

## **CONTRA COSTA COUNTY'S SHARED FAMILY CARE PROGRAM: AN ALTERNATIVE TO OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT**

**Mary Grimm\***

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Shared Family Care (SFC) is a "parenting immersion" program where the entire family, parent and child, are placed in the home of a mentor family for six months while they work towards learning and refining parenting skills and progress towards independence.

The program is a collaboration between the Contra Costa County's Children and Families Service Bureau and FamiliesFirst, a nonprofit community agency. The county contracts with FamiliesFirst. The nonprofit agency provides the direct service to both mentor families and the families who are placed with them or mentee families. The addition of a Housing Specialist and an After Care program has been critical to the program's success. Collaboration continues in monthly team meetings with other service providing agencies involved in the mentee family's life.

Presently there are nine mentor families and five families placed. Several more families will be placed in the near future. All families are referred from Contra Costa County's Child and Family Services Bureau.

#### **FUNDING**

Funding is a combination of public and private monies and has proven to be an ongoing challenge. TANF funds, previously earmarked for this pro-

gram, have been cut which means a cutback in staff. Contra Costa is looking to diversify the funding base.

The present budget for FY2003-2004 is \$350,000. This includes the monthly \$1200 monthly placement cost.

#### **OUTCOMES**

At the onset of this program, the Zellerbach Foundation granted funds to the Abandoned Infants Assistance (AIA) Resource Center, School of Social Welfare at Berkeley for a five-year evaluation.

Contra Costa County's SFC program shows impressive results for the families who complete it.

Outcomes include:

- Increased employment
- Increased income
- Smaller rate of re-entry into the foster care system as compared to Contra Costa County's re-entry rate and California's re-entry rate.

The evaluation period has ended. FamiliesFirst is using a measurement of progress tool as a means of collecting information to evaluate.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY**

I recommend that Santa Clara County consider the Shared Family Care program as an alternative to

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out-of-home care. In October after the redesign has been implemented, the following activities can occur:

- Convene a focus group with representatives from the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), the Department of Employment and Benefits (DEBS) and community partners to discuss the Shared Family Care Program
- Review the evaluation and outcomes from Contra Costa County's program
- Work up a proposal for the Executive Team that includes funding possibilities, timelines for implementation and an evaluation process.

While experts recognize that the SFC program is not for every family, it has been a benefit to some parents and children who otherwise would have been separated. The program requires collaboration, agency commitment and resources. The savings come in the long run as the family stays out of the child welfare system and able to maintain self-sufficiency.

## **CONTRA COSTA COUNTY'S SHARED FAMILY CARE PROGRAM: AN ALTERNATIVE TO OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

I chose to study the Shared Family Care Program in Contra Costa County. When I heard about Shared Family Care I thought about a family I worked with, as a case carrying social worker. A young mother, "Rebecca", had two children ages four and six with whom she recently reunified. She had no family support and was marginally connected to the community. Working as a hotel housekeeper she was barely able to make ends meet. I knew that her six-year old son had some challenging behaviors. "Rebecca" and her children would probably have been good candidates for the Shared Family Care program.

Shared Family Care (SFC) is similar to foster care for the whole family. The parent and child are placed together in the home of a community mentor family who provides nurturing, guidance and sometimes, tough love. The parent learns the finer points of parenting on a daily basis that encourages positive interaction between parent and child.

### **SHARED FAMILY CARE CONCEPT**

Richard Barth who was a Professor at the School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley (currently a Professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) was interested in the shared family care idea since his Fulbright to Stockholm University in 1990. In Sweden Professor Barth found that fifty percent of the children in foster care were placed there with a family member. Upon return to the United States, he found that there were programs in Pennsylvania and Minnesota that

had similar ideas—placing parents along with children in home settings with host families or mentors who would provide guidance.

In the Guiding Principles and Anticipated Benefits from the Shared Family Care Program Guidelines developed by the Abandoned Infants Assistance (AIA) Resource Center, two of the general values and beliefs include:

- Families should remain together (i.e., children should not be separated from their primary caregiver) if at all possible,
- In order to support a child, it is necessary to support the child's parent(s).

When a family comes to the attention of the child protection agency and the environment is not deemed safe enough for the child to remain, the agency is faced with finding a suitable place for the child either with a relative or in an out-of-home setting. At the same time the parent is provided support towards creating a safe environment for the return of his/her child. Yet these two supports happen concurrently and not necessarily with child and parent together. As good as the services are for the parent, and as stable as the child can be in an alternative setting other than his or her own home, the separation causes parent and child to travel on different paths. Parenting is a daily exchange between parent and child where both learn how to adjust to the changes that they experience.

