

MOVING OUT OF CRISIS AND INTO PROCESS: PLACEMENT OF FOSTER CARE YOUTH AND THE MATRIX PROGRAM OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

There are not enough foster homes in Santa Cruz County. As child welfare professionals develop a greater understanding of how to best meet the needs of abused and neglected children, the ironies and contradictions tied into foster care become more apparent. The foster care system cannot provide adequate support for the children it is designed to help.

These difficulties are more pronounced with teenagers in foster care. Foster care teens are underserved by the child welfare system due to a lack of meaningful placement options and the system's inability to work with teens outside the context of crisis.

THE MATRIX PROGRAM

The Matrix Program – developed by the Santa Clara County Department of Social Services — provides an intensive case management process that identifies long term placement solutions for difficult to place teenagers. The program has been contracted out to EMQ Children and Family Services — a local community-based organization.

The main goal of Matrix is to develop a long-term plan for foster care teens that relies more on the teenager's personal community ties than on the conventions or structure of the traditional "system" care. This is carried out through an intensive assessment process, wrap-around services, family

conferences, and promoting collaboration and collective responsibility with other agencies involved in the support of foster care teens.

The thrust of the Matrix Program is to work with teenagers in developing a plan for their long-term care. This process begins while the teenager is placed in Santa Clara County's foster care shelter. Subsequently, teens are moved to an on-site "transitional unit" at EMQ for up to 90 days. Ideally, within this 90 day period, a placement plan will have been drafted and put into motion. Matrix will continue to extend support to teens in their community placements for up to a year after leaving the transitional unit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

The central philosophy tied into the Matrix Program is that one must "build on what's right" in developing placement plans for teens. Matrix advocates that youths and perhaps their families of origin, must lead the planning process to build trust, buy-in, and the long-standing community support. These ideas represent a shift from the traditional way that child welfare workers respond to "high end" youth in the foster care system.

The Adult Family and Children's Division of Santa Cruz County would benefit from Santa Clara's model in its continuing work with foster care youth. Specifically, I recommend that the Agency develop a focus group process with a two-fold purpose:

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1. To consider the viability of a program similar to Matrix in this community. Ideally, the focus group would have representation from all local agencies that work with foster care youth.
2. To appoint either the same team of people as above or a group made up of similar representation to meet on a regular basis – outside the context of crisis – to collaborate and share information on the County’s “high end” youth.

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INTRODUCTION: FOSTER CARE, SHELTERS AND A SURE THING

In selecting a project for my BASSC internship, I focused on a concern of particular relevance to the Adult, Family and Children's Division for Santa Cruz County. High on the list of concerns within the division is the lack of viable placements for teenagers in foster care. Social workers, care providers, supervisors, and administrators can all easily agree and lament over the challenges inherent in serving foster care teens.

With this in mind, I planned to look into the operation of shelter care in another county. My initial thinking was that a shelter was the only logical solution. Foster homes and group homes can refuse to take teens into care. With no more than a week's notice, they can ask that teens placed with them be moved. I concluded that Santa Cruz County needed a permanent placement for teens: a shelter.

The path I ultimately took veered away from shelters and brought me to the Matrix Program instead. Developed by the Department of Social Services (DSS) of Santa Clara County, Matrix offers foster care teens more than just additional bed space; it provides an intensive case management process that identifies long term placement solutions for difficult to place teenagers. After a brief background on the foster care system, foster care in Santa Cruz County, and teenagers in foster care, this case examines the Matrix program in Santa Clara County. The case concludes with the implications and recommendations for Santa Cruz County.

BACKGROUND – THE CRISIS OF FOSTER CARE

One of the greatest challenges within the child welfare system is the placement of children who have been removed from parental care. Nation-wide, the foster care system is over burdened, controversial and in trouble. As child welfare professionals develop a greater understanding of how to best meet the needs of abused and neglected children, the ironies and contradictions of foster care become more and more pronounced; the foster care system simply cannot provide adequate support for the children it is designed to help.

Across the nation, child welfare agencies have the same concern: a) there are more children entering foster care than there are foster care homes, b) children placed into foster care have problems of increasing complexity, c) foster parents are often compelled to take in more children than they can reasonably accommodate, d) older children in foster care often run from placement, and e) others find themselves moved from home to home.

The most compelling concern is that children who "age out" of the foster care system frequently struggle throughout their adult lives. Adult foster children are over-represented among welfare recipients, prison inmates, the homeless, and – ironically – parents of children placed into foster care. The argument has been made that many children who grow up in an environment of abuse or neglect actually fare better as adults than those children raised in foster care.

FOSTER CARE IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY – THE CRISIS IS HERE, TOO

In Santa Cruz County, the challenge of providing the best possible care for foster children is underscored by the concerns noted above. In addition, because the cost of living is high and the availability of housing is low, it is difficult for foster parents and group homes to establish themselves in Santa Cruz.

