

Response to Grand Jury Report Form

Report Title: Protecting Sonoma County's Most Vulnerable from Abuse and Neglect: For the Children

Report Date: May 8, 2026

Response by: Rebecca Hermosillo Title: Chairperson

Agency/Department Name: Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS:

[List numbers: F1- F6]

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: _____

I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: **F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6**

(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed with an explanation of the reasons.)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

[List numbers: R1 – R3]

- Recommendations numbered: **R1** have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered: _____ have not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future.
(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)
- Recommendations numbered: **R2, R3** require(s) further analysis.
(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. ***This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.***)
- Recommendations numbered: _____ will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.
(Attach an explanation.)

Date: _____

Signed: _____

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

General Statement

The Child Death Review Team (CDRT) is a multidisciplinary body composed of representatives from multiple County departments and partner agencies, each with distinct statutory responsibilities, legal obligations, and operational priorities. The Team is made up of staff from Department of Health Services, District Attorney's Office, and the Human Services Department, in addition to representatives of many external partners.

The Child Death Review Team serves a broader purpose than the review of deaths to determine potential child abuse and neglect. The team reviews all child deaths occurring in Sonoma County to identify trends, risk factors, and opportunities for systems-level improvements that may reduce preventable childhood mortality. These reviews encompass a wide range of causes of death, including medical conditions, injuries, transportation-related incidents, unsafe sleep, drowning, suicide, homicide, and neglect-related fatalities.

The Child Death Review Team has operated in Sonoma County for many years and has historically conducted multidisciplinary case reviews, developed prevention recommendations, supported community education efforts, produced periodic reports, participated in training activities, and informed child health and safety initiatives. Team members have continued to meet regularly, review cases, collect and analyze data, monitor trends, and identify opportunities for prevention and systems improvement.

Many matters reviewed by the CDRT involve sensitive child welfare information, medical records, law enforcement investigations, and criminal prosecutions. Although Penal Code section 11174.32 provides confidentiality protections for information shared within the CDRT process, concerns regarding the protection of confidential information and active investigations have historically influenced the way the CDRT conducts its work and maintains records.

Findings:

F1. Family, Youth and Children Division was unable to explain the rationale for reexamining cases that had been evaluated out four times within the previous 12 months. Therefore, it is unclear whether the practice is an effective response to reports of child neglect and abuse.

Response: Partially Disagree

The Family, Youth and Children Division of the Human Services Department is able to explain the rationale for reexamining the 4th evaluated out referral in the previous 12 months. Please see the response to R1 regarding the origin of this process. However, the Board agrees that the efficacy of this practice has not been studied since its implementation in 2018 and a review of that practice is both timely and appropriate.

F2. Because the Sonoma County CDRT lacks funding for acquisition of data and retention of records, production of its mandated reports may be impaired.

Response: Partially Disagree

Data collection, data entry, trend analysis, and record retention activities are ongoing and supported through existing staff resources. Child mortality data continue to be collected, reviewed, and analyzed, and summary information has been routinely shared among participating members. However, the Board agrees that limited dedicated resources have constrained the team's ability to consistently produce public-facing reports.

F3. By failing to report its findings for the past 12 years, the Sonoma County CDRT has not fulfilled its mandate to educate service providers, policymakers, and the public about the risk factors for child neglect, abuse and death. Annual reporting could have led to systemic improvements to alleviate or prevent risks to vulnerable children.

Response: Partially Disagree

The Board acknowledges that annual reports have not been produced since 2014 and recognizes the value such reports could provide to policymakers, service providers, and the public. However, the absence of public-facing reports should not be interpreted as an absence of review activity. The CDRT has continued to conduct case reviews, analyze trends, and share findings among participating members and programs, and findings are shared with Health Services, the District Attorney's Office, and FY&C, which actively engage in efforts to alleviate and prevent risks to vulnerable children

At the same time, concerns regarding confidentiality, active criminal investigations, and potential litigation implications have historically affected the way CDRT information is collected, maintained, and disseminated.

It is possible that future reporting efforts could be structured to provide meaningful aggregate statistical information while fully protecting confidential information, ongoing investigations, and prosecutorial interests.

F4. The Sonoma County CDRT lacks leadership. Without formal leadership the CDRT has failed to meet statutory requirements.

Response: Partially Disagree

The CDRT has historically operated with shared leadership from the Health Services Department and the District Attorney's Office. Additionally, the Board recognizes the unique structure and purpose of the CDRT. The CDRT is a multidisciplinary team composed of representatives from multiple agencies, each with distinct responsibilities and limitations on participation and information sharing.

Because participating agencies have differing statutory obligations and priorities, leadership within a multidisciplinary team necessarily differs from leadership within a single agency and often requires balancing competing responsibilities and interests.

The Board further notes that the CDRT has continued to meet regularly, conduct multidisciplinary case reviews, collect and analyze child mortality data, monitor trends, and identify opportunities for prevention and systems improvement despite the absence of recent public-facing reports. Nevertheless, the Board agrees that increased capacity may assist the CDRT in fulfilling all aspects of its statutory mission, including the preparation of future reports.

F5. The Sonoma County CDRT is without an effective spokesperson for child advocacy in the community. This results in lost opportunities to inform and influence the many service providers and the public regarding children’s health and safety in the County.

