

It takes a village

Protecting Buncombe County's children is everybody's business

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April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month — a chance for the Buncombe County Department of Social Services to educate area residents about how each of us can help support a safe, healthy and thriving community. Protecting our children requires a strong commitment by residents who, individually and collectively, care enough to report their concerns: a teacher who sees that a tired, hungry child is having difficulty learning; a neighbor who notices bruises that the child can't explain; a law-enforcement officer who sees a child cowering in the corner during a domestic dispute. In each of these cases, an individual taking the time to report their concerns can make a big difference in a child's life, strengthening the family system and, ultimately, the whole fabric of our community.

The Child Protective Services system can be confusing and subject to many misconceptions, due in part to the complexity and unpredictability of the circumstances we're dealing with. Decisions are often difficult, and they impact children and families at their most vulnerable moments. When the system works well, we don't talk about it, but when it fails or when a child is harmed, we ask ourselves how this could happen *here*, in our community.

For social workers and their supervisors, it's a challenging and stressful job. In partnership with families, these qualified, trained professionals must make critical, day-to-day decisions, drawing on insight developed through advanced education, hands-on fieldwork and a supportive network of seasoned supervisors and peers.

The core of the system are the social workers who go out and knock on doors each day, not knowing what they'll find but ready to face any situation. Walking into people's homes, they must answer a crucial question: Is this child safe? Their specialized skills and knowledge help them make that assessment with precision, balancing families' right to self-determination and caregivers' right to privacy.

Everything they see, hear, ask and observe is a piece of the puzzle, helping them formulate the best possible decision. And here in Buncombe County, we're fortunate to be able to recruit and retain the most qualified social-work staff to serve our children and families. Smaller counties sometimes struggle with this, often because the pay is not in line with the demands and realities of the job. This can lead to high turnover and gaps in assessment that ultimately impact the ability to protect the most vulnerable populations.

Supervisors also play a critical role in ensuring that decisions follow policy and law, and that all safety-related options have been discussed with the family. Every decision a social worker makes concerning child protection must be formally reviewed by a supervisor (and, when

indicated, by a child-review team), which is why there are limits on how many social workers one supervisor is allowed to manage. Buncombe County adheres to the state mandate: one supervisor to five workers.

Sometimes, supervisors must make decisions in the middle of the night — such as when a social worker calls them to say a 2-year-old is out in the road alone, or a child has seen his or her parents arrested for selling or using drugs. The supervisor provides emotional and professional support to the social worker who's seen a child with a broken arm or burn wound, or who's heard a 5-year-old talk about how Mom's boyfriend sexually abused her. A strong Child Protective Services system requires strong oversight and support by tenured, qualified supervisors who can help ensure that the DSS has done its job.

But residents must also play a vital role. Buncombe County has always enjoyed a strong community commitment, grounded in the understanding that we're all responsible for protecting our children. That means reporting problems we're aware of; being involved, even when we don't want to be; and participating — as family, friends, faith community and professionals — in ensuring that our children are safe and supported. When a child is harmed, it means the entire community has failed.

There's always room for improvement in any system, and community dialogue, including the families we serve, is essential to finding viable solutions. By continuing to create a strong, interconnected system, we can achieve positive outcomes for the children in our community.

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