"Parenting immersion" describes the idea better according to Steve Schmidbauer, Program

Manager for FamiliesFirst, Inc., Concord, Ca. Immersing the parent in the daily experience of parenting helps make things click. Some of the parents participating in the SFC program have never been parented themselves. This immersion experience allows parents to learn day-to-day good parenting skills from their mentor families while caring for their children as they work toward independent living.

### **BACKGROUND**

There are several components that assisted the Shared Family Care program to become established. First, the project was promoted by the National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center (AIA), School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley where Rick Barth is associated. Secondly, the Resource Center brought together child welfare agencies from surrounding counties to develop the idea of a Shared Family Care program. Finally, the Zellerbach Foundation offered start up funds to counties wanting to grow the program and granted funds to the AIA Resource Center to provide technical assistance and a five-year evaluation component. Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department stepped forward in 1997. After two years of planning and development that produced the Shared Family Care Program Guidelines, Contra Costa's SFC program began to take shape.

### **EVOLUTION OF THE PROGRAM**

Initially, the county's Child and Family Services Department contracted with FamiliesFirst, a non-profit agency, to provide SFC services to families in West County. With Loving Care received a contract to help recruit families in North Richmond. In January 2000, Contra Costa's Social Services

Director decided to expand the SFC program by making CALWORKS (TANF) funds available for FamiliesFirst to administer the program in Central County and provide oversight to the whole program. The county also contracted with the Center for Human Development to administer the SFC site in East County. Families First and CHD developed policies and procedures for the program that previously had not been defined. The target population shifted so that all referrals to the SFC program came from the County Social Services Department. Previously, community members or agencies could refer though all participants still needed to have an open CFS case.

In July 2001, FamiliesFirst took over the administration of the East and Central sites of the program. The county consolidated the program under one agency in order to minimize administration overhead costs.

### **FUNDING**

Sources of funding for the program have come from private foundations (Zellerbach, Stuart, Hedge Funds), TANF, State and Federal Family Preservation funds.

The present budget for FY2003/2004 is \$350,000. Contributions are as follows: Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department, \$260,000; Zellerbach, \$15,000; San Francisco Foundation, \$25,000; and Hedge Funds, \$50,000. Part of the budget covers the monthly placement cost of \$1200.00 per month per family.

Ongoing funding continues to be a challenge and Contra Costa County is looking to diversify its funding base. The program will face budget shortfalls without funding from another source.

There are two possibilities for ongoing funding:

- Taking a look at applying for a Title IVE waiver to use flexible funds
- Including Shared Family Care in the present government proposal for foster care reform and restructuring foster care rates so that a Shared Family Care rate is established.

Contra Costa County's Director of Employment and Human Services, John Cullen did present the Shared Family Care program's successes to the California State Assembly Human Services Committee in Sacramento in March. He did suggest that SFC be a part of the state's Department of Social Services redesign.

### **FAMILIESFIRST**

FamiliesFirst is the nonprofit agency that contracts with the Children and Families Service Bureau (CFS) to provide direct services to families referred to SFC and services to the mentors.

Criteria for the SFC Program developed by FamiliesFirst, in partnership with Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department include the following:

- Only families who have an open case with the Children and Family Services Bureau (an open child protective services case) can be referred
- The parent must follow through on the court case plan or the voluntary case plan
- The parent has to have completed a treatment program and any after care programs (if applicable)
- The parent must have a minimum of six weeks of consecutive negative drug tests with accompanying documentation. Drug testing will continue while in SFC (if applicable).
- The parent must show proof of income.

- There must be a commitment on the parent's part to increase his or her income through employment.
- The parent must be physically and mentally capable of caring for themselves and their children.

The application process is initiated by the social worker from Children and Family Services. A meeting is scheduled for the parent, the CFS social worker and the SFC social worker to discuss the possibility of placement in the program.

Expectations are established: continued follow-through on the case plan; adherence to the mentor's house rules; participation in weekly meetings with the Shared Family Care social worker; participation in monthly training and support; mandatory monthly savings/matching funds program and agreeing to work with the Shared Family Care Housing Specialist.

The expansion of the FamiliesFirst program allowed the agency to hire a Housing Specialist, which has made a huge difference. The Housing Specialist works with the family to ready them for housing (helping with tenant resumes, how to dress when looking for a place to live, etc.) and serves as a liaison between the landlord and tenant, if needed.

While the program offers housing services, FamiliesFirst staff stress that this is not a housing program. Families do need stable housing but there are other issues that need to be addressed, too. Services encompass much more than assisting with housing (as mentioned earlier). After six weeks and with approval, the parent and children can spend one weekend a month away from the mentor's home.

