



DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT

CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATION DEPARTMENT



Pinellas County Sheriff's Office Child Protection Investigator **Pam Gilmore** lay on the floor coloring with 6-year-old Chloe, making small talk and building a "quick rapport," as they call it in the Child Protection Investigation Division (CPID).

"If I tell you something, will you tell my mom and take me away?"

Pam knew that the way she reacted to this question could make or break her investigation – and this little girl's life.

"Well, that depends on what you tell me. ..."

High-pressure conversations like these are every-day occurrences for PCSO Child Protection Investigators (CPIs), whom **Sergeant Dave DiSano** describes as the backbone of the Division.

"I have such a profound respect for what they're doing every day," Sergeant DiSano said. "Seeing how consistent they are being and how hard they're working on their cases, I just can't say enough good things about them."

Like deputies, CPIs enter strangers' homes – be they houses, shacks, or cars – with no idea what to expect on the other side of the door.

Whether they find a happy family, a bruised child, or a passed-out parent with drug paraphernalia strewn about, their visible reaction must be the same: composed and compassionate.

"A lot of young people get into this job for the right reasons," said CPID Commander **Captain Tim Pupke**. "But it's tough when they actually get into it and they see, smell, and hear the things they have to deal with on a daily basis."

It is for this reason "CPI Investigator Trainee" is one of the PCSO's continuous job postings, and the person who makes a life-long career of the position is almost an anomaly.

"You have to have these inherent qualities and be able to adapt to any situation," said **CPI Administrator Brandi Lazaris**, who started as a CPI about 16 years ago. "You have to have this internal drive, really good time management, and really live on that sense of urgency."

With between 800 and 1,000 new cases assigned to the CPID every month, "urgency" is virtually guaranteed for the about 70 CPIs, who are responsible for up to 15 high-liability investigations at once.

Unlike patrol and most detective work, during which deputies take initial reports and move onto the next call, CPIs manage every aspect of a case's investigation, – seeing the victims, interviewing every member of the household, talking to collateral contacts like doctors, relatives, and school officials, inputting data within strict time constraints, testifying in court, etc. – which can take up to 60 days.

As one of six Florida sheriff's offices that house the county's child protective services, the CPID must adhere not only to the rules,

regulations, and mandates of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), but also those set by the Sheriff's Office.

"We have a level of accountability that some of the other DCF offices might not have," **Brandi** said. "But, we also have that layer of support."

Instead of CPIs scattered between multiple DCF service centers throughout the county, as it is for most offices and previously was in Pinellas before the Sheriff's Office appropriated it about 16 years ago, the CPID is consolidated into a single building, streamlining its processes and improving communication and case-flow between CPIs and the Division's many other moving parts.

The Case Assignment Unit fields calls from the statewide Child Abuse Hotline and distributes them to CPIs, accordingly. When investigators establish that a case involves an absent, missing, or prospective parent, they enlist the help of Diligent Search analysts, who examine records from post offices, utility companies, law enforcement, and more for aliases, nicknames, maiden names, etc. Family Support workers conduct foster home visits to ensure the children have been placed in safe homes, whether they are permanent or temporary.

The CPID also comprises multiple clerical positions, several CPI supervisors, who oversee three to five CPIs each, four sergeants, **Lieutenant Cynthia Gibson**, who manages Division operations and inventory, and **Captain Pupke**.

As program administrator, **Brandi** updates staff about new policies and procedures and acts as a liaison between the investigators and Division administration as well as between the CPID and its many community partners.

"This job cannot be done separately from the community," **Brandi** said. "Working with children is unique because they are our most precious resource – you want to protect them with everything you have because they're helpless."

It is the joint effort of this community that ensures children of Pinellas, like Chloe, have a safe place to call home.

Three years after Chloe confessed to **Pam** that her mother, an impaired professional, had shot at her twice, claiming she'd been cleaning her gun, Chloe stood at a podium in front of hundreds of people a happy, healthy, grateful 9-year-old adoptee and the Annual Faith-Based CHAMPION for Children Luncheon's keynote speaker.

"Will **Pam Gilmore** please stand up?" she said, after relaying her painful story and naming **Pam** her saving grace. **Pam** stood, and Chloe raced through the crowd to embrace her.

"I don't think there was a dry eye in the house," **Sergeant DiSano** said. "Listening to this 9-year-old go through this non-scripted story of her life and showing that the dedication of what **Pam** did is what saved her life."

"We do good work here – we do excellent work here, and we don't always get the recognition we should," **Pam** said. "It's a tough job, but it's rich with rewards."