Response: Partially Disagree

The Board recognizes that public awareness regarding child safety issues may benefit from the identification of a designated spokesperson or representative for the CDRT. A clearly identified representative could assist in communicating aggregate findings, trends, and recommendations arising from the work of the CDRT. However, any public communications regarding the work of the CDRT must remain consistent with applicable confidentiality requirements and the protection of active investigations. Further, while designation of a formal spokesperson may strengthen community awareness and communication, participating agencies and community partners have continued to advance child health and safety efforts through their respective roles and responsibilities. The Board, however, agrees that a more formalized process for communicating findings and recommendations may enhance the team's effectiveness and visibility.

F6. The Sonoma County CDRT’s failure to identify a single leader, develop written bylaws and protocols, provide training for its members, and generate minutes of its meetings has impaired the development of institutional memory.

Response: Partially Disagree

The CDRT has maintained continuity through longstanding participation by multidisciplinary partners, regular case review activities, ongoing data collection and analysis, and routine sharing of trends and findings among members. However, the Board agrees that development of formal bylaws, governance documents, training expectations, and documentation practices would strengthen institutional knowledge, continuity, and long-term sustainability.

Recommendations:

R1. By October 1, 2026, the BOS shall direct the FY&C to determine the origin and efficacy of reviewing decisions to evaluate out a case which has been reported to the Hotline four times in the previous 12 months.

Response: Has been implemented

Regarding origin: The Family, Youth and Children (FY&C) Division of the Human Services Department has an established rationale for an additional review of the 4th evaluated out referral in the previous 12 months. This additional review process is an effort to increase child abuse prevention efforts with earlier intervention. While each individual evaluated out referral does not rise to the standard established by the State of California to warrant an in-person response, the cumulative picture of the family in that 12-month period may suggest that the family is struggling to best meet the needs of their children and keep their children safe. The 4th evaluated out review process does not require an in-person response; rather, it provides a prompt for a deeper dive assessment with a manager to assess if overriding the Structured Decision Making Tool to an in-person response might be warranted. The goal of the in-person response is two-fold. First, it is an opportunity for a thorough investigation during which the social worker will gather all of the information, including interviewing the impacted children, their caregivers, and collaterals, to complete a wholistic safety and risk assessment. Second, it provides an opportunity to offer prevention services to support the family in an effort to reduce the likelihood of future abuse or neglect.

Regarding efficacy: The following steps have been completed to assess the efficacy of the current 4th evaluated out review process.

1. FY&C reports to CDSS incidents of child fatality and near fatality that are reported to the child abuse hotline, investigated, and for whom the fatality or near fatality was determined to be a result of abuse or neglect. FY&C has reviewed the cases for every reported child fatality and near fatality for Sonoma County from 2018-2025. This review included the number of evaluated out referrals and completed in-person investigations that occurred in the 12 months prior to the child's passing or near fatal injury. Based on the data gathered in this review, FY&C has determined that there is no basis to support a modification of the current 4th evaluated out review process.
2. FY&C has implemented the use of a special project code in the statewide Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) for every family for whom the 4th evaluated out review process is triggered. The special project code allows for the tracking of every family for whom this process is completed. FY&C will track these cases for the next 12 months to assess what happens for families and children for whom a 4th evaluate out review has occurred. FY&C will then use this data to assess the efficacy of the 4th evaluated out process and asses for any needed modification to that practice.

R2. By October 1, 2026, the BOS shall direct the Sonoma County CDRT to establish procedures, effective by April 1, 2027, that include the following:

- **Identify a single individual as chairperson**

- **Designate a spokesperson to the community**
- **Create written bylaws and protocols governing its work**
- **Develop training for members and members' staffs**
- **Publish a report of its findings annually**

Response: Further Analysis Required

The Board supports efforts to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the CDRT. Additional analysis is necessary to determine the feasibility, resource requirements, governance implications, confidentiality considerations, and legal impacts associated with implementation of the recommendation. To begin this work, the District Attorney's Office and Department of Health Services will work collaboratively with CDRT partners to strengthen governance and operational practices.

Activities could include:

- Development and adoption of bylaws, governance structures, and operating procedures.
- Identification of leadership and communication roles within the team structure.
- Incorporation of training requirements into annual confidentiality and participation processes.
- Review of available CDRT Toolkit resources and development of an ongoing training plan for members.
- Publication of a comprehensive ten-year report summarizing child mortality trends and findings.
- Establishment of a process for future public reporting consistent with statutory requirements.

The departments will begin this analysis by November 2026.

R3. By October 1, 2026, the BOS should allocate appropriate resources to assist the Sonoma County CDRT in its activities.

Response: Further Analysis Required

Dedicated administrative and analytical support could assist the CDRT in meeting its statutory objectives, and the Board supports evaluation of appropriate funding mechanisms to support report preparation, data management, training, and administrative functions.

Participation in CDRT activities, including case review, data collection, trend analysis, and report development, is currently supported through existing staff assignments and available funding sources. The County has the capacity to continue these core review functions, report trend data publicly, and support ongoing multidisciplinary review activities. However, implementation of prevention strategies identified through the CDRT process will need to be evaluated as it lies outside the statutory scope of the CDRT.

The Board remains committed to collaborating with community partners, policymakers, and stakeholders to strengthen the CDRT and advance efforts to improve child health and safety outcomes in Sonoma County.

The Board will begin evaluating potential funding mechanisms by November 2026, and as part of the FY 2027-28 budget process, the Board will consider any requests for resources to assist the CDRT alongside other County funding priorities.