Families in the SFC program are asked to apply to the CalWORKS program if the parent does not have

an income. A minimum of \$5.00 rent allows families to keep the CalWORKS grant as parents work towards self-sufficiency.

## MENTORS

FamiliesFirst staff explained that it was difficult finding mentor families at first. Advertising was the best way but advertising can be expensive. Announcements through radio, magazines and public service announcements for the better part of a year created lots of nibbles but people were hesitant because the SFC concept was something new. Finally, a group of families, which has since developed into a strong core group, spread the word.

As Saundra Marshall, Supervisor for the SFC program at FamiliesFirst explained, mentor families who continue with the program have seen the success that was intended by the program: a parent and child completing the program while developing the skills to live productively and independently.

What are some characteristics inherent to mentors in the Shared Family Care program? Staff at FamiliesFirst found that mentors had several things in common:

- Previous experience living in community or with extended family and doing it successfully
- A life experience where they have had to rely on someone else for help
- A middle to lower income level
- Experience raising children of their own

The following considerations are desirable when recruiting mentors to the program:

- The ability to provide a stable environment
- Flexibility
- The ability to welcome the family into the home non-judgmentally
- Treatment of families with respect

- The application of good boundaries
- Being situated close to public transportation
- Having at least one bedroom that is empty and furnished
- Being able to meet their own families' financial needs

The role of the mentor is to guide the parent, not to parent. The mentor assists the parent in finding resources in the community and helping with communication. The mentor works to empower the parent with skills.

There is an ongoing monthly support group for mentors at the FamiliesFirst office. The meeting provides a forum for mentors to discuss openly any issues that arise.

Training for mentors includes two days of foster care training and eight hours of new mentor training. Topics for new mentors include understanding the child welfare system and roles, communication, and conflict resolution.

Presently there are nine mentor families in the program.

## MENTEES

Parents or mentees go through a series of interviews before being accepted to the program and matched to a mentor family. Paperwork during these meetings includes signing releases of confidentiality statements. Placement in mentor homes can occur during the reunification phase of a Children and Families Services case as long as parents are able to reunify with their child(ren) within 30 days.

Two exit plans (Plan A and Plan B) are developed at the beginning of placement. The program allows for

six months in a mentor home. The exit plan includes desired goals to be achieved by the end of the stay.

After placement in the mentor families' home, the mentee parents are provided with support from their CFS social worker and from the staff at FamiliesFirst. The FamiliesFirst therapist meets with mentees in the home regarding parenting, setting limits with their children, engaging with children, sobriety and relationship issues. Team meetings with parent, mentor, the CFS social worker, the FamiliesFirst social worker, other service providers and support individuals occur on a monthly basis to review progress towards the goal of independence.

There have been a few placements that haven't been successful for the following reasons:

- The parent has relapsed and can't get back on track
- The parent doesn't want to follow the mentor's rules
- The match with a mentor family may not have worked out

Some mentees have a strong relationship with their mentor and keep in contact beyond the six-month stay.

The average age of parents participating in the program is about 30. These parents seem ready to participate in the program and are ready to take suggestion. Most have been single mothers with one or two children although there have been two single fathers.

There is an After Care program which is offered after the placement ends. Participation in the After Care program is voluntary and can last for six months.

Currently, there are five mentee families involved in the FamiliesFirst program. In these five families there are nine children. (Generally, parents in SFC have one or two children). There are several families that will be placed in about a month.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

The greatest strength of this program is the collaboration among the mentee, mentor, CFS social worker, the FamiliesFirst social worker and other service providers. This collaboration is strongest in the team meetings.

The greatest challenges have been the recruitment of mentor families when FamiliesFirst began the program. Recruitment for new mentor families has not occurred for three years mainly because the program downsized and the current mentor base meets the need. Providing mentors with mentees on a regular basis is preferable to having mentors wait long periods of time between placements.

Conversations with the experts who developed this program found that Shared Family Care is not the answer for every family. It seems that those families who are more apt to benefit from this program are those where there is little or no family or community support and where the only other alternative is homelessness.

## **EVALUATION AND OUTCOMES**

The AIA Resource Center received a grant from the Zellerbach Foundation at the beginning of the development of the SFC program to evaluate progress at several sites including Contra Costa County.

