

Reducing Re-entry Rates: Alameda County Social Services Agency's Post-reunification Services Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Reunifying a child... is not a one-time event... it is a process involving the reintegration of the child into a family environment that may have changed significantly from the environment the child left.”

—F. Wulczyn, 2004

The purpose of this case study is to explore the impact of the Alameda County Social Services Agency Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Post-Reunification Services (PRS) program on reducing the re-entry rates of successfully reunified families no longer involved in the child welfare system.

The PRS program is a collaborative effort between DCFS and a community-based organization, Family Support Services of the Bay Area (FSSBA). The program started in February 2012 and has provided seventeen families with intensive, home-based case management services. The program delivers free, culturally sensitive services on a voluntary basis. Services may last up to 16 months, and address the range of barriers and emotions that can impede successful

reunification. A strength-based, family-centered approach to service delivery, the PRS program is a joint partnership between the family, DCFS, and FSSBA staff.

Although still in its infancy stage, the program appears to be having a significant impact on families. A positive attribute of the PRS program is the delivery of after-care services following juvenile court dismissal. Research supports this strategy, suggesting that the provision of a continuum of service delivery has a positive impact on permanency. Findings of this study suggest that the PRS program is a worthy strategy for addressing re-entry rates.

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Introduction

The trauma of abuse and neglect can have a life-long impact on children. A recurrence of child maltreatment or re-entry into foster care can have even more devastating consequences, oftentimes creating a sense of hopelessness, failure, and rejection for both the child and the parent(s) in question.

In 1994, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was given the responsibility of monitoring state compliance with federal outcomes for child and family service programs, including child protective services, foster care, adoption, family preservation, family support, and independent living services (DHHS, 2012). Beginning in early 2001, the Children's Bureau, a branch of HHS, directed Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) to measure both federal child welfare requirements compliance and evaluate the experiences and opportunities for positive outcome achievement for children and families involved in the child welfare system. The intent of periodic CFSRs is to aid states in enhancing three domains of services that promote child safety, permanency, and well-being.

One of the federal child welfare outcomes focusing on child safety monitors the number of children who re-enter foster care following a successful family reunification. To be in federal compliance, states are to monitor family reunifications for at least 12 months following termination of court involvement. The national standard set for re-entry rates is no more than 9.9 percent. According to the Administration for Children and Family Services (ACFS), the percent of children who re-entered foster care in less than twelve months from the date of case closure

covering January to December 2011 in California was 12.4 (ACFS, 2012).

To improve federal compliance and adequately address the complex challenges of families involved with child welfare, it is imperative that as a system, child welfare understands family and systemic factors that may serve as barriers to sustainable reunification and reduced re-entry rates. Equipped with this knowledge, child welfare must create evidence-based programs that not only ensure safety for children, but also increase the likelihood that children can return home successfully and remain permanently. Empowering parents with comprehensive after-care supports that include both concrete (e.g. housing, financial assistance, transportation, etc) and "soft" (e.g. counseling, case management, parenting education, etc) services can improve their capacity to safely care for their children, improve family functioning, and ensure that re-entry is unlikely. Likewise, a child welfare system that embodies shared accountability, system integration, and community partnerships, can increase its capacity to ensure that families are more apt to meet positive outcomes (Wulczyn, 2004).

Background

On January 1, 2011, Contra Costa County Children and Family Services (CCCFS) was providing child welfare services to 1,315 children and youth. Of those 1,315 children and youth, 329 were in receipt of court-ordered Family Reunification Services. The re-entry rate following reunification for 2011 was 11.5%. In the neighboring county, the Alameda County Social Services Agency Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was serving 2,356 children

and youth, of which 330 were in receipt of Family Reunification Services. The re-entry rates following reunification for 2011 in Alameda County were 16.4 percent (Needell et al., 2013). Both Alameda and Contra Costa County re-entry rates are above the national federal standard of 9.9 percent. While Alameda and Contra Costa counties are striving for optimal service delivery, they continue to struggle in reducing recidivism rates.

Contra Costa County believes that, when possible, the primary permanent goal for children in foster care is to reunite with their families. However, the agency recognizes that in order for reunification to be successful, families must be supported throughout their entire experience with child welfare. To this extent, Contra Costa County purposefully develops family-centered programs that embody the concept of community partnerships, system integration, and cultural humility.

Recognizing the challenges associated with increasing timely reunification while not increasing instances of foster care re-entry rates, Contra Costa County is exploring strategies for providing comprehensive post-reunification and after-care services that increase child safety, family functioning, and community involvement.

Interested in the provision of after-care services, Contra Costa County examined Alameda County's program to see if any of its elements might assist with Contra Costa County's endeavor to improve timely reunification and reduce re-entry rates for the children and families receiving child welfare services.

