assigned to this Director in collaboration with the Adult & Aging and Family, Youth, & Children Divisions. An initial project that encompasses workgroup creation, data collection and utilization, relationship building, and a mental health liaison program would take an estimated six to nine months to develop and set into motion. Some of the responsibilities this role would take on during the project would include working with the divisions to develop requirements for data collection, reporting development, and research on worker safety data; assessment tool development; building shared language and understanding between the protective services programs, their staff, and marginalized communities; pursuing and working with divisions to manage C.R.I.S.E.S. Grant funding; and developing a partnership with the Department of Healthcare Services to re-establish a contract for Behavioral Health Clinicians. Once these initial activities are completed, the new structures would reside with the divisions and be reviewed as necessary in partnership with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director.

**Fiscal Impact:** An HSD Division Director costs an estimated \$300,000 per year in salary and benefits. A nine-month project would equate to approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of that cost, or \$225,000.

## **Conclusion**

As a safety-net service provider, Sonoma County Human Services Department's clients are some of the most impacted by race-based inequities, including those

involving law enforcement. Law enforcement accompaniment of APS and CPS social workers is a concrete area where existing policy can be examined and improved by using a racial equity approach.

In 2022, HSD is well-positioned to evaluate the use of law enforcement in social work programs that enter client homes. Alternatives programs are being piloted in several localities and APS and CPS have developed some internal methods for identifying when and if to involve law enforcement. In order to further this work and the effort to become an anti-racist organization, HSD can enhance existing initiatives, develop new policies and practices, and prioritize the work by providing strong leadership and authority to make change. Engaging the community, collaborating across divisions and County departments, accessing grant funding, and collecting and utilizing data are threads that can weave together to create a law enforcement accompaniment policy that ensures worker safety while realizing HSD's mission to empower, support, and protect the community.

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank my colleagues at Sonoma County Human Services Department for their willingness to share information and answer my questions: Michelle Bendyk, Margo Enos, Eric Glentzer, Marty Graff, Nick Honey, Cole Hornstein, Jennifer McCarthy, Jo McKay, Katie Parrish, and Nadia Woodcock. Steven Grolnic-McClurg with the City of Berkeley, Elece Hempel with Petaluma People Services Center/SAFE, and Wendy Tappan with Sonoma County Department of Health Services/InResponse, generously provided insight into the creation and operation of policing alternatives. This subject matter

cannot be addressed without community voice, and I am grateful to have it included with help from Kirstyne Lange of the NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma, Richard Ortiz of Santa Rosa Junior College's Second Chances program, and Ronit Rubinoff and Esther Lemus of Legal Aid of Sonoma County. The connections, suggestions, and academic support I received from Sara Carnochan, Luca Connolly, and Andrea DuBrow of the U.C. Berkeley School of Social Welfare were indispensable. I appreciate the opportunity provided to me by the Sonoma County Executive Team as led by Angela Struckmann, the encouragement of my Division Director Paul Dunaway, and especially the support from my Section Manager, Gary Fontenot. Finally, a sincere thanks to Diane Kaljian, a friend and mentor in work and life.

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