The Adult, Children's and Families Division of the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency report the following statistics:

- As of February 2, 2001, 315 children were on record as being in relative care, foster care, or group home placements in the county.
- 123 of these children are between 14 and 18 years of age.
- 31 children are in group home placements.

The licensing department within the Adult, Children and Families Division actively recruits potential foster parents in the community through traditional means and also more innovative approaches. Support and training is extended to existing foster parents in the effort to retain them.

And yet, within the Agency it is agreed that appropriate, long-standing foster care placements are in short supply. All case-carrying workers throughout the Agency were recently surveyed as to what the Agency's top priority should be for improvement. The overwhelming majority cited the improvement and expansion of foster care placements should be a priority. Reduction in workload and job site improvements – typically high on the list of social worker demands – were distant runners up.

TEENAGERS IN FOSTER CARE – GET READY FOR THE SNAPSHOT

Meeting the needs of all children in foster care is difficult, but trying to serve teenagers in the system is a confounding task. A snapshot of current foster care openings in Santa Cruz County illustrates this point. As of May 2, 2001, there is the capacity to place 67 children into emergency foster care. Of these 67 spaces, 51 are currently occupied – leaving 16 openings. The 16 openings are spread out over eight different foster homes. Only two of the eight foster families are receptive to taking teenagers into their care. Between them, these two families have three current openings. The family with one opening is already providing care for five teenage girls. The family with two openings is headed by a monolingual Spanish-speaker. If there had been a need to place a teenager into emergency care the week of May 2nd, these two homes would have been the only placement options available to the Agency.

The above snapshot focuses on the immediate problem, yet distracts from the bigger picture. Placement decisions are frequently made during a crisis and – as stated before – there are not enough placements in Santa Cruz County. A valid solution – in the context of a crisis – would be to have a shelter. It is a “sure thing”. In addition, however, all key players in the foster care system agree that teenagers need more than shelter space if they are to thrive in placement.

MATRIX – WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS

The Matrix Program offers foster care youth a “process” rather than a shelter. The program (which has been in operation since Fall, 2000) emerged

from the concerns that Santa Clara County DSS had about their existing foster care shelter system. DSS staff reported that the shelter is over capacity at times. Teenagers often remain in shelter care longer than anticipated and beyond their best interest. Children of all ages are housed in the shelter for long stretches of time, which brings up a range of difficulties and safety concerns unique to shelter care.

Through collaboration with representatives from the Probation Department, County Mental Health, and other agencies working with foster care youth, DSS developed a model for the Matrix Program. Most of the implementation of the Matrix program has been contracted out to EMQ Children and Family Services, a local community-based organization that contains a foster family agency.

Matrix is set up to transfer “high end” teenagers (i.e. those with particularly difficult placement histories) from shelter care back into their own community. The main goal of Matrix is to develop a long-term plan for foster care teens that relies more on the teenager’s personal community ties than on the conventions or structure of the traditional “system” care.

It is presumed that children between 13 and 18 years of age can potentially be served by Matrix. Children unable to change their behavior due to developmental delays or extreme mental illness are not likely to be candidates for the program. However, Matrix will work with chronic runaways, youth diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, or borderline personality disorder.

Teens identified for Matrix are accepted into the program while they are residing at the DSS shelter.

A process of assessment and engagement occurs over a period of several weeks. Up to ten teenagers are placed into a “transitional unit”, (i.e. a group home on EMQ property). The facility is licensed as a Level 14 placement with a Mental Health Patch. Teens may stay in the transitional unit for up to 90 days. There are on-going assessment and intensive case management services while the teens are at the transitional unit. Ideally, at the end of the 90 days, a viable plan has been developed to integrate the teens back into the greater community. The Matrix program follows the teens for up to a year, extending support to them in their community settings.

Matrix personnel strive to know the youths in their charge. Wrap-around services, family conferences, and multi-layered genograms all bring deeper meaning to the traditional assessment and service delivery process. This enables the formation of placement options that are tailored to the needs, strengths, and individuality of each teenager in the program.

The placements Matrix hopes to develop and sustain include conventional foster homes, relative homes, and the homes of caretakers drawn from a teen’s own community of support. The process of forming a plan, securing the youths’ buy-in, and building support into the community placements sets Matrix apart from the traditional “system” care typically available to foster care youth.

BUILDING ON WHAT’S RIGHT AND MAKING SOCIAL WORKERS SHIFT

Craig Wolfe, Division Director at EMQ for Matrix, describes the program’s philosophy with foster care youth as “building on what’s right”. The idea of drawing on strengths is apparent in staff meetings,

in Matrix's own literature, and in discussions with key players in the program. This philosophy is emphasized by the following EMQ statement: "Matrix is strength based. Interpersonal relationships are of central concern because they are fundamental to the discovery, cultivation, and use of a youth's strengths."

At first glance, this sentiment is hardly controversial – it sounds little more than positive and affirming. But a deeper look indicates that Matrix is challenging child welfare workers to make an enormous shift. It is easy to label teenagers with long-standing placement difficulties and their families of origin as pathological. Yet, Matrix is asking these youth and families – with whatever troubles they bring – to lead the process of developing a plan of long-term care.

