



What are some examples of **real-time information sharing between child protection and law enforcement?**

[Child protection and law enforcement agencies have a shared responsibility](#) to keep children safe. In most states, mandated reporters and other concerned citizens may report suspected maltreatment to either agency, so cross-reporting protocols are necessary to ensure that the information reported gets to the appropriate agency, as determined by state law, for timely follow-up.

The need for information sharing goes far beyond sharing reports.

Both CPS and law enforcement have critical data about families — including information about prior maltreatment reports, arrests, and convictions — that the other agency needs to make good decisions about child safety. Sharing this information promotes a more complete picture of the child and family, which can help child welfare caseworkers assess their personal safety before entering a home and could mean the difference between life and death for a child. It can also form the basis for greater [collaboration on investigations between CPS and law enforcement](#). Yet progress in this area continues to be slow, impeded by concerns such as cost and confidentiality, as well as by cultural, structural, and bureaucratic barriers.



casey family programs

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Saving lives

The Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities found in its [2016 report](#) that child protection staff access to real-time information about law enforcement's interactions with families is rare. Fewer than half of all states address the process of information sharing in statute: [16 states require CPS and law enforcement agencies to coordinate investigations](#) and share information in order to minimize the trauma caused to children by repeated interviews; and seven states require information sharing among multidisciplinary teams.

For CPS caseworkers to be most effective at keeping children safe, they must have access to the law-enforcement information they need to make good decisions. We must develop and encourage ways for law enforcement to share information with child protection in a timely way. Doing so will help **both agencies make the best possible decisions** on behalf of vulnerable children.

This brief focuses on the practice of sharing information between CPS and law enforcement during the investigative phase of the child protection process. For a broader view of the range of collaboration models that exist between child protection and law enforcement, see: [Are there good examples of how child welfare agencies are collaborating with law enforcement?](#)

Jurisdictional examples

The large jurisdictions of Los Angeles County and New York City offer examples of effective information sharing and collaboration between CPS and law enforcement during the investigation process.

Los Angeles County: Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Report System (eSCARS) and Emergency Response Investigation Service (ERIS)

California's Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act requires CPS and law enforcement to share information about reports of suspected child abuse, with oversight by the District Attorney. In 2009, Los Angeles County launched the Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Report System (eSCARS) to address this shared responsibility. This **secure, web-based application** links the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), 46 local law enforcement agencies, and the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office.¹

Prior to the creation of eSCARS, the protocol for sharing reports between agencies via paper and fax was slow, cumbersome, and inconsistent. Reports rarely were tracked or followed up with conversations among departments about findings, actions, or outcomes. So DCFS, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the DA's office submitted a joint proposal to the County Board of Supervisors in 2005 for funding to improve the system.

Today, when the child protection hotline receives a report, the information is entered online and sent simultaneously to appropriate law enforcement agencies, social workers, and the DA. If anyone related to the case (child, parent, or perpetrator) has a history of child abuse reports, that information is immediately available to those responding. Law enforcement officers enter their findings directly into eSCARS as well, where they can be viewed by social workers and help inform a child protection investigation in real time.

eSCARS has improved the consistency and accountability of cross-reporting between law

When you don't have an understanding of how the other pieces operate, you just operate from your own perspective. Collaboration allows us to come up with better solutions from a multi-system perspective. I see it as a three-legged stool; if you don't have one leg — child welfare, law enforcement, or the district attorney — it's not going to succeed.

— JENNIE FERIA,
DIVISION CHIEF, CHILD PROTECTION HOTLINE, LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

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enforcement and DCFS in Los Angeles County. The system also has improved relationships among the agencies involved. Monthly face-to-face steering committee meetings are credited with increasing comfort, camaraderie, and communication among the three agencies, with child welfare staff expressing that they feel more like an equal partner with law enforcement in child maltreatment investigations. Additional benefits include generating data to support requests for increased funding for child maltreatment investigations, and to inform child fatality reviews.

