

## **CHILD WELFARE RECEIVING CENTERS: CONTRA COSTA COUNTY'S INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO THE SHELTER CARE CRISIS**

**A. Glenn Wallace\***

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Shelter care services for abused and neglected children is and will continue to be in a state of crisis. There are more children coming into the foster care system than the system can adequately support and fewer incentives for individuals and families to want to become a foster care provider. It is also believed that with today's economy, financial incentives alone will not be enough to retain the needed foster care providers. Children are coming into the system arrive with more complicated psycho-emotional as well as medical problems causing emergency foster parents' skills and abilities to be challenged like never before.

This lack of homes results in children just entering the emergency foster care system to have to wait for a bed to sleep in. It means sitting for long periods in their Social Worker's office listening to their worker scramble to find a home or hearing other workers talk about how badly a child on their case load had been hurt. At night, the lack of homes often means children having to wait in the back of an uncomfortable police car, wondering what they have done wrong.

Contra Costa wanted to do something about these problems. They wanted to develop a way to assist children, foster parents and social workers. Subsequently, they took the concept of a "receiving center" and with forward and progressive thinking redeveloped it to the point where it could meet their needs. They supported the creation of three unique facilities; each designed to provide a tailored set of

services to the children in the part of the County it served. Each of these receiving centers was designed so that children could comfortably spend up to (but no more than) 24 hours waiting for a placement. These receiving centers were designed to be child friendly environments where children could get something to eat, play some games, take a bath or just get some sleep. Additionally, while at the center, children could get the beginnings of a medical exam and a behavioral assessment, both of which are important for the foster parent as well as the social worker. The foster parents benefited by having not only a better idea of what type of child they were receiving, but also in the fact that the initial placement was a better match between child and foster parents. The social workers benefited in having the beginning documentation for concurrent planning needs as well as a safe and comfortable place for the child to wait a home was being sought and an investigation was initiated.

The Receiving Centers, however, do have some shortcomings. Child Welfare staff are only bringing a small proportion of the children they remove to the receiving centers. Additionally, for many reasons, Contra Costa has made the decision to not allow police to drop off children at the centers. Subsequently very few children removed at night or on weekends ever received the services offered by the centers. Consequently, Contra Costa is looking at the utilization issues and is developing new ways the centers could be used. Other possible solutions to the utilization problem would be to create small

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community based shelters instead of receiving centers. The difference between the two being that children could stay longer than 24 hours in a shelter and could possibly remain in the community they were removed from so as to minimize the trauma of removal.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Alameda County Social Services Agency believes that all children in Alameda County should have the opportunity to grow up in a nurturing and stable environment where they can be safe and healthy. Our aim is to make certain that all children in this County receive the support and protection that their family, their extended family or when necessary, a foster family can provide. To achieve this end, we will provide services to families, where ever possible, to strengthen and support them. If we are unsuccessful, then we must be prepared to locate and make available permanent homes for these children. It was with this in mind that I went to Contra Cost County to look at their Receiving Centers and how they provide an innovative delivery of service to their Shelter Care Program.

### **HISTORICAL**

Contra Costa County is a medium sized county with a population of more than 916,000 people who are served by 19 cities, 201 special districts and the County of Contra Costa. Many of the services provided by the County, such as Child Protection Services, are available to all residents. Services for the children of Contra Costa County, such as foster care, Head Start, child abuse protection and health and nutrition programs, are a high priority for the County. Because of its size, Contra Costa has a myriad of ways services are provided. Child Protective Services, for example, is divided into three diverse regions. East County, which has an industrial and agricultural economic base, is comprised of a blend of rural and suburban communities. Central County,

which is made up of more affluent families with its economic base of retail, small and large business. West County, which is a highly urban area with a large industrial economy and a higher proportion of minority families and less affluence.

During the mid-nineties, Contra Costa was conducting approximately 700 child abuse investigations a month. Out of these investigations roughly ten percent had petitions filed on them in Juvenile Court. Although the exact numbers vary from month to month, this ten-percent translated roughly into about 120 to 130 children coming into Child Protective system each month. The result was a steady growth in the number of children placed in the foster care system. Up until this time, these children were placed into a network of emergency shelter care homes or into Contra Costa County's privately run, non-profit, emergency shelter called Lions Gate. For many reasons the program at Lions Gate was eventually dismantled which resulted in reliance solely upon the emergency foster care network.

A crisis eventually ensued, not just for Contra Costa and their foster care system, but also for the foster care system throughout California: bed space for children coming into the foster care system was dwindling. There were more children coming into the system than the system could adequately serve. According to many staff children were wandering the halls with their social workers or sat in county cars as shelter care coordinators desperately scrambled to find a place for the children to spend the night. Sibling groups could no longer be easily placed together and children were often moved from

one emergency foster home to another due to mismatched placements. As the 90's progressed, the nation's robust economy and low unemployment rate along with inadequate foster care payments only served to further exacerbate this crisis as fewer and fewer people were interested in being a foster care provider.

