

MARIN COUNTY'S YOUTH PILOT PROGRAM: FAMILY DECISION-MAKING

Fred Slone *

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1995, Marin County has been operating a successful Youth Pilot Program. The program's goal is to maintain in-home or lower levels of placement for at-risk youth. This goal is accomplished through two primary program elements. The first element is the use of flexible funding to provide supportive services for in-home placements. The second element is the use of Family Network meetings, a facilitated team and family decision-making model. These meetings bring together the family and the service providers on a regular basis to create a common action plan and a framework for coordinated service delivery.

The result of these strategies is that families are engaged in a supportive environment with a neutral facilitator. In addition, case workers gain additional resources for funding and staffing in the form of the facilitators.

For San Mateo County, there is an opportunity to incorporate elements of the Marin County model into its current Team Decision-Making (TDM) and Senate Bill 163 (SB163) wraparound programs. San Mateo should review its current team decision strategies with the goal of incorporating the service coordination elements of Marin County's Youth Pilot program. San Mateo should also consider the use of a trained, neutral facilitator who can support the families as well as provide an additional resource for staff.

Finally, Marin's experience clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of supported in-home placements. San Mateo should review its current wraparound program, which it is already doing, with the goal of increasing opportunities for Children and Family Services clients while maintaining collaboration with other departments.

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BASSC Executive Development Training Program

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Marin County has been operating its successful Youth Pilot Program for ten years. During the course of that program, they have gained valuable insights into working with youth and their families. This paper will focus on two key policy questions related to Marin's experience. The first question is, "Can we achieve better outcomes for youth by aggressively supporting in-home or less restrictive placements?" The second issue is, "Does team decision making lead to better outcomes and is family involvement important?" The information and lessons learned from Marin County will also be balanced against San Mateo County's current practices and experiences. The goal is to develop recommendations for San Mateo that are relevant, realistic, and supported by data.

BACKGROUND

In 1995, Marin County was one of six counties in California chosen to implement a Youth Pilot Program (YPP) via Assembly Bill 1741 (AB1741). Marin County's Youth Pilot Program hoped to answer two questions:

- 1) could children at imminent risk of placement be kept in the home using flexible, intensive services?
- 2) could children already in placement be moved to a lower level of out-of-home care, or returned home sooner? Marin's experiences tell us that both of these goals are achievable.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The Marin program is based upon a facilitated team and family decision-making model known as Family Network. Teams include family members as well as service professionals. In addition, the program also provides flexible funding to help support and strengthen existing funding.

Referrals to the program are received from the Departments of Social Services, Community Mental Health, and Juvenile Probation. Referrals are then screened for acceptance by the Child Welfare Supervisor who oversees the program. Once a case is accepted, it is forwarded to the staff at the Coordinated Youth Services Council (CYSC). CYSC assigns a neutral facilitator who manages the scheduling of the meetings, the creation and updating of the team plan, and other staff support functions for the team. CYSC works with the family to identify potential team members, which can include extended family, neighbors, friends, and others. In addition, CYSC schedules an orientation for the family as well as other potential team members. The orientation is a key component of the program. Family Network differs from other team meetings that clients may have participated in, such as IEP, "wraparound," TDM, and mediations. Orientation helps participants establish agreement on operating principles and practices and is a strong preventative for future issues. Orientation includes information packages, phone calls, and meetings.

At the initial meetings, the teams identify family strengths and challenges and establish their goals for the team. Those goals and the action steps

required are encapsulated in a service plan maintained by CYSC. The service plan is intended to function as the core guiding document for the teams and highlights success, progress, and required next steps. The service plans are communicated to all team members throughout the process.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

As with most successful programs, there are a multitude of partners and participants that are all critical to the overall success of the project. However, there are certain elements of the Marin program that are noteworthy for their impact or uniqueness.

Neutral Facilitation

The facilitation staff support provided by CYSC is critical. Their training and neutrality increase the effectiveness of the meetings. In addition, the fact that they are an additional staff resource, and not another task for a case worker, provides support for details such as plan updating and meeting scheduling.

Family Involvement

Family involvement placing families on an equal footing with service providers, is key. It reduces the friction among professionals about which plan is “right” and builds commitment on the part of the family.

Ongoing Meetings

Unlike some family conferencing models that meet only once, the Marin teams meet regularly, usually once a month. The frequency of the meetings builds relationships, enhances accountability, and increases the likelihood of action.

