

L.A. County's leak investigation is about the law, not publicity

The director of the county's Department of Children and Family Services defends her agency's record.

By Patricia S. Ploehn

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Your Aug. 21 editorial, "Leaks don't kill kids," and Tim Rutten's Aug. 18 Op-Ed column, "When children die," erroneously implied that the focus of the county's inquiry into illegally disclosed confidential case information is to mitigate bad publicity or improve social worker morale. This is simply untrue. It is also wrong to imply that child-specific case information is kept confidential at my own, or any other public employee's, whim. It is confidential according to state law. As director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, I have a duty to the county, the state and the children and families we serve to uphold state law by taking reasonable measures to protect confidentiality while sharing any and all information that can be legally shared.

It would make my job much easier if I could freely discuss the circumstances of our high-profile cases, but I simply cannot. When incomplete confidential case information is selectively leaked, both the public and my social workers are disadvantaged because there is no legal avenue for us to correct inaccurate or misleading information. This has nothing to do with public relations. The fact is that not presenting the full story, as is routinely the case in media accounts based on partial, leaked information, erodes public trust and contributes to the oversimplification of the work that social workers do. In very real ways, this increases the potential for harm to children.

I believe my department is the most scrutinized child welfare agency in the country, and I welcome that scrutiny because I believe transparency and public oversight are vital. When information is used in a balanced way to represent the challenges faced by — and, yes, the occasional missteps taken by — our department, I am fully supportive. Too often, that balance is missing and heroic, admirable work by the vast majority of our social workers goes overlooked. I am proud of my social workers and the life-changing work they do.

Our department keeps thousands of children safe every year, and we put a great deal of resources into reviewing tragic circumstances and correcting bad practices whenever and wherever we find them. I can assure the public that the time and resources being used for this leak inquiry are miniscule compared to the time and resources we dedicate to keeping our children safe.

Los Angeles County has the largest child welfare agency in the country, with more than 32,000 children in our care, and we have a better safety record than many other metropolitan agencies. Still, my staff and I are determined to make this the safest county in the nation for all of our precious children.

Patricia S. Ploehn is director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.