Post-Reunification Services Program in Alameda County

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT/KEY ELEMENTS

Expanding on an existing collaborative partnership, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) contracted for a pilot program with a community-based organization, Family Support Services of the Bay Area (FSSBA), in early 2012 to provide post-reunification services. Rooted in the belief that families are stronger when supported in

resolving their own challenges, PRS is a voluntary home-based program that offers a variety of supports addressing multiple family circumstances that may be barriers to reunification and self-sustainability. Working directly with families, PRS social workers provide intensive in-home services to families on a weekly basis for up to 16 months. Most impressive is the delivery of services that address the spectrum of emotions experienced when families reunify. These emotions can include grief, fear, guilt, worry, and ambivalence for both parents and children. The PRS program is a formalized transition to after-care support for families, who as a result of participating, are connected to a community-based organization prior to the closing of the juvenile court case. The continuum of service delivery is a highly supported strategy to sustain permanency and minimize re-entry rates (Courtney, 1995; Wulczyn, 2004).

The pilot program is funded through a blend of federal, state, and local funding sources at an annual contract amount of \$300,000. In the original design, referrals for services came from a unit in DCFS whose social workers carry both Family Maintenance (FM) and Family Reunification (FR) cases called the Vertical Case Management (VCM) unit. Typically, referrals occur 30 to 45 days prior to reunification during a Reunification Team Decision Meeting (TDM). The VCM unit has five DCFS social workers supervised by a child welfare supervisor. Oversight of the program is carried out by a DCFS program manager and a division director over the Gateways to Permanence unit of Alameda County DCFS. FSSBA employs three PRS social workers supervised by a program director.

To better meet the needs of the families, an evolving practice permits for referrals to occur at the discretion of the assigned DCFS social worker based on a family's willingness to participate and the likelihood to reunify. Most referrals for services occur in a more natural setting during unit meetings attended by the program director for FSSBA. Discussion of the case plan and family goals take place during unit meetings. This process has afforded both FSSBA and DCFS a more enriching partnership, decreased times

from referral to delivery of services, and provided a clearer understanding of the family dynamics and presenting barriers to reunification or stabilization.

Once accepted into the program, the PRS social worker meets with the family in their home to assess both their strengths and needs. As a team, the family and the PRS social worker develop a written plan of action known as the Family Care Plan that incorporates actionable items to be addressed in an effort to reach jointly established goals. The Family Care Plan is in alignment with the court-ordered Family Reunification or Family Maintenance Plan from Alameda County DCFS. There are no fees charged to the families participating in the program.

The program objectives are to:

- Reduce the time to juvenile court dismissal for families who recently have re-unified (30–60 days), or are being considered for re-unification within the next 30–60 days.
- Provide support to recently re-unified families for up to 16 months of voluntary services.
- Strengthen the family unit with case management, referrals, and follow-up with community-based resources in coordination with its child welfare workers.
- Reduce re-entries of families by 5 percent.

A benefit of the PRS program is the collaborative partnership between FSSBA and Children's Hospital Oakland. Meeting twice monthly, this unique partnership has afforded the PRS team an enriching educational and supportive training that highlights the complexities of assisting families in navigating the reunification process. Covering topics such as parental and child ambivalence, fear, anxiety, and guilt, these trainings permit PRS social workers the opportunity to debrief situations they are experiencing and gain support in serving families.

To date, the program has provided home-based services to seventeen families who have recently reunified. Of those served families, one family had services terminated as reunification efforts did not succeed. At this time, ten families continue to be actively involved with FSSBA and are achieving successful milestones.

SUCCESS/BARRIERS

Given that the program is relatively new, it is difficult to determine if the program has achieved success in its four objectives. Anecdotally, one could theorize that the successes in two of the objectives (strengthening families and the provision of voluntary support services to reunified families) will ultimately lead to achievement in the remaining objective areas

TABLE 1
PRS Program Successes and Barriers

Successes	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No waiting list for services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Referrals limited to one DCFS unit; limited families serviced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Empowered and engaged families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unclear guidelines around information sharing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthened community partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of referral form
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reduced work-load for DCFS social workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unclear data collection process: a way to capture both qualitative and quantitative data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individualized, culturally responsive concrete and "soft" services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Families unwillingness to participate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Non-Medi-Cal families are eligible 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Services continue post juvenile court dismissal 	

(reduce time to juvenile court dismissal and reduce the re-entry rates). Research supports this theory, which suggests that the provision of concrete and “soft” post-reunification intensive case management services increases the likelihood of timely reunification without increasing re-entry rates (Courtney M., 1995). *Table 1* indicates the observed successes and barriers to the PRS program.