For example, if a teen in placement expressed a desire to live with her 20-year-old sister, conventional thinking might be to reject the idea based on the sister's age. Matrix, however, might explore with the teen, the sister, and others in the teen's life whether or not such a plan could be implemented if safeguards and support were built into place. If a youth in Matrix is a chronic runaway, Craig Wolfe states they attempt to "find out where he's running to" in the hopes of developing a deeper understanding of the action or perhaps a long-term placement plan for the youth.

The challenges of this approach are considerable. Youth and families who are veterans of the child welfare system come with formidable troubles and are often reluctant to trust the system. Winning a youth or family's trust is seen as essential in making any placement plan successful.

MEETINGS AND COLLABORATION

Another central idea of the Matrix Program is to promote collaboration among the different systems that work with foster care youth. Matrix personnel attend at least three multi-disciplinary team meetings on a regular basis. An on-site community team meeting is held each month at EMQ. Among those who attend are representatives from DSS, County Counsel, the Probation Department, County Mental Health, the Drug and Alcohol Program, DSS shelter staff as well as the Matrix staff themselves.

The Matrix Program personnel also attend "RISC" (Resources and Intensive Services Committee) meetings each week. Attendees include most of the team members noted above, as well as staff from local group homes. In addition "Mini-RISC" meetings are held each week and involve Matrix staff and DSS shelter staff.

The spirit of collaboration I witnessed at these meetings greatly impressed me. Inter-agency discussions about the placement of troubled teenagers are often focused on what will not happen. This focus dwells on who must take responsibility for placement, rather than considering what is best for the child. In contrast, the collaborative meetings I attended while examining the Matrix program generally focused on shared responsibility and accountability. This was especially evident at the RISC meeting I attended. The members concentrated on sharing information about teenagers in placement. They seemed to be laying the groundwork for possible future placement decisions. Perhaps more openings will be available during crisis as a result of these meetings.

WHAT ADMINISTRATORS ARE WONDERING AS THEY READ THIS — WHAT DOES IT COST?

The cost of operating the Matrix Program is not inexpensive. Although greatly simplified, the cost breakdown is as follows:

- Title IVE money is used for facility costs. This amounts to \$5700 per youth placed into the transitional unit per month.
- Because the residential facility is set up with an agreed-on Patch, Matrix is guaranteed \$1000 per month in Patch monies for each of its ten beds, whether the beds are occupied or not.
- EPSTD dollars via County Mental Health pay for the treatment that youth receive while engaged in Matrix services. This is not limited to youth living in the residential facility. A very rough, average estimate of the monthly cost per youth might come to \$3340 per month. This estimate is explained below.

The calculation for the exact dollar amount EPSTD will pay is dependent on the number of treatment hours billed and the cost of each “unit” of treatment. As per rates set through the Short-Doyle Medi-Cal Program, if Matrix attains a certain ratio in terms of units of service billed, the state and federal government will foot the entire cost. If the ratio is not attained, Santa Clara County must absorb some of the costs of treatment.

A FEW POINTS OF QUALIFICATION

Matrix is a new program and there are no data to evaluate the program’s success. It will be interesting to see how Matrix performs over the next couple of years. It seems optimistic to develop long-term placement plans for “high end” youth within just 90 days. I anticipate a longer period of transition time will be needed.

It is remarkable that Santa Clara County DSS handed a program with the scope and ambition of Matrix over to EMQ. Because of the resources required, and its location, Santa Cruz County would have difficulty replicating Matrix.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

I embarked on this project with the strong belief that Santa Cruz County needed a shelter for foster care youth – and that anything else would not address the County’s current placement difficulties. Shelters have obvious benefits; yet, by looking to shelter care as the only solution to the crisis of foster care placement one risks overlooking the true challenge of the foster care system: *What happens after the child is placed? What process will assure the child’s stability in placement? What process will promote a sense of connection to family or community? What process will prepare the child for adulthood?*

If it were run properly, a shelter in Santa Cruz County could address the above concerns. However, I believe a program holding the values I observed in Matrix would do a better job. I can specifically recommend that:

The Adult Family and Children’s Division of Santa Cruz County must make a philosophical shift in its approach to working with foster care youth. To accomplish this, I would propose that the Agency develop a focus group process with two components:

1. The viability of a program similar to Matrix in this community be considered. This would involve financial, philosophical, and logistical considerations. Ideally, this group would have representation from all local agencies that work with foster care youth.

2. Outside the context of crisis, representatives similar to those outlined above meet on a regular basis to collaborate and share information regarding the County's "high end" youth. Collaboration and shared responsibility must be a priority in this process.

To be successful, foster care youth need more than they currently receive from the child welfare system. As we strive help the children in our system, we need to understand that the placement of a child into care does not represent the end of the problem but, rather, the beginning of a process.

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