Along with this growing crisis came new legislation for foster children: "Concurrent planning." It was a widely held belief that living for extended periods of time in foster homes or institutional care was damaging to the children. Efforts were now being made to return children home to their parents faster or, if that was not possible, to *permanently place* them more rapidly in homes where they could be adopted or where someone would want to become their legal guardian.

It was against this backdrop of change that Contra Costa made the decision to not invest any more time or money on creating a new shelter to replace Lions Gate. Instead they focused their energy on creating a new form of service delivery for these children: a series of three receiving centers for each region of their county.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE RECEIVING CENTERS**

The idea of establishing receiving centers instead of recreating a shelter came as a relatively easy decision for Contra Costa. Philosophically, many believed that putting children into an institutional setting was damaging to a child. Additionally, Lions Gate quickly filled up with difficult to place children and thus lost its effectiveness to provide crisis shelter for children just coming into the system. Finally, Lions Gate was an expensive program and according to one senior manager was not being fiscally managed well.

Subsequently, the Director of Children and Family Services as well as others made the decision to take a different tract. It was their intent to create a place where children could go for a short stay (less than 24 hours) in a "homelike" and child friendly environment. Here the children could get bathed, have something to eat, sleep, play some games, and get an exam from a nurse and/or a mental health worker. More importantly, the receiving centers were a place where children could be better assessed for their placement needs with the goal of making more appropriate first placements so as to cut down on the number of re-placements that children had to experience. Additionally, the designers of this new service wanted to create a place where the social workers could do some of the interviewing and paperwork that was needed after removing the child from his/her family. These centers were initially designed to be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and were to be run by CBO's.

Administration also knew that receiving centers alone would not solve the problem. Consequently, Contra Costa also started to simultaneously develop a network of emergency foster homes that could accept and appropriately care for any child coming out of the receiving centers. Their goal was to have a continuum of placements; ranging from regular emergency foster homes on one end to specialized high-level group homes on the other. Emergency foster family agency placements (FFA's) were in the middle and would be to available to meet the needs of the children who did not qualify for a group home placement or were acting out in such a manner that made it difficult to place them in one of the County's regular emergency beds.

## **PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION**

Planning began with the formation of a task group made up of managers and line staff. They began by looking at some of the models other Bay Area agencies had put in place. They took what they saw as the best that each model had to offer keeping in mind the geographical layout of Contra Costa County. What they developed was a plan to create not one, but three receiving centers, each designed to meet the needs of the part of the community it served.

The County's management then took this plan back to the line staff to introduce them to this new form of service delivery and to get any feedback they wanted to offer. As one might expect, some staff were very resistant to the change and wanted to go back to a shelter-like model. Other staff, especially ones that had had experience with other receiving centers in other counties or who had no experience with Lions Gate were more open to the new service delivery approach.

During this period of time the County was also selling the concept of receiving centers to their Board of Supervisors. Stories of children waiting for long periods of time in the social workers' office or in County vehicles while waiting for placement was part of the impetus for the Board to make this change. One of Contra Costa's core values was to "strive to provide the highest quality of services to the public" and to be seen as a County that truly cares for its children. Subsequently, the timing was right and the Board approved for a pilot project to develop the receiving centers. Approximately \$200,000 dollars per receiving center, for a total of \$600,000 dollars was allocated.

One final point in the implementation process worth highlighting, the County purposely did not take on the responsibility of creating and maintaining these centers. Contra Costa County's mission statement begins with, "In partnership with the community we provide services..." Subsequently, they believed that these centers could and should come out of the community they serve. A Request for Proposal (RFP) was sent out to the public on February 9, 1997. The goal was to locate three community based organizations, which knew the community it served, and have each of these agency's develop a plan for a center which could meet the stated goals of Social Services while, at the same time better serve its community. Eventually three agencies were chosen: Aspira Foster Family Agency for East County, Family Stress Center for Central County and Imani Facilities for West County.

## **CURRENT STATUS**

Currently there are three receiving centers in operation. They are comprised of a program supervisor and 1 to 3 part-time child care staff, depending on the need. Each center is open during normal business hours, however staffing for the centers can be made available for overnights and weekends. Available services at each center include but are not limited to: supervision, behavioral and emotional assessments, warm meals, clean clothing, bathing (including delousing), age appropriate activities, on-call mental health services, and medical assessments when the PHN is onsite. Additionally, all of the assessments are put into a written package for the social worker to assist them in the concurrent planning efforts for the child(ren) and to help with the placement process. The centers, however, do not serve all children coming into protective cus-

today. Children with severe mental health problems or children determined to be potentially dangerous to other children are not to go to the center; instead they are to go directly to their placements. Moreover, children removed after hours can go to the centers, but are not required to. Currently, only children removed during normal business hours and who do not appear too dangerous to themselves or others are required to go through the center.