Funding

The final ingredient for success is the flexible funding that is available to the teams as a result of Marin’s efforts under AB1741 and their subsequent waiver. The funding is flexible, reasonably substantial, and is not an entitlement. As result, it can be used to fill gaps in services and respond to each family’s unique needs in the most effective manner. It is also a key motivator for the team members because it can bring resources and services not otherwise available.

RESULTS

For the most recent fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2004, Marin’s Youth Pilot Program (YPP) continued its history of producing strong results in alignment with its goals. The program is succeeding across multiple dimensions, including client outcomes, number of clients served, and cost effectiveness. The results for FY03-04 were:

- Fifty four (54) families were served, with a total of 111 children.
- 43% of the referrals were from Social Services, 29% from Probation, and 28% from Mental Health.
- More restrictive placements were avoided for **95%** of the focus children served.
- The program saved an estimated **\$874,000** in costs that would have been incurred if those children had been placed out of home or in higher levels of care. Actual cost of services to those 54 families was \$338,000.

The program not only showed strong results for the past fiscal year, but prior years as well. For FY02-03, 32 families were served at a cost of \$347,000. The year over year comparison from FY02-03 to FY03-04 demonstrates a **69%** increase in the

number of families served as well a **42% decrease** in the cost per family. In other words, more families were served for less.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

In considering the implications for San Mateo County, one of the first questions to be addressed concerns the relative size of the Marin and San Mateo counties and how that impacts the relevance of service practices and results across the counties. Although different in overall size, the two counties share many similarities. Both counties have relatively high average income levels, a high cost of living, and concentrated areas of poverty and need. In addition, the overall numbers of children served are surprisingly close, as both agencies serve children numbering in the hundreds. (San Mateo serves nearly 500 and Marin roughly 300 children.)

How does Marin's program compare to San Mateo's current practices? San Mateo currently operates a "wraparound" program under Senate Bill 163 (SB163). This law allows counties to use State foster care funds to "wrap" services around families as an alternative to out-of-home placements.

There are a few notable differences amongst the programs:

- San Mateo serves between 15-25 clients at a time, as compared to the 54 families that Marin served last year.
- San Mateo's program is managed by the Mental Health Department and nearly all of the clients in San Mateo's program are from Probation or Mental Health. In contrast, Marin has a much wider distribution of referrals, with a particularly strong presence in child welfare referrals.

This dramatic difference in referral sources across the two counties illustrates the impact that departmental ownership/oversight can have on a program and the challenges of cross-departmental coordination. As one step in addressing this difference, San Mateo has recently hired a consultant to review and assess the SB163 wraparound program. The consultant will be reviewing all aspects of the program, not just the referral sources, and making recommendations on how that program can better support San Mateo's Child Welfare System Improvement Plan (SIP).

In a broader context, San Mateo follows an overall approach known as "Family to Family." Wraparound services and many other programs are part of this broad approach. Of note, the Family to Family approach includes Team Decision Making (TDM) as a key component. Any youth facing a change in placement or entering the system goes through a TDM event. TDM is one of eight different team-based meetings that a youth may experience in San Mateo. Again as part of their Child Welfare SIP, San Mateo is already reviewing these meetings and looking for efficiencies and streamlining opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program has successfully maintained children at lower levels of care or kept them in the home. The program is built around flexible funding and a Family Network practice of team decision-making that includes family participation.

The following recommendations for San Mateo County are based upon the combination of Marin's experiences and San Mateo's current practices:

- Create a strategy that will mirror Marin’s Family Network success as an ongoing case management and service coordination tool. This could be done by expanding San Mateo’s existing TDM model. TDM currently focuses on single or limited occurrence events, such as a change in placement or entry into the system. If TDM is not the best fit, the SBI63 wraparound program could also be modified to mirror Marin’s practices.
- Review the governance structure of the current SBI63 wraparound program with a view to increasing the participation of Children and Family Services clients. At the same time, it is essential to maintain collaboration with the Juvenile Probation and Mental Health Departments.
- Consider using neutral facilitators who are not affiliated with any of the providers. This creates a more effective balance of power between the family and the providers.
- Utilize the facilitator as an additional resource. Make them responsible for scheduling the meetings and maintaining and communicating the workplans.
- Limit the size of the team action plans. Long plans can be self-defeating, and creating a sense of accomplishment is essential.
- Track action items that are created during a meeting on a whiteboard or easel during the

meetings. This assists in controlling the scope of the items and maintaining focus for the participants at the meetings.

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