

In 2008, Georgia will pilot DEC Response teams in 25 communities. In each of these communities a team consisting of professionals from law enforcement, prosecution, child protective services, education, and health care will closely follow county adopted guidelines when responding to drug endangered children. The guidelines should specifically address DEC cases from discovery of the child through intake and care to dismissal of the case as well as aftercare.

Since it is well recognized that children living in environments where any drug is misused, sold, distributed, or produced are endangered, DEC Response Teams will concentrate on children in production as well as non-production drug environments.

DEC Response Team Structure

The exact make-up of a DEC response team can vary from county to county and is dependent on available resources. Ideally, the core team members will include law enforcement, child protective services (CPS), district attorney's office, education, and health care. The DEC team's three overall goals are to 1) break the cycle of child abuse, neglect, and endangerment caused by those who manufacture, use, distribute, and sell drugs and 2) to create a collaborative, multidisciplinary response to improve the lives of children and families discovered in dangerous drug environments and, 3) to ensure successful prosecution of the individual(s) accused of child abuse, neglect and endangerment.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement organizations involved may include city police departments, county sheriffs' departments, state departments of justice or bureaus of narcotics enforcement, and federal law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement personnel are often the first on the scene and are the most likely to find children living in dangerous drug environments. They are trained to quickly contact CPS to ensure that the children are removed from danger as soon as possible. They also file child endangerment charges when appropriate. Close coordination and communication with CPS can help the officer carry out these responsibilities.

To minimize trauma to children and ensure consistency between the CPS and criminal investigations, CPS workers and law enforcement officers might jointly interview children and other witnesses. Officers document any present or potential danger, assess the level of danger and the likelihood of harm, and assess any intentional aspects of endangerment.

Child Protective Services

Child protective services (CPS) typically operate under local county offices of social services, and, when necessary, intervene on behalf of children at the direction of the juvenile court. It is the child welfare worker who determines the best course for the child's care and health and safety.

The CPS DEC worker typically coordinates the medical examinations and communication between the criminal and dependency and/or family law courts. It is the role of the CPS DEC worker to interview children and parents, take children into emergency custody, assess the need for both short- and long-term protective custody, arrange for timely medical and mental health evaluations and follow-up care, and to gather information for the juvenile court. They coordinate these activities with law enforcement to ensure that any issues are adequately evaluated. CPS workers also must provide records of any relevant current and past investigations. The responding CPS worker also may be required to testify in cases.

Educators

Educators are often considered a point of entry into the system for drug endangered children. They often recognize when children are truant, traumatized, and neglected among other concerns. This member should be the school superintendent, school social worker or someone in a related position. They should closely coordinate services and communicate with CPS and law enforcement as appropriate.

Medical Services

This member should be a health care professional who has been trained in diagnosing and treating children exposed to neglect and abuse, possible chemical hazards, and trauma due to drug environments exposure. This may be Physicians, Public Health Nurses, Nurse Practitioners, or Physician's Assistants. Medical personnel must document each child's physical and mental condition, using photographs as appropriate. They also must document any relevant injuries or exposures that occurred before lab seizure and provide diagnosis and treatment for drug exposures resulting from the manufacturing process, ingestion of drugs and hazardous substances, and physical injuries and abuse. Results of these medical evaluations and testimony of the examining physician, toxicologist, or other specialists may be required in cases.

Mental Health Services

To address the complex behavioral and emotional problems experienced by these children, a psychologist, clinical social worker, or other mental health professional should participate on the team. Crisis intervention may be needed when children are removed from their families. Referrals for therapeutic services are often necessary for children coping with the effects of long-term neglect and abuse. The mental health professional should be consulted throughout the prosecution of a case, working closely with child protective services, law enforcement, and prosecutors to consider the emotional state of the child.

Prosecution

Criminal prosecutors are responsible for filing and supporting charges of child endangerment, abuse and/or neglect. By reviewing all the evidence gathered, charging the drug violations as appropriate, and filing appropriate charges against the appropriate parties, the prosecutor strengthens the multidisciplinary team's efforts to achieve favorable child protection outcomes.

Communication between CPS workers, probation officers, health care personnel, police officers, and attorneys should continue throughout the period of prosecution. Even if charges are dismissed, the prosecutor can play an important role in safeguarding the child's welfare by asking that the court consider conditions relating to the charge in sentencing and/or probation.

Public Safety

Fire department personnel and hazardous materials professionals, including toxics control specialists and cleanup personnel, also play a key role in documenting conditions of child endangerment, including the potential for fire or explosion, presence of hazardous materials, improper storage of chemicals, and poor ventilation. They should be included in team trainings and meetings. The reports or testimony of hazardous materials specialists who respond to the site and other experts will be required in court.

Source: <http://www.cadecalliance.com/> with revisions by GA Alliance for Drug Endangered Children