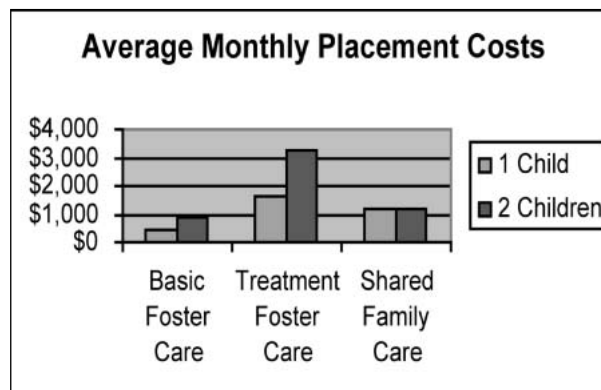
While the program has served a small number of families, the outcomes are impressive. Findings from the evaluation show that:

- Employment for parents increased from 36% (pre-placement) to 76% at graduation from the program
- The average monthly income increased from \$520 (pre-placement) to \$1,100 (at graduation)
- 18% of parents and children were living independently (pre-placement); 76% of parents and children were living independently (at graduation)
- 8% of the children re-entered foster care within 12 months of completing the SFC program. In comparison, 13% of children in California, and 15% of children in Contra Costa County, re-entered care within 12 months of reunification after regular non-kin foster care.

In general SFC appears to be more cost-effective than treatment foster care, and may be more cost-effective than basic foster care in the long run. Looking only at placement costs and average length of stay, the cost of Shared Family Care is more (with one child) or slightly less (with 2 or more children) than basic foster care, but significantly less than treatment foster care. Families that successfully complete SFC are less dependent on the system because upon and beyond graduation, they are more likely to be employed and have a higher income than when they entered the program. Further, children from families that graduate from SFC are less likely to re-enter foster care than children who reunify after being placed in regular foster care.

The chart below represents the monthly placement costs for one and two children in Basic Foster Care, Treatment Foster Care and Shared Family Care. The average length of stay in basic foster care

placement is 10 months, for treatment foster care is 19 months and for Shared Family Care is six months. (Figures taken from the last evaluation in 2002).



While placement costs can be cost effective, consideration has to be given to pre-placement services, intensive services while the families are in placement, the after care program and administrative costs.

The funding for the evaluation has ended. FamiliesFirst has decided to implement their own evaluation process. The agency is using an assessment tool to measure life skills. This tool helps to measure progress and helps to assess the program.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY

In October, after the redesign has been implemented, I recommend that DFCS gather a focus group with representatives from:

- The Resource Family Support Team
- Parent Advocates
- Social Workers from each of the Family Resources Centers
- Social Services Program Managers



- Department of Employment and Benefits (DEBS)
- Community Partners
- Housing Authority
- SSA Office of Evaluation and Planning

to discuss the Shared Family Care concept and the information from the studies done in Contra Costa County. If this group sees SFC as feasible for Santa Clara County, then the group would develop a proposal for the Executive Team to approve that would include:

- A budget
- Research results of funding source possibilities (including recommendations for flexible funding waivers)
- The possibility of partnering with other counties to secure ongoing funding
- DFCS as the fiscal agent and contract monitor
- Support for the program provided by one of our community partner agencies along with some program support from DFCS Family Resource Centers
- Recommendation of oversight by one of the Social Services Program Managers
- Research results of the possibility of partnering with Housing Authority to offer Section 8 certificates after families have successfully graduated from the program
- A recruitment plan for mentor families (starting small with two or three families)
- Criteria for mentee families to participate that would change with experience
- Customization of the program utilizing the SFC guidelines already developed
- Development of an evaluation mechanism to include the following areas (before families start the SFC program and upon completion):
  - Income
  - Employment

- Housing
- Case Plan Progress
- Family Well-Being
- Re-Entry Rate into Foster Care
- Link outcome measurement to agency outcome measurement

Shared Family Care is a small program that requires time, resources, agency commitment and interagency collaboration. It is well worth taking a look at this program given the successful outcomes.

Parenting is a daily experience for both parent and child. As a social service agency dedicated to the well-being of children and families, this program may be an answer when faced with the possibility of removing a child from his or her parent.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful to Lynn Yaney, Community Liaison with Contra Costa County for connecting me to the Shared Family Care Program. I want to acknowledge Paul Buddenhagen, Special Projects Coordinator with Children and Family Services for generously sharing his information and knowledge and to Deborah Moss, Division Manager. Steve Schmidbauer, Sandra Marshall, Kim MacDonald and Eleanor Vohrysek provided valuable information about the Shared Family Care program at their agency, FamiliesFirst. Thank you to Amy Price from the National Abandoned Infants Resource Center, School of Social Welfare who shared her expertise. Finally, thank you to the Department of Family and Children's Services in Santa Clara County for giving me the opportunity to participate in the BASSC Executive Development Program.

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