

EXPLORING SANTA CLARA COUNTY'S FAMILY FINDING PROGRAM

Kathy Marsh*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Family Finding is a program that was created by Kevin Campbell of Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington. Santa Clara County adopted the Family Finding Program in 2003, contracting for this service through the Eastfield Ming Quong (EMQ) agency. Family Finding is a program for children involved in the child welfare system. The target population currently served are the court dependent children in high end, out-of-home placements. Family Finding is a process whereby intensive search efforts are made by EMQ staff to locate family members of children placed in out-of-home care. The goal is to seek out family members and to assess them for possible placement or life-long connections with the child. EMQ staff will go anywhere nationwide, or out of the country if necessary, to assess family members if placement is a strong possibility. If placement is made, then EMQ Family Finding staff remain an on-going support and resource to the family member accepting placement.

FINDINGS

Family Finding searches have proven to be greatly beneficial to the children, allowing for fewer place-

ment changes or disruptions and allowing children to connect with family members they lost a connection with or never knew about. Santa Clara County DFCS is working on replicating the Family Finding program within its own department to allow for the expansion of service to other children who could benefit from the program.

RECOMMENDATION FOR CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

It is recommended that Contra Costa County implement the Family Finding program. Family Finding is in alignment with the Federal Children and Family Services Review (FCFSR), the California Program Improvement Plan (PIP), and the Contra Costa County System Improvement Plan (SIP). Contra Costa County is set up with a centralized Relative Assessment Unit that could expand its functions to include Family Finding services. Contra Costa County could also utilize its community partners, negotiating a contract for the service funded by one of the grants currently supporting Child Welfare Redesign efforts or System of Care implementation. Should those funds already be committed, it would be recommended that another grant proposal be offered.

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BASSC Executive Development Training Program

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INTRODUCTION

Contra Costa County has been at the forefront of Child Welfare Redesign efforts, constantly looking at ways to better serve the children and families in the county. One of the redesign strategies involves looking at placements and services for adolescents and ways they can be improved. An integral part of the strategy is aiming to reduce the number of out-of-home placements youth experience while in foster care.

Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) has many programs in place that serve adolescents and are also aimed at minimizing the number of placements an adolescent might experience. One of those programs is called Family Finding. This is a new and innovative program for Santa Clara County that they are optimistic will become a long-standing program in their county.

BACKGROUND/HISTORY

Family Finding is based on a program founded by Kevin Campbell, Intensive Resources Director, at Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington. In 2003, Santa Clara County Eastfield Ming Quong (EMQ) Director, Craig Wolfe, met with Kevin Campbell. Upon learning about the Family Finding program, Craig Wolfe quickly liked the objectives and structure of the program and brought it back for implementation at EMQ in Santa Clara County. The idea of Family Finding was brought to the Santa Clara DFCS where they too liked the idea and agreed to utilize these services. This service

has been available for approximately 1 1/2 years to Santa Clara County child welfare children receiving services through EMQ.

PROGRAM PURPOSE

The purpose of Family Finding is to assist in the stabilization of children served by EMQ by seeking connections with relatives, near and far, and exploring such relatives as placement options for children who are unable to live with their legal/biological parents. It is recognized that relative connections are a major stabilizing factor and are preferable placement options for children. Necessary and appropriate precautions are in place to ensure that the links made between children and their relatives are safe and nurturing for the child. As children gain permanence, clinical behavior improves, ultimately helping the child to stabilize and reducing placement disruptions.

Children in out-of-home placement in the child welfare system can get lost due to broken family connections or multiple placement changes. Some families are skeptical and fearful of the child welfare system and court, or feel they cannot engage the systems. Many times relatives are not aware that the child is in placement or in need of a relative connection.

FAMILY FINDING PROCESS

Family Finding is currently offered to children being served by EMQ. Referrals are made to EMQ through the Resource Intensive Services Committee (RISC) which meets every Friday and is made up of

representatives from EMQ, Juvenile Probation, Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol Services, County Office of Education, and Rebekah Children's Services. Children referred to RISC are usually children having a designated mental health need and/or a higher level placement need. EMQ is able to offer services through either their wrap-around UPLIFT Program or through their residential Matrix Program.

A county social worker may make the referral for Family Finding to EMQ on behalf of a child. The EMQ staff sends confirmation of the referral and a release of information form back to the social worker through the child welfare social worker's supervisor. The supervisor must ensure that there are no court restrictions to Family Finding, and, if there are restrictions of any sort, that must be shared with EMQ. Authorization is granted to EMQ by the child welfare supervisor at which time the DFCS clerks are notified so that an appointment can be set up for EMQ staff to review the child's case file to search for family information.