The eSCARS system received funding in 2015 for a major technical upgrade, including additional functionality (such as the ability to identify [commercially sexually exploited children](#)) and modernization that has made the system more accessible to caseworkers using mobile devices in the field. **The entire eSCARS project has been so highly regarded that the State of California Office of Emergency Services is now offering grants to other counties to replicate it.**

In 2018, [Emergency Response Investigation Service \(ERIS\)](#) was launched to provide child welfare investigators with **real-time access to additional information about families, including family composition, past history with law enforcement and, eventually, data from the county departments of mental health, public health, probation, and more.** The first phase of this project leverages the capabilities of the Los Angeles Countywide Master Data Management system and its related Master Person Index to provide investigative caseworkers with access to more accurate information about all adults related to a report, including arrest records, warrants, registrations, detailed physical descriptions, and convictions. The ERIS application can be accessed from a computer in the office or from the field on a tablet or smartphone.

New York City: Instant Response Teams (IRTs)

The New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) created Instant Response Teams (IRTs) in the late 1990s to improve coordination between the two agencies. IRTs enhance the CPS agency's investigative capacity and coordinate rapid responses to fatalities, severe physical and sexual abuse, and other cases involving severe maltreatment. In 2006, the effort was expanded to include a database that relays certain case information in real time between ACS supervisors and the police department.

Agency policy dictates what information can be shared between the two departments. Child protective records are disclosed to NYPD and local district attorneys when necessary to conduct a criminal investigation or prosecution. NYPD is likewise authorized to share information with ACS if both agencies are investigating cases involving the same victim. Information that can be disclosed includes witness information, names and addresses of family members, existence of any orders of protection, arrest and detention records, and domestic incident reports.²

Key considerations

The following questions may be helpful to consider when designing and implementing a law enforcement-CPS information-sharing initiative or other investigation partnership:

- **Who will lead the effort?** Support of local elected officials is critical. A steering committee or other decision-making body should include representatives from all involved agencies. It also is important to include both frontline staff that actually will use the system along with decision-makers who have the authority to modify or adapt policy.³

eSCARS has helped put us all on the same page, in the same boat. We're equal professionals now, working on behalf of these kids and families. It has professionalized our investigations, and we're seen as full partners with other first responders.

— JOHN LANGSTAFF,
PRINCIPAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS ANALYST, LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

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- **Which agencies will participate?** There may be more than one law enforcement agency in a particular jurisdiction that may need to be involved in this initiative. In addition, it may be beneficial to exchange child welfare or law enforcement information with neighboring jurisdictions, particularly in areas with highly mobile populations across contiguous counties or states. Sharing information between CPS and law enforcement is a great place to start, but a more complete picture of family life will be available to investigators if MOUs can also be developed with other agencies and systems serving the same families, such as TANF, public health, and mental health.
- **What information will be shared?** Agency leaders may choose to share information only in certain, severe cases (where law enforcement and child welfare have joint responsibility, for example), or protocols might allow child welfare to obtain family information from law enforcement for all reports. The information shared might be limited to past child maltreatment reports, or a broader net might be cast that includes information about prior arrests and convictions on other charges, or other law enforcement involvement at the home that did not lead to arrest but might be relevant to assessing the child's safety.
- **How will information be exchanged and kept current?** In Los Angeles County, for example, information that CPS hotline staff enters into a database is automatically sent to the appropriate

law enforcement agency, investigative social worker, and the DA's office. An electronic system like this one may be more costly to develop but ultimately can save thousands of hours of caseworker time that otherwise would be spent in manual case transmittal and follow-up.

- **How will child welfare staff access the information?** The more quickly the information is available to CPS, the more useful it will be in protecting children from harm. A system that can be accessed via mobile devices in the field (tablets and smartphones) is the gold standard.
- **Will the information-sharing agreement include a joint investigative approach?** CPS and law enforcement partners will need to determine whether certain cases necessitate a joint investigation response and how those determinations will be made. Considerations may include age of alleged victim, type and severity of the allegation, and whether an emergency response is indicated.
- **How will the child welfare agency ensure that CPS work continues to be strength-based and focused on family engagement and support?** Coordination with law enforcement requires finding the right balance between the need to ensure child and caseworker safety and an approach that engages and supports families. In some cases, the visible involvement of law enforcement may be counterproductive to successful family engagement, so the risks and benefits must be weighed and addressed in each case.

1 Interview with John Langstaff, Principal Information System Analyst, and Jennie Feria, Division Chief, Child Protection Hotline, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, April 24, 2018.

2 NYC Administration for Children's Services. (2016). *Instant Response Team resource manual*. New York, NY: Author.

3 NYC Administration for Children's Services. (2016).

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