

**DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES  
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
311 W. SARATOGA STREET  
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND 21201**

**DATE:** October 30, 2012

**POLICY#:** SSA # 13-11

**TO:** Directors, Local Department of Social Services  
Assistant Directors, Services

**FROM:** Carnitra D. White, Executive Director  
Social Services Administration

**RE:** Telephone Coverage for Screening and Intake

**PROGRAMS AFFECTED:** Screening and Intake Services

**ORIGINATING OFFICE:** In-Home Services

**ACTION REQUIRED OF:** All Local Departments

**REQUIRED ACTION:** Change for Some Jurisdictions in Screening and Intake  
Procedure

**ACTION DUE DATE:** November 15, 2012

**CONTACT PERSONS:** Steve Berry, Program Manager  
In-Home Services  
410-767-7018  
[sberry@dhr.state.md.us](mailto:sberry@dhr.state.md.us)

Deborah Ramelmeier, Deputy Executive Director  
Child Welfare Practice & Policy  
410-767-7506  
[dramelme@dhr.state.md.us](mailto:dramelme@dhr.state.md.us)

**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this policy directive is to provide direction to Local Departments of Social Services (LDSS) in ensuring that all calls that are made to Screening and Intake are responded to by a worker trained in Child Protective Services who will respond to and manage the callers' concerns immediately both during regular work hours as well as off hours.

**BACKGROUND:**

The Local Departments of Social Services' (LDSS) screening and intake units are the agency's first direct contact with the community. Community members and mandated reporters all rely on the screening and intake units to be available during normal business hours, in order for them to make reports and referrals regarding children and families in need of assistance from the Local Child Protective Services Department.

It is therefore essential that each LDSS have telephone coverage during business hours that has a live person available to speak with the community.

**ACTION:**

**Screen and Intake Process**

The Screening worker

- Accepts and elicits information from callers that will enable agency staff to determine validity and/or urgency of reports or referrals;
- Encourages callers to provide complete information; and
- Refers persons making reports that are not appropriate for Child Protective Services (CPS) to Non-CPS services or other agencies when services are needed or desired.

All LDSS' are to ensure that all calls to report child maltreatment are channeled to an actual person who can either respond to the report or take the necessary information to have an appropriate screener respond immediately if needed, to the report.

If the volume of calls overrides the ability of the screener to immediately respond, the call can be routed to an individual who can assess if the caller is comfortable with a call back or have the caller wait while an appropriate person can be located to take the call. If waiting, the caller needs to be monitored while waiting as wait times may vary. An individual should check back with the caller while waiting to let them know that their call is important and recheck on their status. A caller should never be kept waiting for any extended period of time before being connected to a screener.

If LDSS' do not have a designated CPS reporting line, all calls not reporting maltreatment should immediately be transferred to a receptionist or other informed personnel who can direct the call to the appropriate service. LDSS' are encouraged to have a designated line to best facilitate the management of CPS reports and expedite a response. This is especially the case for local departments who experience a higher volume of CPS maltreatment reports.

#### Local Department Mandate

No local department may use answering machines or voicemail as their standard mechanism for receiving calls during normal business hours for their intake and screening lines. Individuals in the community are unlikely to leave a message on a voicemail or answering machine and are also unlikely to call back if and when they are unable to speak with a live individual. In using a voicemail or answering machine, the local department may fail to obtain pertinent information useful in helping children and families. By not having an actual person respond quickly to reports of child maltreatment and possibly having a caller wait days before anyone connects with them, we open the door to increasing the danger and/or risk a child may be facing and leaving the agency open to liability.

Each local department shall therefore provide telephone coverage by a live individual during normal operating hours, where all telephone calls are answered by the third ring to ensure that all community members can access a local department representative. Each local department shall develop a system that enables all incoming calls to be answered by a live individual during normal business hours.

The only exception to this should be when the volume of calls is so great and all available screeners are involved with other maltreatment reports and cannot access the phone. At those times, only, should a voice mail system be utilized. All voice mails shall be accessed no later than every 30 minutes and a call back made as soon as a screener is available. All voice mail calls shall be returned on the same day they were received.