

Safely Surrendered Baby Law

Stronger Guidance From the State and Better Information for the Public Could Enhance Its Impact

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Department of Social Services' response as of October 2008

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee (audit committee) requested that the Bureau of State Audits (bureau) review the Department of Social Services' (Social Services) administration of the Safely Surrendered Baby Law (safe-surrender law). The Legislature, responding to a growing number of reports about the deaths of abandoned babies in California, enacted the safe-surrender law, which became effective in January 2001. The law provides a lifesaving alternative to distressed individuals who are unwilling or unable to care for a newborn by allowing a parent or other person having lawful custody of a baby 72 hours old or younger to surrender the baby confidentially and legally to staff at a hospital or other designated safe-surrender site. The audit committee asked us to identify funding sources and review expenditures for the safe-surrender program since 2001 and determine how much has been used for public awareness, printing and distribution of materials, and for personnel. We were also asked to determine how Social Services sets its annual goals, examine its process for determining which outreach and public awareness strategies are the most effective, and identify its plans for future and enhanced outreach to increase the public awareness of the law. In addition, the audit committee asked us to gather information regarding safely surrendered and abandoned babies and determine whether the public outreach efforts appear to be appropriately targeted in light of this information.

Finding #1: The safe-surrender law lacks an administering agency and consistent funding for its implementation.

The safe-surrender law is not as effective as it might be because it does not give state agencies rigorous, ongoing responsibilities for publicizing the law's benefits, and the State has not funded the administration or promotion of a safe-surrender program. Before 2006 the law simply required Social Services, the state agency primarily responsible for implementing the law, to report annually to the Legislature on the law's impact. Since 2006 state agencies have had virtually no legal obligations under the safe-surrender law. Social Services' only involvement is compiling information that counties must submit when their designated sites accept surrendered babies, and since 2002 it has not attempted to obtain funds to further implement and publicize the safe-surrender law. The Legislature did pass two bills that, among other things, would have required Social Services to conduct a media campaign to increase public awareness of the safe-surrender law, but Governor Davis and Governor Schwarzenegger vetoed those bills. Nonetheless, in late 2001, at the request of then-Governor Davis, Social Services used approximately \$800,000 from its State Children's Trust Fund (trust fund) and obtained \$1 million from the California Children and Families Commission (First 5 California) to conduct a two-phase public awareness campaign.

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the State's implementation of the Safely Surrendered Baby Law (safe-surrender law) revealed the following:

- » *The safe-surrender law does not impose on any state agency sufficient requirements to publicize its availability, thus potentially reducing the law's effectiveness.*
- » *The State's failure to provide consistent funding for promoting the law may further reduce its effectiveness.*
- » *The Department of Social Services' (Social Services) initial efforts to publicize the safe-surrender law exceeded its statutory obligations; however, it has not developed any further goals for conducting additional activities.*
- » *After the Legislature amended the safe-surrender law to provide greater protection to individuals who surrender a child, Social Services supplied counties with erroneous guidance on managing confidential data on these individuals.*
- » *Safe-surrender sites included identifying information on individuals who surrendered babies—a violation of state law—in more than 9 percent of the cases since the amendment took effect.*
- » *At least 77 children may not have access later in life to information on their birth parents that they may have a legal right to view because, according to Social Services, counties have incorrectly classified them as surrendered.*

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» *Likely as the natural result of the safe-surrender process and the act of abandoning a child, which do not lend themselves to robust data collection, we learned very little about the mothers of surrendered and abandoned babies from our review of the caseworker narratives.*

» *Several counties have developed interesting approaches to increasing public awareness about the safe-surrender law.*

If it would like Social Services or other agencies to promote awareness of the safe-surrender law, we recommend that the Legislature consider amending the law to do the following:

- Specify the agency that should administer a safe-surrender program, with responsibilities that include ongoing outreach and monitoring efforts.
- Require continued annual reporting to the Legislature on the law's impact.
- Consider providing or identifying funding that will support efforts to promote awareness of the law.

To support future efforts related to the safe-surrender law, including continuing outreach and improving the quality of the State's statistics, we recommended that Social Services consider using a portion of existing funds, such as those available in its trust fund, and should consider renewing its partnership with First 5 California, which Social Services can legally use for such efforts.

Legislative Action: None.

Social Services' Action: Partial corrective action taken.

Social Services stated it will continue to provide funding for outreach related to the safe-surrender law to the extent that funding from the trust fund is available. Further, Social Services reported that a safe-surrender law outreach committee was formed as part of a workgroup, and is tasked with developing outreach activities related to raising public awareness about the law. Social Services indicated that one recommendation from the subcommittee is to submit a funding proposal to First 5 California.

