

CREATING A NEW SYSTEM OF EMERGENCY FOSTER CARE: MONTEREY COUNTY'S CHERISH PROGRAM

Toan Le*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an ideal world, children would grow up in a loving and safe environment with their families. Unfortunately, there are times when a child is removed from their family and placed into protective custody because they are neglected or abused.

Half a million American children are in foster care, remaining in psychological and physical dilemmas – many far longer than they should. These are real children, perhaps children we may even know. The foster care system, intended to provide temporary care, has become a permanent home for far too many children.

Responding to the need for emergency foster care providers, Monterey County administrators convened a group of concerned leaders, community partners and staff, to address the lack of emergency foster care in the County. Their commitment and efforts produced an innovative program – the Cherish Project. The mission of the Project is to design, develop, and sustain an innovative, top quality system for emergency placement of children (up to 18 years of age) who have been or are at-risk of being abused or neglected.

The Cherish Project has dramatically improved the foster care system continuum in Monterey County. The Receiving Center, the purchasing of new homes for potential foster parents, and community partnerships have expanded placement options for social workers.

Finally, the Cherish Project and related recommendations have considerably moved Monterey County toward a more community-based system of care, with emphasis on family reunification. This movement parallels both Monterey and San Mateo County's transition to the Family to Family model.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAN MATEO

- San Mateo County should analyze its target communities and ensure foster families and services meet the population needs;
- Develop strategies to prevent foster parent burn-out;
- Seek creative financing through non-profit partnerships – this option allows non-profit agencies with the ability to fundraise and leverage additional funding (i.e. grants); and
- Promote foster care legislation to relieve financial or regulatory restrictions on the County.

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INTRODUCTION

At approximately 2:00 am, Mary, a social worker in Monterey County, receives a call regarding a possible child abuse case from law enforcement. She jumps in her car and drives over to the home where the child is located. Upon her investigation she concludes that the child, Mike, requires protective custody, so Mary removes Mike from his parents.

Unfortunately, Mary's dilemma is just starting - she is struck with the fact that there is no emergency shelter for Mike this early in the morning. With no place to go, Mary decides to take Mike to a local Denny's Restaurant where they wait throughout the morning. While the characters are fictitious, this story is based upon real events.

BACKGROUND

The Child Welfare Services (CWS) system is the safety net for neglected and abused children. This system is a complex array of programs, services, and laws. A primary CWS service is foster care - the 24 hour out of home care provided to children in need of substitute parenting because their own families are unable or unwilling to care for them. The ultimate purpose of the foster care system is to keep children safe while services are provided to reunite them with their families. In situations where family reunification is not possible, foster parents provide long term or permanent care.

There are several reasons to focus on the foster care system. Our government has a unique obligation to children in the foster care system. First, when it

removes children from their parents, it takes on the responsibility of providing for their well being. Second, over 100,000 children are in the California foster care system; and third, government in general spends over 2 billion annually on foster care costs and services for both the children and their families.

While endless research and analysis can be done to scrutinize the spectrum of the foster care system, this case study focuses on one small yet critical component - the system of emergency care in Monterey County. We should ask why Mary's only option is to go to a local Denny's Restaurant. It should provoke local leaders and decision makers to take immediate actions, and it should anger parents and advocacy groups. Finally, it should force a resolution.

HISTORY

Like so many counties in California and across the nation, Monterey County's foster home crisis began in the early 1990s with the dot-com boom and the consequent higher cost of living, including the outrageously inflated housing market. Other factors, like the lack of funding for emergency shelters, limited support services for foster parents, and an increased need to place special-needs children, played a role in crippling the foster care system.

While the demands for foster care increase, the number of available foster families has critically decreased. In Monterey County, the number of contracted emergency foster care facilities eroded to zero. The absence of an emergency foster care sys-

tem is further complicated when “back-up emergency homes” or regular foster homes decline to take in a child for various reasons, mainly because they cannot serve the child’s special needs or do not have the capacity to house additional children.

The lack of emergency foster care often forced social workers to make placement arrangements with the child sitting in their office. Sadly, in some situations, the child would hear potential foster care families declining on the phone. Furthermore, these facilities are not equipped to handle a child’s needs (i.e. bathing, delousing, emotional support.)

