

PRESSING FORWARD

Newsletter for the Employees of the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services

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PRS staff pull together amidst Branch Davidian crisis



Photo by R.U. Steinberg

PRS Executive Director Dr. Janice M. Caldwell (right) introduces CPS investigations supervisor Joyce Sparks to reporters at March 5th press briefing held at the Waco Convention Center.

EVERY DAY, the women and men of the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (PRS) protect the physical safety and emotional well-being of the most vulnerable citizens of Texas. Although more intense than "business as usual," response by staff to the recent events at the Branch Davidian compound in Mount Carmel outside Waco illustrated what they must face on a day-to-day basis. **PRESSING FORWARD** presents a glimpse from PRS staff.

Feb. 28: Day of the siege

Bob Boyd, CPS program director in Waco, was watching the TV news around noon on February 28, the day of the siege. "I knew what this meant," he said. "We had to be ready in case children were going to be released. So I started making phone calls." Boyd didn't know at the time that he was going to be on the phone on and off until 2:30 the next morning.

Jeanne Byrd, a CPS investigations worker, got a phone call about three hours later. "It was from Jessé Guardiola, the supervisor who was on duty that day," she said. "He told me that we needed to be on stand-by because David Koresh might release the children from the compound." When the call to respond was received, CPS staff arrived at the command post within 40 minutes.

As Byrd watched the events at Mount Carmel unfold on the TV news, she recalled her dealings with Koresh and the Branch Davidians more than a year earlier. "That's when investigations supervisor Joyce Sparks and I began our investigation of them," she said.

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■ PERSPECTIVE ■

From the Executive Director

If the crisis at the Branch Davidian complex at Mt. Carmel outside Waco can be considered a test of our responsiveness, effectiveness, and dedication, then we have passed with flying colors. Nearly 100 PRS staff were involved in one way or another, with representatives from APS, CPS, and Child-care Licensing all pulling together in a responsible and timely manner.

Although I recognize that everyone on the front lines deals with potentially critical circumstances daily, I am gratified that in a situation that called for our utmost, and one that was before the eyes of the world, the dedication and professionalism of our staff was evident.

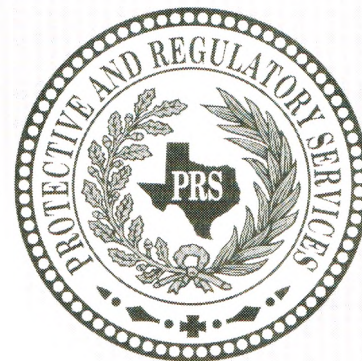
As many of you may realize, the ordeal in Waco erupted my first week with the agency. There was no easing into this job; I was plunged immediately into the thick of a crisis. I feel, however, that I could have received no better welcome than to see staff meeting this challenge as they did. I was especially gratified by the dynamic team work I observed as people came from other regions to help handle the demanding tasks that needed to be done.

I urge all of us to take pride in the way we responded quickly and compassionately to provide safety and care to those children who were released, the responsibility we demonstrated towards the elderly adults we feared might be at risk, and the groundwork we laid for those children we hoped would one day be released. Their deaths in no way diminishes the labor of love we did for them.

Because you were prepared and willing to do whatever it took, this tragedy has shown to the people of Texas who we are and what we stand for. They will recognize that we are dedicated to serving and doing our best even under the most difficult circumstances.



Janice M. Caldwell, Dr. P.H.
Executive Director
Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services



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Byrd said that CPS went to the Branch Davidian compound three times in 1992. For the first two times, they requested law enforcement agents to accompany them—a typical procedure CPS workers follow when they suspect that they might be facing potentially dangerous situations. “By the third time, we decided to go out with just a cellular telephone,” she said.

According to Byrd, staff were concerned about what they saw, but couldn’t confirm that any abuse was being committed. “We couldn’t validate that abuse was going on,” she said. “But we came away with concerns that there was much more going on there than could meet the eye or that we could legally act on.”

Byrd said that Koresh talked about violence frequently. “He told us there would be blood and fire some day,” she said. “The last time we went out to the compound, his parting words to us were that the Los Angeles riots would be a picnic compared to what was going to happen one day in Waco. He described the people of Waco as ‘Babylon,’ and he and his followers as ‘the lamb of God.’ ‘Babylon,’ he said, ‘would have to fall.’”