Presently, however, only a small percentage of children actually utilize the services at the receiving centers although the numbers are slowly increasing. Between September 1997 and July 1997 approximately 170 children were seen at the Antioch center. This translates into approximately 15 children per month or 4 children a week. Recent figures, however show that between August of 1998 to the present approximately 350 children have been seen or 19 children a month, a 25% increase. In a recent visit to the Central County receiving center, no children had utilized their service, although the agency had only been in operation for a little over a month.

With this information in mind, the question was asked of line staff in both Antioch and Martinez, "did they know about the receiving centers and what the barriers were to using this service?" All of the staff knew about the centers and most stated that they had been to the centers' open houses. Moreover, all of the staff knew what services were available to the children. Some of the staff who had worked for the County a longer period of time, however, reminisced about the "good old days" when they had a shelter and how much easier it made their jobs (e.g. they only had fewer places to go to interview the children on their caseload). Others talked about the time constraints and argued that it saved them time to take the child or children directly to a foster home rather than to the receiving

center first and then to the foster home. Newer staff and staff in Antioch, however, talked only about the positive aspects of the receiving centers. They liked to have the ability to have a calm and nurturing place to interview the child, especially after a difficult removal. Others stated that it made their jobs easier to have someone else watch and care for the child(ren) while they waited for a placement. All staff agreed that the CPS office or County car was not an appropriate place for children to wait for a placement.

Staff were also asked what would make receiving centers more user friendly. All agreed that having a center located close to the office was beneficial. Some wanted to see police be able to bring children to the center and/or have the foster parents pick up the children. Still others argued that the centers should be open at night (note: centers can be open at any time during the nights or weekends with a manager's approval). Staff at the shelters reported that they believed that with time and with word of mouth more and more workers would be utilizing the services of the center. In the meantime they suggested that the center be utilized in different ways. Some examples were to allow the foster parents to use the center as a place for respite. Others suggested that foster parent training be conducted at the center or that they be set up as a visitation center for relatives and children.

## CONCLUSION

Shelter care services for abused and neglected children is and will continue to be in a state of crisis. There are more children coming into the foster care system than the system can adequately support and fewer incentives for individuals and families to want to become a foster care provider. With the loss of Lions Gate, their institutionally based shelter

program, Contra Costa found themselves at a critical juncture. They knew they had to develop an innovative approach to providing a comprehensive service that had to meet the many needs of the people involved. Contra Costa took the idea of a receiving center and with forward and progressive thinking developed a system of service delivery that would meet their needs. They moved away from the hospital based approach and more to one that was community focused. More importantly, they facilitated the setting up of three unique facilities; each designed to provide a set of services to the children of that community.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY**

Alameda County, like many other counties throughout the Bay Area is currently experiencing a severe shortage of emergency foster homes. It is no longer uncommon to see children waiting, in the offices of the social workers or in the back of county cars, for placements. Then, when placements are located children are frequently being transported out of the county to the placement. What is even more disturbing that it has become a rare occasion when sibling groups can be placed together. Long term results include no initial assessments of children for concurrent planning and placement purposes, and poor initial placements, which often result in multiple placements for children as they go through the foster care system. Additionally, foster parents are receiving children in crisis and with minimal support, which leads to burnout and retention problems. For these reasons I propose the following:

1. Alameda County set up a task force to look at the fiscal feasibility of setting up a shelter care system.
2. That Alameda County model this shelter system after Contra Costa County's system of receiving centers: a series of small "family-like" satellite shelters, owned/operated by CBO's throughout the community. Further, should the county decentralize its services, like Contra Costa, a shelter or shelters could be made available in each region depending on need.
3. That these shelters would provide all of the same services as the receiving centers in Contra Costa with the following additions:
  - a. children could spend the night and then could be placed with a relative or parent in the early stage of investigation as opposed to a series of emergency foster care placements,
  - b. respite care for foster parents,
  - c. locations for trainings and/or meetings,
  - d. visitation centers for relatives of children in foster care
  - e. police could place children in the shelters after they were removed from their families.
4. A Public Health nurse and Mental Health specialist be co-located with one or more shelters to provide services necessary to make good medical and mental health assessments. These assessments would be necessary for both concurrent planning and in order for the social workers to make good initial placements. Additionally, the mental health specialist could provide some on-site crisis counseling for children in need.
5. That in addition to the assessments from the nurse and mental health specialist, that the shelters' staff be trained on how to do behavioral assessments to aid in the placement process.

6. That the shelters have some office space for social workers to complete their interviewing of the child(ren) and to complete the necessary paperwork.
7. That the shelters be a possible place of employment for qualified Cal-Works recipients.