

MARIN COUNTY'S YOUTH PILOT PROGRAM: A COMMUNITY-BASED ALTERNATIVE TO PLACEMENT

Rebecca Feiner*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program has been in operation since 1995 when Marin was one of six counties chosen to participate in the pilot under Assembly Bill 1741. To date, the program has proven to be successful in that Marin County has experienced a decrease in the number of children placed in out-of-home care. Additionally, the program has demonstrated cost effectiveness.

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program (YPP) was designed for families with children who are in, or at imminent risk of, out of home placement. The program is based on the philosophy that families, in conjunction with their personal and professional support systems, are in the best position to plan and implement a strategy for protecting their children and meeting their special needs.

The program was designed to determine if children at imminent risk could remain at home with collaborative planning and provision of intensive services. It was also designed to determine whether children already in placement could be moved to a lower level of out-of-home care, or returned home sooner, with collaborative planning and provision of out-of-home services.

Case managers from the Department of Social Services, Community Mental Health and Juvenile Probation make referrals. The State of California has granted Marin County a waiver to allow for the

flexible use of state funds previously available only to fund out-of-home placement. The waiver will allow Social Services to use these funds to expand the YPP and further assist families to keep their children at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NAPA COUNTY

Napa County's SB 163 Program began accepting referrals in October 2001. In 1997, state legislation was passed allowing California counties to participate in a statewide pilot project with the goal of keeping children who would otherwise be placed in residential treatment in their own homes or expediting their return from residential treatment. Authored by Hilda Solis, Senate Bill 163 allows counties to use state foster care funds to provide wraparound services to eligible families as an alternative to residential treatment.

Counties participating in SB163 claim state foster care payments for wraparound services provided to eligible children and their families.

Napa County's SB 163 program has demonstrated success in its early stages. It appears likely that the program will continue to expand. In order to ensure the continued success of the program, I recommend that Napa County consider making a few changes to the SB 163 Program. I suggest that Napa County identify and train individuals who are not SB 163 staff to coordinate and facilitate family team meet-

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ings. Napa County has an existing Family Group Conferencing program whose staff may be appropriate. Additional training could be provided to other agency staff who could be utilized as needed. Further, I suggest that facilitators participate in Family Network facilitation training provided by CYSC in Marin County. Finally, I recommend that a Napa County purchase a laptop computer for the SB 163 program to be used at every family team meeting to update the family's wraparound plan.

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INTRODUCTION

Maria is the mother of two children. Rosa, age thirteen and Christian, age nine, had been made dependents of Marin County by the juvenile court following a life-threatening crisis related to Christian's chronic medical condition and a serious incident of domestic violence between Maria and the father of the children. It appeared Maria would be unable to establish and monitor the medical care necessary to ensure Christian's health without case management by Marin County Child Protective Services and oversight by the juvenile court. Maria and her children were referred to Marin County's Youth Pilot Program in an effort to prevent the children from being placed in out-of-home care. Maria was concerned that the services offered would not be culturally appropriate for her family.

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program is designed for families with children who are in, or at imminent risk of, out-of-home placement. The program is based on the philosophy that families, in conjunction with their personal and professional support systems, are in the best position to plan and implement a strategy for protecting their children and meeting their special needs. The program was designed to determine if children at imminent risk could remain at home with collaborative planning and provision of intensive services. It was also designed to determine whether children already in placement could be moved to a lower level of out-of-home care, or returned home sooner, with collaborative planning and provision of out-of-home services. Referrals are made by case managers from the Department of Social Services, Community

Mental Health and Juvenile Probation. The State of California has granted Marin County a waiver to allow for the flexible use of state funds previously available only to fund out-of-home placement. The waiver will allow Social Services to use these funds to expand the YPP and further assist families to keep their children at home.

The program uses a family group decision-making model to serve children at risk of placement and their families. This process brings together a "family team", including family members, public and private service providers, and family advocates or supports. A trained facilitator who is neutral and simply guides the interaction facilitates the team meetings. The facilitator makes sure all team members are heard and then brings the team to consensus on a plan of action for the family. The plan includes the goals for the family and the action steps to reach those goals. Family members are critical to the team and parents are viewed as experts in respect to their own children. Because the family is part of the team, they take an active part in devising the plan and take ownership of it. Members of the team agree to take responsibility for moving each step of the plan forward.

The criteria for acceptance are as follows:

- A family must have a child in placement or in imminent need of placement.
- A parent must be available and want to have the child at home.
- If there is no parent available and willing, there must be a relative or appropriate foster parent available and willing to provide care for the child.