Throughout the past year, Byrd and Sparks met several times with FBI and ATF agents to coordinate information. “I drew diagrams of the inside of the compound for the FBI,” said Byrd. “Koresh had even taken me down to a buried bus to show me where they stored their guns, and told me about how they had been equipped with ‘hell fire’ to make them automatic.”

Working the long haul

Julie Clemons, a conservatorship worker in Waco, remembers the scene at work that Monday morning. “Things are usually busy, but this was an exception,” she said. “First thing when I got in, I was assigned some of the shifts out at the emergency headquarters, which was set up at the Texas State Technical Institute,” she said. “We were waiting to see if any of the children would be released. It had been decided that we would cover the

situation around the clock.”

Boyd said that he lined up a shelter at the Methodist Children’s Home, but there was a catch. “They had an unused home unit, but they didn’t have any staff,” he said. “So I spoke to Barbara Patterson, the foster home supervisor in Waco, and we were able to line-up foster parents and foster home staff in the area to help take care of the children. Working with Kathryn Hibbert, the Region 6 foster homes and adoption director, and Karen Eells, the Region 6 CPS director, we were able to divide up the workload.”

Joyce Sparks said things quickly came together because her co-workers deal with crisis situations on a day-to-day basis. “The brightest and the best came together and did marvelous work,” she said. “There were acts of heroism everywhere. People who normally weren’t responsible for certain duties pulled together and took the initiative to get the job done.”

Since she covers the child abuse hotline, intake worker Letha Cotton was used to getting phone calls—but not like this. “It was mind-boggling,” she said. “It was really a hard time. I can’t tell you how frustrating it got. I’ve been with the agency for 20 years, but I never ran across anything like this.”

Koresh released 21 children who ended up in CPS care. Among the first were two sibling groups who were assigned to Clemons. “I completed studies of the relatives and coordinated visits with those who were visiting from out of town,” she said. “One child’s father had come from England, which required me to work with the British consulate, call people in England, fax things to them, and get criminal checks from foreign countries.”

Clemons said the pressure was intense because workers often had to work within tight time constraints. “Things got especially difficult during the second week of the crisis,” she said. “Visits from relatives picked up because of a court hearing about the children’s conservatorship.”

Sparks said that skilled workers were in great abundance and easily handled the crisis. “We had a good

variety of caseworkers,” she said. “In one instance, caseworker Earnest Trotter was sent to pick up a 12-year-old boy because we figured that they’d hit it right off. And sure enough, before they left the emergency site, they already had come up with nicknames for each other.”

All of the children who were released were initially placed in the Methodist Children’s Home, which was already licensed through PRS to provide 24-hour child care. Barbara Balew, a Child-care Licensing (CCL) Division representative in Waco, said that the children were put in a separate unit housed away from other children and they had their own support staff. “I didn’t have to do anything extra for them—just monitor their care,” she said.

Sparks commented about how well the children were doing in the home considering what they had gone through. “They were laughing and playing with each other,” she said. “Older children were taking care of the younger ones as in a family, and were reading stories and playing with them. Plus the kids really loved the house parents’ cooking.”

Amidst the turmoil, Sparks remembered the following thank-you letter that was received from one of the families whose children were released:

“Thank you for all the help and much needed assistance through the court custody hearing and our stay in Waco. For all the time spent in arranging our meetings with our little granddaughters, who are doing great. We thank you so very much for everything. You and your staff are the greatest group put together.”

The Branch Davidians

Balew remembered visiting the Branch Davidian compound about a dozen years ago. “I received a letter from a woman who said that she was worried about her 17-year-old grandson who was out there,” she said. “Since they had an unlicensed child-care facility, I carried out an investigation to check on him. After speaking with him, I remember going back to the office thinking to myself, ‘If this



young man doesn't think he's Jesus Christ right now, he is very close to it.' It was amazing that someone could use scripture to talk about anything no matter what the subject."

Balew also talked to George Roden, the man in charge. "I told him that they were subject to licensing, and that they had to fill out an application," she said. "But a few days later, I received a letter from the grandmother who said the child returned to her. I suspected this was an attempt to get me off their backs."