Finding #2: Social Services' lack of further plans to publicize the safe-surrender law may limit its effectiveness.

Because the State has not funded a program that would publicize the safe-surrender law and its benefits, Social Services has not actively publicized the law since concluding the mass-media portion of its awareness campaign in December 2003. Further, Social Services presumes that counties are actively promoting the law and that increases in the number of abandoned babies would provide the necessary warning for it to adjust its practices. However, our audit indicated that Social Services' assumptions about the counties' programs for and its statistics about the safe-surrender law may be incorrect.

Social Services' staff stated that although the department will update its information on the safe-surrender law if it changes, it does not plan to actively promote the law. Moreover, Social Services' administrators do not believe that an official safe-surrender program exists because the Legislature has not created or funded such a program.

We believe that Social Services' decision not to set long-term goals for or actively promote the safe-surrender law will probably limit the law's effectiveness. Indeed, some individuals who are unaware of the law may abandon rather than safely surrender babies born to mothers who may not be able to care for them. In justifying its position, Social Services' management explained that the department has fulfilled all of its legal requirements. In addition, management indicated that counties have ongoing public awareness efforts and that Social Services' statistics do not indicate an "alarming increase" in the number of abandoned babies. Although we agree that state law does not presently require it to take any further action, Social Services' assumption that counties are continuing to market the safe-surrender law is not well founded, and its statistics on abandoned babies are incomplete. For instance, for calendar years 2003 through 2006, Social Services reported a total of five deceased abandoned babies found throughout the State, and it reported no deceased abandoned babies for 2005. Our limited review of other data suggests that the actual number of deceased abandoned babies may be much higher. Specifically, the Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect reported that in Los Angeles County alone, 24 deceased abandoned babies were found during the same four-year period. In addition, a database that the Department of Public Health (Public Health) maintains to monitor the deaths of children and the causes of those deaths contains information on six deceased abandoned infants, found across California in 2005, who we determined were one year old or younger. Additionally, Social Services' position suggesting that it will not conduct additional activities related to the safe-surrender law unless the number of abandoned babies increases significantly is not in keeping with the mission of the Office of Child Abuse Prevention.

We recommended that Social Services work with Public Health and county agencies to gain access to the most accurate and complete statistics on abandoned babies to ensure that it is aware of and can appropriately react to changes in the number of abandoned babies.

Social Services' Action: Pending.

Social Services stated that as part of the tasks being addressed by the safe-surrender law workgroup, a subcommittee was formed to address data issues. The subcommittee includes representatives from Social Services, Public Health, and county agencies. According to Social Services, efforts are underway to address the following:

- Clarification regarding the manner in which data for surrendered and abandoned babies is extracted from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS).
- Clarification regarding the issuance of a Certificate of Finding, which does not list the birth parents' names, in lieu of a birth certificate for surrendered babies.
- Public Health and Social Services' data sharing related to safely surrendered and abandoned babies.

Social Services will also continue to partner with Public Health and county agencies to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Finding #3: Safe-surrender sites are violating state law by disclosing confidential information on individuals who surrender babies.

Social Services' guidance on the management of confidential data is contrary to the Legislature's intent for the safe-surrender law and, combined with the safe-surrender sites' violation of the prohibition against providing confidential data to county agencies, may adversely affect one of the safe-surrender law's ultimate goals—the adoption of surrendered infants.

Effective January 2004 the Legislature amended the safe-surrender law to protect personal identifying information contained in the medical questionnaire on persons who surrender babies. In August 2004 Social Services issued an information notice to all counties that gave instructions on entering data about safely surrendered babies into the CWS/CMS. Among other things, the instructions stated that

if the parent(s) verbally provided their names, the counties should enter the names into the CWS/CMS because the parent(s) has waived their privilege of confidentiality. Conversely, if a parent reveals their name on the medical background questionnaire, their name should not be entered in the CWS/CMS.

According to our legal counsel, the instructions provided by Social Services appear to contradict state law. Specifically, the safe-surrender law states that any personal identifying information that pertains to a parent or individual who surrenders a child is confidential and shall be redacted from any medical information provided to the county agency. In fact, the law unambiguously prohibits the disclosure of identifying information on the person who surrenders a baby by a safe-surrender site—even to county agencies. Further, we believe that it is unlikely that a parent surrendering a child would know that verbally mentioning her or his name could constitute a waiver of the privilege of confidentiality. Moreover, our legal counsel asserts that the safe-surrender law does not provide that a person verbally providing personal information waives his or her right to confidentiality.