BACKGROUND

In 1995, Marin County was one of six counties in California chosen to implement a Youth Pilot Program via Assembly Bill 1741. While the process of each county's pilot program is different, they share common goals:

- Determining the best use of state and local human service moneys
- Blending these funds to facilitate integrated services for families and their children
- Increasing efficiency in the administration of human services

The Youth Pilot Program was adopted as a strategy to answer two questions: 1) Could children at imminent risk of placement instead remain at home with collaborative planning and provision of intensive services? And 2) Could children already in placement be moved to a lower level of out-of-home care, or returned home sooner, with collaborative planning and provision of out of home services?

THE YOUTH PILOT PROGRAM— KEY ELEMENTS

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program uses a facilitated family decision-making process to provide intensive community-based services with the goal of safely maintaining children in the least restrictive level of care. Flexible funds are used to purchase goods and /or services in accordance with family plans as needed to meet team goals.

Referrals to the program are received from the Department of Social Services, Community Mental Health or Juvenile Probation. Referrals are screened for acceptance based upon the following criteria:

- A family must have a child in placement or in imminent need of placement
- A parent must be available and want to have the child at home, or
- If there is no parent available and willing, there must be relatives within the immediate geographic area who are available and want the child in their home, or
- If no parent or relative is available and willing, there must be an appropriate foster family within the immediate geographic area who could provide care for the child. (This option is available only for children in group or residential care, or at imminent risk of being placed in group or residential care), or
- The child could be safe at home or in an alternative placement if intensive services were made available to the child and caregiver.

The child welfare supervisor assigned to the Youth Pilot Program reviews program referrals from Juvenile Probation and Mental Health as well as those originating from Child Protective Services. If a family is eligible for services, the application is forwarded to staff at the Coordinated Youth Services Council. The family is then asked to identify potential team members. As families become engaged in services with the Youth Pilot Program, the CYSC assists the family in identifying team members. A team might include parents, guardians, extended family members, family friends, neighbors, children, and service providers. Teams are comprised of naturally occurring members (family, neighbors, friends) as well as professionals (teachers, therapists, mentors).

In addition, a facilitator is assigned to conduct the team meetings. The facilitator's contact with the family is limited to the team meetings. The facilitator is neutral, does not participate in the content of

the meeting, and is not actively involved with the family or with the provision of services. The facilitator is trained to run the team meetings in keeping with the Family Network principles. She ensures that each team member has an opportunity to participate in the meeting. The facilitator does not contribute opinions or ideas to the meetings. She encourages team members to express their points of view and explore a range of solutions to challenges drawing upon the individual and combined strengths of team members. At team meetings, the family is given the first opportunity to speak and has the final word on decisions made by the group.

Once a referral is received and prior to the first team meeting, CYSC staff schedules an orientation for the family. The orientation provides the family and potential team members with information regarding the structure and philosophy of the program as well as the opportunity to ask questions.

Early in the process, the facilitator works with the family to elicit both family strengths and challenges. Goals for the family are established based upon the challenges identified and action steps are developed in order to reach the goals. At each family team meeting, the family's successes are acknowledged. Additionally, any barriers to completing the action steps are identified and discussed and the team works together to find solutions to assist the family in overcoming the barriers.

The Youth Pilot Program uses the Family Network process for planning and implementing the services designed to reduce the need for out-of-home placement. Family Network is a form of family group decision-making which was created by a diverse group of partners in the Coordinated Youth Services Council (CYSC). CYSC is a membership organization, comprised of public sector agencies, schools,

nonprofit service providers and parents. The goal of the process is to streamline the tasks required of families by public agencies. Its primary activity has been to support families as they navigate the often-overwhelming procedures of public agencies particularly when they have children placed in out-of-home care.

Family Network is a process by which families, their support systems, and their service providers work collaboratively to create a plan to which they will hold themselves accountable in terms of its implementation and outcomes. The Family Network process is similar in philosophy to Family Group Conferencing and was developed by members of the Coordinated Youth Services Council. It is significantly different from Family Group Conferencing in that Family Group Conferencing usually consists of a single meeting or event, while the Youth Pilot Program consists of a series of meetings over a period of time. Typically, meetings are held monthly. Between meetings the team members support the family in their efforts to reach their goals.

During each team meeting, a written plan is formulated to document each goal identified for the family and the progress made toward achieving each goal. The plans are sent out for approval to team members following each meeting and are the basis for supporting the family in their efforts to keep their children in their care.