The frustration over the lack of emergency foster care resources forced the county to develop new and innovative approaches to the emergency foster care system. In the year 2000, responding to a call to improve the foster care system, specifically emergency shelters and services in Monterey County, the Department of Social Services, Family and Children’s Services (FCS) convened a group of staff to revamp the current foster care system. After months of research, data analysis and community meetings, FCS staff were still ‘spinning their wheels’ to come up with a solution. Finally, in early 2001, the county allocated essential resources that allowed FCS to hire a staff person to focus specifically on countywide foster care issues. Within months, FCS, in partnership with the Charitable Council and the Social Services Commission formed CHERISH (Children’s Emergency Shelter Intake Project) and developed a working mission statement and model.

The Cherish Committee quickly moved forward with the goal to develop and implement a strategy for emergency foster care. The planning process included: 1) data collection; 2) focus groups; 3) national and local research, including site visits;

4) testing a pilot model; 5) development of recommendations; and 6) implementation. Through months of analysis and work – with over 25 focus groups consisting of stakeholders, community members and professionals – the Cherish “coalition” researched existing best practice models throughout the nation; and conducted community recruitments and implementation, successfully fulfilling its obligation to develop and customize a working emergency foster care model for the County.

The Cherish Project recommendations were:

- 1) **Maintain** – Systems, programs components, staffing, procedures, methodology and community partnerships currently in place in the county’s emergency foster care that will be maintained in their current form;
- 2) **Enhance** – Components of the current emergency foster care system that will be augmented to provide better service, more placement options, prevent foster parent burnout, etc.;
- 3) **Expand** – New components that do not exist currently.

While the recommendations may seem overly simplistic, the amount of work involved remains endless.

PROCESS

With the Cherish Committee research and recommendations, Monterey County will soon implement a new system of care. Eventually, when a child is determined at-risk and placed into protective custody, the child will be immediately brought to the receiving center. The receiving center is one of the many recommendations resulting from the Cherish

Project and was one of many critical components that were initially missing from Monterey County's foster care continuum. Here, children will receive support, medical care, and, more importantly, a safe haven from their abusive environment. Staff will make further assessments to determine the placement option that would best fit the interests of the child. This placement could range from a more restrictive to less restrictive environment. (See Attachment 1)

In San Mateo County, a similar risk assessment is performed when a child is placed into protective custody. However, placement is determined by a "placement worker" based upon the child's needs. Generally speaking, if the child is 0-12 years of age, they are taken to an emergency foster family. The family is under contract with the County to take in children under emergency circumstances. Similarly, if the child is over 12 years of age, they are placed at a receiving center where further assessments are made to determine the child's best interest. Once in the emergency care system, the child is assessed for a more permanent placement.

Like Monterey County, the San Mateo foster care placement continuum model consists of ongoing and permanency options. In the less restrictive facility, the County has the opportunity to reunite the child with his/her family or place them in a temporary foster care facility home while providing the family with reunification services. Consequently, if the child is acting out and/or requires special attention, services are provided in a more restrictive site for the benefit of the child.

KEY ELEMENTS

To date, the Cherish Project has improved the foster care system continuum. One unique component to

this continuum is the Children's Circle of Friends Initiative, formerly the Best Friends Housing Project. This innovative program has secured several brand new three to four bedroom homes to house emergency foster families. The homes will be used to attract new foster families by allowing them the opportunity to purchase the home at the end of their obligation. The County is currently in its implementation phase for recruiting families while final touches are being made to several of the homes.

Another is the Marina Public Safety Program (MPSP). Through the vision of former Social Services Commissioner Paul Vierling, the MPSP program allows Marina Public Safety Officers or City employees to serve as emergency foster parents in exchange for receiving subsidized housing using a mixture of redevelopment funds and other sources.

This unique partnership between the City of Marina, County of Monterey, Rotary Club, and stakeholders, is the first in California and possibly in the nation. It is another example that speaks to the innovation, commitment and dedication of the people of Monterey County.