Like Balew, Mike Cumpston, an Adult Protective Services (APS) worker in Waco, recalled the compound's past. "Until recently, people around here were never very concerned about the Branch Davidians," he said. "They were like a lot of separatist sects in the area who kept to themselves. Then one day back in the mid-1980s, George Roden, who was their leader at the time, tried to resurrect a dead body. Some gunfire ensued, and Roden hid for safety behind a 20-inch wide tree. Only problem was that he was a little bit wider than that. Folks joked that every time he exhaled, he'd get fired upon. Ever since then, people have been a little concerned about the place."

In 1990, Cumpston investigated the Branch Davidian complex, which he described as a plywood fort. "Family members outside the compound told me they were concerned about their mother who had been recruited by Koresh from a Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Hawaii," he said. "They hadn't heard from her for a long time and were wondering if she was still alive. Because she was in the cult, she had basically severed ties with her relatives."

"Once I arrived there, I found a woman who met their description," he said. "Briefly, she told me she was fine and hadn't called her family because she didn't want to bother them. She looked healthy and said she was happy to be there. And since she wasn't being abused or neglected, we closed the case."

APS joins in

Four or five days after the initial crisis began on Feb. 28, Cumpston

became involved with the Branch Davidians again. Cult member Woodrow Kendrick, who had escaped from the compound before the gun battle, fled to a trailer house that was inhabited by five elderly women, each of whom were connected to the cult.

"The McLennan County sheriff asked me to evaluate the women's condition," said Cumpston. "Unfortunately, when I showed up at the scene, I found myself surrounded by deputy sheriffs. Nobody told them I was coming, and they thought I was a burglar. Fortunately, Bill Williams of CPS saw what was going on and bailed me out."

Initially, Cumpston tried to find out if the women needed anything. "They said they were concerned about their Social Security benefits, which were being sent to the compound, so I helped reroute the checks to their house," he said. "I also arranged for them to get food from the commodities office."

But despite law enforcement's concerns, Cumpston said that the women looked healthy. "No protective intervention was necessary," he said. "The issue of them being exploited was sketchy because their benefits were being sent to the compound, but they didn't feel like they were being exploited."

April 19: A tragic end

"It was strange to be assigned to some of the children who were still in the compound," said Clemons. "Then, when I watched the compound burn down on TV, I was thinking, 'My kids are still in there. My kids are dying.' Feeling numbed by the whole situation, Clemons turned to her husband for support."

Byrd said there wasn't any way to sum up her mixed feelings and put them into words. "I personally met about six or seven of the children who remained and later perished, including David Koresh's legal children—Star, Cyrus, and Bobby—as well as the three Martin children," she said. "Sherry Doyle, who has already been identified among the dead, was the first child I interviewed when I went out there—she was only 17 years old."

Like many of her co-workers who

needed someone to help them deal with their grief, Byrd consulted with Dr. Bruce Perry, chief of psychiatry at Texas Children's Hospital and vice chairman of psychiatry at the Baylor College of Medicine. Perry was brought in to counsel the children who were released, as well as workers.

"I've worked with Dr. Perry, a lovely man who has made himself available to all of us," said Byrd. "He's let us all sound off and it's been helpful to have him assist us in processing our feelings. But there's only so much another person can do for you. The rest you have to resolve within yourself. All I can say is that I'm human, and I really hurt for these people."

Tim Sharkley, a conservatorship worker in Waco, said that staff are just beginning to work out their feelings on an individual level. "Everyone has been supportive of each other," he said.

Balew pointed out the valiant efforts of the Baptist Children's Home of San Antonio, which established a center that was ready to care for the children who were never released. "They came here to Waco after uprooting some of their staff," she said. "They were set up to house the children, as well as relatives from out of town who would have been coming to pick them up. We had them licensed in two days—they really knew what they were doing. But they never got to do what they were ready to do."

Boyd only had praise for his staff. "Everyone here went through two months of stressful, anxious times, but they did an excellent job," he said. "We made decisions that best helped the children who came out of the compound. And I'm proud of the staff in the way they pulled together."

The day after the fire, Clemons still had her appointments, and her regular caseload of 35 children. "People may think that this was an exception, but this is what we do all the time," she said. "This wasn't a special way that we handle things. We deal with terrible things every day." ★

by R.U. Steinberg, staff writer