EMQ staff will look through case files for names and any information about relatives within the county, state, United States, and sometimes other countries. Some relatives may be contacted for information about other relatives. Searches are also conducted through family genealogy websites and other information sites that can be gleaned for a thorough computer search. Child welfare staff are kept abreast of the progress the EMQ Family Finding worker is making on a regular basis. Consultation with the DFCS social worker prior to contacting a relative for placement or visitation is always done. Once agreed that the relative may be contacted, background and criminal checks are conducted by the Family Finding worker if visitation or placement are to be considered. Family

Finding staff will visit the relative's home and conduct an in-person assessment of the family, their home, and neighboring areas. Family Finding workers will fly to other states and have even flown to other countries to assess relatives. Should placement become a realistic possibility, then necessary DFCS paperwork and protocols must be followed. If DFCS and the relative are in agreement about a visit or placement, EMQ Family Finding staff will complete a safety plan for the child. The safety plan will include resources within reasonable access to the relative's location.

Once a child is placed with a relative, EMQ will provide on-going support services to maintain that placement even if the dependency is vacated. This helps to reduce placement disruptions and assists the family meeting the needs of the child.

When a relative is located, EMQ Family Finding staff are careful about what information they share with the family. They are mindful about confidentiality laws pertaining to children and families involved with child welfare. Intensive training is provided to Family Finding staff on how to approach relatives by mail, phone, and in person. Training manuals are provided giving sample letters as well as scripted conversation samples. Generally, very little information is given out by the Family Finding worker and much information is collected by the Family Finding worker in the initial phases of engagement.

FUNDING

Funding for EMQ's Family Finding service currently comes from S.T.O.P. funding and the flex funds provided for EMQ's Matrix program and for EMQ's wrap-around UPLIFT program. The costs currently utilized for EMQ's Family Finding is

equivalent to approximately eleven wrap-around slots.

BENEFITS OF FAMILY FINDING

- Alignment with Federal Children and Family Services Review (FCFSR)
- Alignment with California's Program Improvement Plan (PIP)
- Alignment with Contra Costa County and Santa Clara County System Improvement Plans (SIPs)
- Alignment with California Child Welfare Stakeholders Redesign goals
- Increase in out-of-home placement resources
- Decrease disconnectedness and isolation for children
- Increase and assistance in placement stabilization
- Preparation for youth to become self-sufficient adults
- Allowance for youth to exit the child welfare system with a lifelong connection
- Reconnection of families
- Assistance to families to meet child's needs
- Reduction of dollars in high end out-of-home placements, allowing money to be allocated for supportive services

SANTA CLARA COUNTY DFCS RELATIVE FINDING UNIT

Santa Clara County is working to replicate Family Finding services within their DFCS department. They hired a Social Work Supervisor in December 2004 and have a designated Program Manager I overseeing the program. The Relative Finding Unit is a reconfiguration of its existing Relative Assessment Unit. It is currently staffed with one Coordinator I and one Coordinator II worker. The goal is to be able to offer Family Finding for the younger children not currently served by EMQ but

who may benefit from finding families to establish permanency. They eventually hope to have Family Finding available for all children in out-of-home placement. Santa Clara will continue to keep its contract with EMQ to provide Family Finding services for children receiving services through EMQ.

Santa Clara County's presiding Juvenile Court Judge, the Honorable Len Edwards, proposed legislation to the state in January 2005 to mandate Family Finding services in all 58 California counties. Judge Edwards has researched Family Finding extensively and has determined overwhelmingly that Family Finding was a best practice model that greatly improved the lives of children in out-of-home placement.

SUCCESS AND OBSTACLES

The Family Finding outcomes from November 2003 through December 2004 are as follows:

MATRIX PROGRAM	#	%
Children who have been reunified & living with family	13	35
Children living in community w/ durable connections to family	23	62
Children who did not succeed in achieving Family Finding	1	3
Total children served through Family Finding	37	100

UPLIFT PROGRAM	#	%
Children who have been reunified & living with family	15	30
Children living in community w/ durable connections to family	30	60
Children who did not succeed in achieving Family Finding	5	10
Total children served through Family Finding	50	100

RESIDENTIAL PROGRAM	#	%
Children who have been reunified & living with family	1	25
Children living in community w/ durable connections to family	3	75
Children who did not succeed in achieving Family Finding	0	0
Total children served through Family Finding	4	100