Despite the law's clear prohibition of the disclosure of identifying information by safe-surrender sites, we found that county documents in the CWS/CMS created both before and after Social Services provided this guidance contained personal information on parents of surrendered babies. Our review of caseworker narratives for all 218 babies surrendered since 2001 identified the names, phone numbers, or addresses of individuals who surrendered children in 24 cases, including 16 (9 percent) of the 176 cases occurring since January 2004 when the Legislature strengthened the protection given such information. Each of these cases reflects a violation of the safe-surrender law. Individuals who otherwise would use the safe-surrender law might be discouraged from doing so if they were aware of the frequent violation of one of the safe-surrender law's key features—confidentiality.

We recommended that Social Services clarify the circumstances under which the safe-surrender sites and counties must protect the identifying information on the individual who surrenders an infant. At a minimum, Social Services should revoke its erroneous guidance on the waiver of the privilege of confidentiality by individuals who safely surrender babies.

Social Services' Action: Pending.

According to Social Services, the workgroup will draft a new All County Information Notice to correct the erroneous CWS/CMS data entry instructions relative to surrendering an individual's confidentiality. Additionally, Social Services stated that a subcommittee was formed to begin drafting instructions specific to each type of safe surrender site, as well as child welfare service agencies. According to Social Services, the instructions will clarify each agency's responsibility to keep the surrendering individual's personal information confidential.

Finding #4: Counties are not correctly classifying babies as either safely surrendered or abandoned, which affects the decision of whether to disclose confidential information.

Based on Social Services own review, many counties are not correctly classifying babies as safely surrendered or abandoned in the CWS/CMS. A misclassification can affect access to confidential data on individuals who have relinquished their children. For example, children improperly classified as safely surrendered may not be allowed access to information on their parents even though they have the legal right to review the information. Although its staff are aware of the possible consequences of such misclassifications, Social Services has made only limited attempts to correct the problem. According to an official at Social Services, it has not changed the data in the CWS/CMS that department staff believe are misclassified, because Social Services views the data as county property. Moreover, Social Services has not required county agencies to correct such mistakes, because its management believes that the department lacks the authority to do so.

The large number of babies whose cases Social Services believes are misclassified appears to arise, at least in part, because of the misapplication of or confusion over guidelines Social Services issued to the counties. We found that Social Services' own criteria for determining whether cases qualify as safe surrenders have changed over time; however, it has not adequately followed up with the counties to ensure that they correctly apply the current criteria.

Another element prompting Social Services to disagree, for reporting purposes, with the way county agencies classify cases involving surrendered babies centers on the parent's mention of adoption. During our review of cases that it considered to be misclassified as safely surrendered, we noted that Social Services appears not to consider a baby as surrendered if the mother merely mentions that adoption is her ultimate goal for the baby, even if she does not sign the necessary adoption forms. Specifically, since 2001, Social Services has disagreed with the classification of 36 cases that counties deemed to be safe surrenders because the documentation prepared by the counties included some evidence that the parent had mentioned adoption. We agree with Social Services' action in 13 of these instances because the caseworker narratives explicitly state that the mother signed paperwork to voluntarily relinquish her child for adoption. However, for the remaining 23 cases, there was no evidence that a parent completed the paperwork required for adoption. In fact, in some of these 23 cases, there was evidence that the mother may have intended to safely surrender the baby.

Legal access to certain information on parents may be compromised because county agencies have inappropriately labeled some babies as surrendered and mistakenly categorized other babies as abandoned. Social Services has identified at least 77 cases in which babies classified as surrendered should have received another classification. These 77 cases represent more than 26 percent of the surrendered babies reported in the CWS/CMS from January 2001 to December 2007. The misclassifications may limit those children's future access to information about their parents. Moreover, the misclassification of cases as safe surrenders may hinder the potential criminal investigation of individuals who abandon babies.

Additionally, the counties' incorrect labeling of abandoned babies as safe surrenders may have negative effects. We found five instances in which counties classified babies found alone in and around hospitals as safely surrendered, although those cases appear to be examples of unsafe infant abandonment. The classification of such babies as safely surrendered may mean that counties are not pursuing criminal investigations of the individuals who left those babies in unsafe situations.