The Youth Pilot Program has proven to be cost-effective. The year-end report for fiscal year ending June 30, 2003 indicated that thirty-two families were served with a total of eighty children. Of those, forty-three children were identified as at risk of out-of-home placement. The cost of the services to families from July 1, 2002 through June 30, 2003 was \$347,178. It is noteworthy that the projected

cost of placement if the children had been placed in out-of-home care was \$1,130,024. Of the thirty-two families served, twelve were referred by Mental Health, twelve by Social Services, and eight by Juvenile Probation. Twelve of the families were involved with two or more of these county agencies at the time of referral. Marin County was granted a waiver by the State of California to allow for the flexible use of state funds previously available only to fund out-of-home placement. The waiver will allow Social Services to use the funds to expand the Youth Pilot Program and to assist families in keeping their children at home.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NAPA COUNTY

Napa County's SB 163 Program provides an interesting contrast to Marin's YPP. In 1997, state legislation was passed allowing California counties to participate in a statewide pilot project with the goal of keeping children who would otherwise be placed in residential treatment in their own homes or expediting their return from residential treatment. Authored by Hilda Solis, Senate Bill 163 allows counties to use State foster care funds to provide wraparound services to eligible families as an alternative to residential treatment.

Counties participating in SB163 claim state foster care payments for wraparound services provided to eligible children and their families. Under SB163, children eligible for wraparound services are as follows:

- A dependent or ward of the court who is at risk of placement in a group home RCL 10 to 14.
- A dependent or ward of the court that is currently placed in a group home RCL 10 to 14.
- A child who if placed in out-of-home care voluntarily per 7572.5 (SED).

The county receives the amount that would have otherwise been paid to support the child in a group home. The county is responsible for setting up a flexible fund account with the idea that the expense of keeping a child at home and in the community will be significantly less than the cost of maintaining the child in a group home. Under SB163, funds claimed may be used to pay for staff, overhead, and program costs. In addition, an account is established to pay for a wide range of services in support of the family in their effort to maintain a child at home. Those services might include:

- Tutoring services
- After school activities
- Day camp
- Fees or equipment for sports
- Respite for parents or caretakers

Napa County began providing services under SB163 in October 2001. Initially, the program was designed to serve a total of twelve families, four from each of three disciplines (Child Protective Services, Mental Health, and Juvenile Probation). Napa County's SB163 program is also known as The Village Project. In contrast to Marin County's YPP, The Village Project staff is comprised of one mental health counselor, one child protective services case manager, one juvenile probation officer and two family advocates from MATRIX, a local non-profit agency. The staff is co-located in an office in the Children's Services Division of Napa County Health and Human Services. With respect to the facilitation of family team meetings, Marin County's YPP and Napa County's SB163 program operate very differently. Staff of the Coordinated Youth Services Council provide the facilitation of YPP family team meetings. Facilitation of Napa County's SB 163 family team meetings is provided by the SB163 staff who are assigned the role of facilitator on a rotating basis. A staff member is assigned the role

of facilitator on cases that were not referred by his or her respective program. As a result, the juvenile probation officer might be assigned to facilitate the team assembled for a family that was referred by Child Protective Services or Children's Mental Health.

In Napa County's SB 163 Program, the facilitator works with the team to identify the strengths and challenges and, ultimately, to document a wrap-around plan for each family outlining the goals that will assist the family in maintaining their child at home and graduating from the SB 163 Program. A plan is developed during the first few weeks of services and updated periodically as the family's participation in the program continues.

Technical assistance has been provided to Napa County by a nonprofit agency under contract with the state to provide on-going consultation to participating counties. Throughout the development and implementation stages of the SB 163 program, technical assistance has taken the form of direct training to staff and supervisors, observation of family team meetings and feedback, and telephone conferencing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NAPA COUNTY

Napa County's SB 163 program has demonstrated success in its early stages. The twelve slots allocated to families have been filled over time and as families have transitioned out of the program, new referrals have been made. In order to support the program's continued growth and development, I offer the following recommendations based upon my observations of the Youth Pilot Program.

- Broaden the referral criteria to include children in placement or at risk of placement in less restrictive settings.
- Identify and train individuals who are not SB163 staff to coordinate and facilitate family team meetings. Napa County has an existing Family Group Conferencing program whose staff may be appropriate. Additional training could be provided to other agency staff who could be utilized as needed.
- Arrange for facilitators to participate in Family Network facilitation training provided by CYSC in Marin County. Explore the possibility of establishing a contract for the provision of consultation by CYSC staff.
- Purchase a laptop computer to be used at every family team meeting to update the family's wraparound plan.

Maria has managed to find a job that will allow her to support herself and her children. Christian's medical condition has stabilized as the result of careful monitoring by his mother and health care providers. Rosa has developed a relationship with a Big Sister who shares her culture and is helping her to identify her own special interests and hobbies. Maria is in the beginning stages of planning to go back to school. She would like to study English and find higher paying work. Maria is participating in a support group for survivors of domestic violence. The services provided to Maria and the children are in Spanish. Family team meetings are conducted in Spanish by a bilingual, bicultural facilitator.

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