EMQ PROGRAMS COMBINED	#	%
Children who have been reunified & living with family	29	32
Children living in community w/ durable connections to family	56	61
Children who did not succeed in achieving family finding	6	7
Total children served through Family Finding	91	100

The data indicate that almost two thirds of the children who did not reunify with their family of origin have been able to make a positive connection to their extended family. For children who cannot live with their legal/biological parents, this is a critical connection for them. The goal is to decrease the number of children who were unable to be successful through Family Finding. Reasons for not succeeding in Family Finding have included:

- children who were referred for Family Finding too late in that they were AWOL at the time of referral,
- utilizing much of the time for locating the child who was often at the height of his/her AWOL streak,
- children whose needs were too great for family members to work with, the inability to locate a viable family member, or
- children who were ultimately placed for guardianship or adoption by non-kin.

While Family Finding will not work for all the children in out-of-home care, it is obvious to see from the early data that it does serve a large percentage of the population who have been offered the service with a positive outcome.

Some of the obstacles have been due to funding since it limits the number of staff who can devote their time to the searches. Locating viable relatives can be challenging as sometimes families exhibit major dysfunction or negative enmeshment that would not benefit the child. Confidentiality issues can be a potential glitch if the family is wanting more information than can be shared with them. The current budget situation has proven to be an obstacle as DFCS staff do not have permission to fly to various locations to meet the family members

located through Family Finding. Generally, however, the obstacles are few in comparison to the benefits.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Approximately a year and a half ago, Contra Costa County centralized the Relative Assessment Unit under one supervisor and out-stationed a few workers to the three district offices. Contra Costa County has the same need as Santa Clara County to expand out-of-home placement resources, giving a preference for relative placement as both the law and good social work practice mandate. The fact that Contra Costa County has been in the forefront of Child Welfare Redesign in the state has paved the way for expanding and modifying some of the current programs in effect. Family Finding also would enhance the Family to Family System of Care program currently being implemented.

Family Finding could be integrated within the current Relative Assessment Unit. Relative Assessment is currently performed by Social Casework Specialists. If Family Finding were integrated into the Relative Assessment Unit, it could be staffed by either Social Casework Specialist or by Social Casework Assistants, or a combination of both. The expansion of either of these positions could happen as quickly as the staffing budget would allow. The initial target population could be those children in any of our current centralized programs that have a large long term foster care population, such as Specialized Placement Program (SPP) or Children's Residential Placement Unit (CRPU), Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), or a combination of any of these.

It would be my recommendation to start with the children in SPP who we know can be maintained in a structured, supportive foster home placement and likely could succeed if similar structures and support were put in place for the relatives. The population could also be those already identified in the Family to Family Phase-In areas. It would be assumed that Family Finding would need to start with a small, measurable population, such as those identified above, until the capacity was in place to expand the service to all children needing Family Finding.

Should Contra Costa not have the capacity to implement Family Finding within existing staff or structure, contracting with an agency, such as EMQ or Families First, is a possibility as is contracting with some of our existing community partner agencies. We could agree to fund a certain number of Family Finding searches based on the referrals we gave to them. Funding for the program could come from Contra Costa County Mental Health flex funds or possibly through a grant. Since it fits in with the State Redesign efforts as well as System of Care, it is possible that some funding from those grants could be redirected to support Family Finding through a contract or to support existing staff and structure now in place.

Family Finding is truly in alignment with the large shift in child welfare services. It benefits children and ultimately can save dollars on the high-end placements that some children need, freeing up dollars to utilize for prevention or supportive resources. Like other counties, we also have a SIP in place that Family Finding would support.

I have been very impressed with the Family Finding program and believe that it is one Contra

Costa County should give serious consideration to. I do not believe that it would be overly difficult to implement the program as a skeletal internal structure is in place in another large county similar to Contra Costa that we could replicate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would like to thank the numerous people in Santa Clara County who were very gracious and allowed me to eavesdrop in meetings and took the time to give me additional information about their various programs. Thanks also go to my BASSC cohort, Beth McGhee, who squeezed out extra time to enhance my learning experience, and Marina Boliaries, Assistant Director, at EMQ who also shared her valuable time and wisdom. I would like to give a special thanks to Janet Atkins, Program Manager at Santa Clara County for agreeing to be the host for my exchange, arranging for a wide array of meetings and programs that I could observe, and connecting me with the proper people for additional information.

Santa Clara County is quite an impressive county that contains a large group of people who are clearly committed to improving the lives of children and families.