LESSONS LEARNED

Modifying practice or introducing a new resource in any agency can be difficult. To improve the success of a program, it is crucial that all staff have a clear understanding of the program guidelines and expectations. In Alameda County, this did not take place early in the implementation process and caused a delay in the referral process, thereby impacting the numbers of participating families. Additionally, Alameda County was burdened by certain local bargaining issues that prevented the creation of a new form. This barrier prevented DCFS from developing a formal referral form to the PRS program, and limited sharing of information between DCFS and FSSBA.

As Contra Costa County considers introducing a post-reunification services program, it should be mindful of the best vehicle for the dissemination of information to all levels of staff. Likewise, CFS should consider the impact of the program on staff workload and explore ways to integrate the program with current practice.

Implications for Contra Costa County

CURRENT PROCESSES

Contra Costa County CFS has several programs similar to the PRS program that are achieving like outcomes. One particular program, the Wraparound Program, is most similar. The Wraparound Program is a collaboration with mental health and a community-based organization. The home-based comprehensive program aims to:

- Reduce the length of stay in residential care for youth
- Step-down youth from residential care to family homes

- Prevent higher-level placements for youth
- Increase permanency for children
- Support reunification
- Improve placement stability

A Wraparound Program service plan can include Therapeutic Behavioral Services (TBS), an in-home behaviorist/support counselor, mobile response, and therapeutic services including psychiatry, and respite services. The program affords quick family engagement and promotes crisis stabilization and support. Services are time-limited to six months, and do not continue after juvenile court dismissal. A unique program that benefits from a system integration approach to stabilizing families, the Wraparound Program has cost neutrality.

Another program similar to the PRS program is the Family Preservation Services (FPS) program offered to families who have a family maintenance service plan. The FPS program is serviced through a contract with a community-based organization, and provides home-based intensive case management services on a voluntary basis at no cost to the family. This program also provides both concrete and “soft” supports for involved families. Services are time-limited and do not continue after juvenile court dismissal. Funding for the FPS program includes state and federal dollars.

Both aforementioned CFS programs employ the belief that families, when supported, have the capacity to thrive. Additionally, both programs recognize that successfully assisting families to achieve their full potential for health and well-being requires collaborative partnerships between families, other service delivery systems, and the community. Unfortunately, neither program offers continued support following juvenile court dismissal.

CONSIDERATIONS

Contra Costa County would benefit from continued exploration and monitoring of the PRS program as it moves from a pilot to a formalized mode of practice in Alameda County. However, in doing so, CFS should consider the following:

- Developing a plan for after-care services
- Integrating the Wraparound Program with the FPS Program
- Developing training focusing on the complexities of the reunification process
- Expanding the delivery of concrete services through partnerships

COST ANALYSIS AND

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

CFS receives varied funding sources ranging from federal dollars to foundation support earmarked for the provision of child welfare services. Most funding has strict stipulations and guidelines for use. A particular funding source that is a viable option to support post-reunification service delivery is Title IV-B Subpart 2 – Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) funds. While a capped entitlement, PSSF funds are 100% federal and have the most flexibility for spending, allowing for family preservation and support services, including services for children who have exited the foster care system.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2012-13, Contra Costa County received a \$608,755 allocation in PSSF funds, of which 23.3% supports community-based family support services. Current PSSF funding supports a wide variety of programming, ranging from after-school programming to parenting education classes. As CFS prepares for FY 2014-15, it could determine if redirecting existing PSSF funds from current programming to support post-reunification or after-care services is a viable option. This strategy would create cost neutrality.

Should CFS consider implementing a post-reunification service program, recommendations include a partnership with a community-based agency. Similar to Alameda County, CFS should explore opportunities to co-locate the program with current service providers to minimize administrative overhead and permit the sharing of staff, thereby establishing a cost effective program. Furthermore, it is critical that information about the new resource is appropriately disseminated to CFS social workers to increase the rates of referrals and subsequent

participation. Information dissemination can include team decision meetings, division meetings, and unit meetings.

Conclusion

The innovation of service delivery in Alameda County has afforded families with a unique program that, if expanded, may significantly impact timely reunification while reducing re-entry rates. Contra Costa County, too, is well known for its innovative programs and strategies to best serve children and families. This case study sheds light on three remarkable programs (Post-Reunification Services, Wraparound Services, and Family Preservation Services) and their potential for achieving successful outcomes with slight program modifications.

The child welfare system is burdened with high caseloads, worker burnout, and strapped resources. Successfully impacting these challenges requires a program design that includes the building and maintaining of collaborative partnerships with other service delivery systems and service providers. By doing so, families benefit from a multi-system continuum of service delivery that encourages early engagement. Such a system would offer frequent home-based visits that develop trusting relationships between the family and community-based organizations, which may remain involved long after juvenile court dismissal. Undoubtedly, this will lead to timely family reunification, reduced rates of re-entry, and a strengthened child welfare system. Most importantly, this will create strengthened families, improved child well-being, and healthier communities.

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