RECOMMENDATION FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

The Cherish Project proposes to dramatically improve the foster care system continuum in Monterey County. The Receiving Center, the new homes purchased by the Children's Circle of Friends Initiative, and non-profit partnerships has expanded placement options for social workers by allowing them the opportunity to place abused children immediately and appropriately.

In addition, the recommendations move Monterey

County toward a more community-based system of care, with emphasis on family reunification. This movement evidences Monterey County's recent transition to the Family to Family model. Based on these ideas, recommendations for San Mateo County include:

- Analyze target communities and ensure foster families and services meet the population's needs;
- Develop strategies to prevent foster parent burn-out;
- Seek creative financing through non-profit partnerships
- Leverage and/or promote foster care legislations to relieve financial burden on the County.

LESSONS LEARNED

Interviews and analysis of the Cherish Project yielded many positive outcomes which resulted in the success of the project. Data/interviews suggest two reasons for this success:

- 1) The financial commitment to hire full time staff dedicated to the project
- 2) Non-Profit partnerships - One particular recurring theme which many participants would identify as a positive lesson learned is community partnership. The successful implementation of the Cherish Project, especially the Children's Circle of Friends and the Receiving Center are viable options because nonprofit and collaborative efforts allow for greater flexibility in managing resources and leveraging resources.

IMPLICATIONS/IMPACT

Governance/Legislations

Federal and state lawmakers play a role in creating, maintaining, and redesigning the foster care system. Policy and law makers must establish a legal framework that governs the public responsibility for children who enter and leave the child welfare system.

The administrating agency responsible for carrying out child welfare / foster care legislation is the United States Department of Health and Human Services. In California, the Department of Social Services supervises county administration and allocates federal and state funds. The Foster Care Ombudsman investigates complaints and resolves concerns related to foster care. Finally, County agencies administer CWS/foster care.

Understanding the governance structure helps CWS/Foster Care administrators to effect genuine change at the appropriate levels to better serve our children. The following legislation merits review, analysis, amending, or lobbying.

- Foster Care Mentoring Act of 2003 – *this bill supports the establishment or expansion and operation of programs using a network of public and private community entities to provide mentoring for children in foster care.*
- Guidelines for Public Policy and State Legislation Governing Permanence for Children – *a technical assistance document designed to help states review their laws and develop statutes and policies that reflect the best practices.*
- Adoption Equality Act of 2003 – *this bill promotes the adoption of children with special needs;*
- Child Protective Services Improvement Act – *this bill intends to improve the ability of the child welfare system to prevent and respond to*

child abuse and place children in safe, loving, and permanent homes.

- Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 – *this bill intends to improve and reauthorize programs and funding of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.*

Policies/Initiatives

During the last two decades there has been a shifting dynamic between two conflicting goals: protection of children by removing them from an abusive environment versus family preservation. This dichotomy has significantly impacted current laws and policies regarding the foster care system, with emphasis on family preservation. One such example of this shift is the Family to Family Initiative.

While committees form to begin their planning stages in Monterey County, the Family to Family Initiative in San Mateo County moves into their 2nd year of implementation. Recently, San Mateo County conducted their first agency Team Decision Making (TDM) meeting to review a child welfare case. While still in the judicial process, it is anticipated that this case will go smoothly due to the involvement of the family and community.

Information Technology Resources

Another way to improve the foster care program is to explore new technology to help improve decisions regarding child safety. For example, San Mateo Human Services Analytical Reporting Project (SHARP) recently integrated and deployed Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies. Leveraging the Agency's current data warehouse, which contains CWS/CMS information, San Mateo County can spatially track a child's number of placement episodes in comparison to his/her resi-

dence. Such technologies will improve the quality and accountability of decision makers and assist in developing policies and resource allocations.

CONCLUSION

This case offers an illustration of an operational challenge, and how public administrators and community partners can work together to forge a new system of foster care.

The Cherish Project has dramatically improved the foster care system continuum in Monterey County. The Receiving Center, the purchasing of new homes, and community partnerships have expanded placement options for social workers. Social workers like Mary can now take kids to a home-like setting at the receiving center while necessary care and placement options are provided throughout the day.

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