

## Child Sexual Abuse Investigations: *Testing Documentation Methods*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1999 Legislature directed the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to establish three pilot projects involving child sexual abuse investigations (Chapter 389, Laws of 1999). The Child Protective Services (CPS) offices were to use written protocols and test different methods and techniques to conduct and preserve interviews with alleged victims of child sexual abuse. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy was directed to evaluate the projects.

Following the law's passage, DSHS asked for volunteer sites. The following sites were selected to test three documentation methods:

Aberdeen: *videotaping* through a Children's Advocacy Center.

Olympia: *audiotaping*.

King Eastside: *teaming of social workers*, using near-verbatim documentation, one person to conduct the interview, and one to take notes.

The study sample consisted of all cases accepted in these offices for investigation of child sexual abuse between January 1, 2000, and October 31, 2000, where a CPS worker conducted or observed the interview. Ninety-two cases met these criteria and had data forms available for analysis.

The Aberdeen site had few referred cases during the study period (10); therefore, the Olympia *audiotaping* and Aberdeen *videotaping* results were combined and labeled "*electronic recording*."

## Major Findings

### *Interview Quality*

- The interviews were conducted with *objectivity*, and no evidence of systematic bias was found.
- Interviewers can learn methods to *increase the objectivity* of their interviews.

### *Near-Verbatim Documentation of Interviews*

- The skill of documenting interviews in a near-verbatim fashion can be learned and offers a significant improvement over narrative summaries. In comparison to *electronic recording*, however, this documentation method is *inferior*.

- Using a *two-person team* of CPS workers to facilitate near-verbatim documentation is *not feasible* and does not improve the quality of documentation.

### ***Electronic Recording***

- Electronic recording is *feasible, well accepted* by interviewers, and has *only minor impact* on children's reactions to the interview or the comfort of interviewers.
- To the extent that a complete record of questions and answers is necessary to evaluate the credibility of statements, electronic recording is clearly the most efficient and reliable method of documentation.
- Almost *five times as many interview questions* were documented using electronic recording as compared with near-verbatim documentation.
- Transcripts of interviews allow other investigators and persons with an interest in the case to *evaluate* whether interviewers are using proper interviewing techniques. Additionally, they are an *invaluable tool for supervisors* to use in assessing performance and giving corrective education.
- *High quality recording equipment and transcription services* are necessary for electronic documentation. If the equipment or the transcription does not accurately capture the questions asked and answers given, the advantages of electronic recording are diminished.

### ***The Investigative Context***

- Many cases referred to CPS for investigation of child sexual abuse allegations are prompted by concerns about children who may be exhibiting unusual behavior or have contact with suspected or known sexual offenders. Under these circumstances, it is *especially difficult to conduct an open-ended interview* and also assess the child's safety.
- Many *families in the study sample had previous CPS referrals* for abuse or neglect and frequently had other problems that complicated the investigator's determination about possible sexual abuse.