Social Services' staff have also found cases of infants labeled as abandoned in the CWS/CMS who they believe met the safe-surrender criteria, meaning that the parents of those children may not be given the protection they are entitled to under the safe-surrender law. Based on their review of caseworker narratives for children whom county agencies have coded as abandoned in the CWS/CMS, Social Services' staff have identified two cases that county agencies should have classified as safe surrenders instead of abandonments. Further, we reviewed a sample of narratives for 40 babies one year old or younger who were classified as abandoned in the CWS/CMS and identified one additional case that could have been classified as safely surrendered, given the lack of clarity on the definition. If a county agency codes a baby's case file as abandoned when a parent actually surrendered the baby, and if the county then uses the coding in the CWS/CMS to determine which data it must protect, the child may later be able to inappropriately access the information on his or her family that the parents believed was confidential. Ultimately, depending on how a county agency classifies a child in the CWS/CMS, a child may have more or less access to information on his or her birth parents than the law allows.

We recommended that Social Services clarify the definition of safe surrender, and then disseminate and monitor its use among county and state agencies. Additionally, Social Services should require counties to correct records that Social Services' staff believe are erroneous because counties have misclassified babies as either surrendered or abandoned. Because Social Services does not believe it presently has the authority to do so, Social Services should seek legislation to obtain this authority.

Social Services' Action: Pending.

Social Services stated that the safe-surrender law workgroup formed a subcommittee to develop a clear, consistent definition of the safe-surrender law to be utilized by all appropriate agencies. This subcommittee created a draft definition that clarifies the circumstances in which a baby is considered surrendered and presented it to the full workgroup for their review. Revisions to the definition are currently underway and the final draft will be reviewed at the next full workgroup meeting. Steps for disseminating the definition to the appropriate agencies will be discussed at that time.

Social Services also stated that its staff encourages counties to follow the established CWS/CMS data deletion process to make the necessary changes to correct inaccurate data related to surrendered or abandoned babies. Social Services anticipates that as safe surrender sites and county child welfare agencies better understand their role in the surrender process, inappropriate information will not be entered into CWS/CMS. The workgroup will continue to develop solutions to this issue.

Finding #5: The majority of surrendered babies may not have access to key medical information later in life.

Our review of caseworker narratives for all safely surrendered infants in California found that 72 percent of the babies surrendered since the law's enactment may not have access to vital information on their families' medical histories because of the difficulty that safe-surrender sites have in obtaining this information in medical questionnaires or by some other means. Safe-surrender sites must provide, or make a good faith effort to provide, a medical questionnaire to the individual who surrenders a baby. The individual may complete the medical questionnaire at the time of the surrender, anonymously submit it later in an envelope provided for that purpose, or decline to fill out the form. The low number of completed medical questionnaires and the minimal intake of medical information by other means suggest that many surrendered babies may not benefit from having knowledge of their families' medical histories.

To provide surrendered babies and their health care providers as much information on their medical histories as possible, we recommended that Social Services consider ways to improve the availability of medical information.

Social Services' Action: Pending.

According to Social Services, in an effort to address this recommendation, the safe surrender workgroup formed a subcommittee that is reviewing the current version of the medical questionnaire provided to surrendering individuals. This subcommittee is also planning to address protocols for surrender sites, which will include the requirement to provide, or make a good faith effort to provide, the medical questionnaire to the surrendering individual. However, because completing the questionnaire is voluntary on the part of the surrendering individual, developing methods of obtaining this information will continue to be a challenge.

Finding #6: Some counties have developed useful models and materials to raise awareness about the law.

Although county efforts to publicize the safe-surrender law vary, some counties have developed interesting products and employed innovative techniques to implement and publicize the safe-surrender law. Los Angeles County appears to have undertaken the most comprehensive and sustained effort, including forming two task forces to help it achieve better results. For instance, according to a representative from Los Angeles County, as a result of one of the task force's recommendations, the county spent more than \$500,000 on an outreach campaign. Other local governments, such as San Joaquin and San Bernardino counties, have also employed novel methods to

inform the public about the safe-surrender law, including using nonprofit organizations to spearhead efforts and producing an award-winning short film on the safe-surrender law. These efforts by local entities furnish a valuable service and help to make up for the State's limited involvement in publicizing and further implementing the safe-surrender law.

We recommended that Social Services work with the counties to leverage existing models and tools currently in use in California, such as translated materials and existing middle and high school curricula, to continue raising the public's awareness of the safe-surrender law in the most cost-effective manner.

Social Services' Action: Pending.

According to Social Services, a safe-surrender law outreach subcommittee has been tasked with developing outreach activities related to raising public awareness about the law. The subcommittee members represent Public Health, nonprofit agencies, county partners and hospitals, as well as Social Services. Social Services stated that the subcommittee has already gathered and reviewed materials brought by committee members and will consider conducting a survey of counties to gather additional information.

Regarding middle- and high-school curricula, Social Services stated that it has no authority to approve and distribute such materials. However, as it is made aware of educational materials for use in schools, Social Services will provide contact information to those who request it.

