

Children of Incarcerated Parents: Innovative Strategies in the City and County of San Francisco

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

San Francisco City and County Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children Services (FCS) began looking at ways to better serve incarcerated parents and their children in 1998. This paper will focus on one of several strategies that was implemented recently. FCS contracted two case managers through Friends Outside to be primary liaisons with the San Francisco County jails and the prisons through the state of California for the parents who have children removed by FCS and are involved in the Family Reunification Program.

Recommendations for Alameda County

I recommend that Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) pilot two contract positions through Friends Outside or another organization that serves incarcerated individuals. These individuals would have easier access to incarcerated parents, early on and throughout the child welfare process, to obtain and receive information that is vital to the child welfare case and placement

decisions for children in out-of-home care. I propose that these positions not be limited to the Family Reunification program, so that early family finding efforts take place and that incarcerated parents are involved in the decision making process early; potentially diverting children from the foster care system when child abuse is not the primary issue. These case managers can facilitate contact between the incarcerated parent and child that has been shown to increase the stability, permanence, and well-being of children in out-of-home care.

DCFS is primed to include innovative strategies to better serve children and families in the community since it opted into the Title IV-E Waiver that provides us the opportunity for flexible funding for prevention and early intervention strategies. DCFS has committed to reducing racial disproportionality, decreasing foster care placement moves, and using the least restrictive placements whenever possible. These goals support the mission and values of all child welfare agencies of safety, permanence and well-being.

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Background

Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is actively working towards improving outcomes to support the mission and values set by the department and to fulfill the obligations of the Systems Improvement Plan (SIP), as required by the California Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability Act (AB636, 2001). Safety, permanence, and well-being are defined by certain outcomes associated with particular activities that are outlined in the SIP. The outcomes that DCFS chose to focus on are the following:

- Addressing racial disproportionality—decreasing the percentage of African American children who enter foster care for the first time, and African American children in out-of-home care for more than 36 months.
- Increasing the use of least restrictive foster care placements.
- Reducing multiple foster home placements.

As I was making my initial contacts to begin my Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) internship, I discovered that San Francisco County Department of Family and Children Services (FCS) had an innovative strategy that addressed both the needs of incarcerated parents and their children that seemed to fit with meeting the outcomes outlined above.

Early communication with an incarcerated parent enables that parent to offer information on kin and fictive kin placements. Kin and fictive kin are more likely to facilitate regular visitation, cooperate in reunification efforts, reside in or near the child's

community, and provide permanence in the event the parent does not reunify. Visitation has been described as the key to successful reunification¹ and the heart of reunification services.² Visitation includes keeping children connected to a range of family members and other important figures in their lives and to immediate neighborhoods, supporting rather than undermining their sense of belonging and offering ongoing reassurance and reinforcement of the continuity of place and social networks.³ On the psychological level, visitation has been considered the most important service for maintaining connections between child and family and thus for easing pain of separation. Yet it also serves broader related purposes for the child welfare system. Visitation is the unique service that best supports achievement of the case or permanency planning goal for a family, while promoting child safety, permanency, and well being.⁴ Feeling safe and secure often leads to better outcomes for children in terms of their placement stability, academic achievements, and overall well-being.

Racial disproportionality and an increase in negative behaviors are more likely if children are robbed of contact with their incarcerated parents. Research has shown that African Americans make up 12% of the general population but more than half of the prison population. They comprise 14% of the

¹Loar, L. (1998). Making visits work. *Child Welfare*, 77, 41-57

²Hess, P., & Proch, K. (1993). Visiting: The heart of reunification. In B. Pine, R. Warsh, & A.

³Millham, S., Bullock, R., Hosie, K., & Haak, M. (1986). *Lost in care: The problems of maintaining links between children in care and their families*. Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Gower Publishing Company.

⁴Wright, L. (2001). *Using Visitation to Support Permanency*. Washington DC: Child Welfare League of America.

nation's illegal drug users, and use at a rate similar to whites, but make up 74% of the nation's drug prisoners.⁵ This disproportionality erodes the African American children's trust in authority and begins a multi-generational pattern of negative behavior and incarceration, particularly when the child has limited contact with their parent. Child reactions to parental incarceration include:⁶

- Identification with incarcerated parent and awareness of social stigma;
- Change in future orientation and intrusive thoughts about their parents;
- Concern about outcomes of their case and unsure and worried about how to live without a mother. Concern about an uncertain future;
- Flashbacks to traumatic events related to arrests;
- Embarrassment;
- Fear and anxiety;
- Anger and hyper arousal;
- Sadness;
- Guilt;
- Low self-esteem;
- Loneliness, feelings of abandonment, emotional withdrawal from friends and family;
- Depression;
- Sleeplessness;
- Eating and sleeping disorders;
- Attention disorders and developmental regression;
- Diminished academic performance, classroom behavior difficulties and truancy; and
- Aggression, acting out, antisocial behaviors, and trauma-reactive behavior leading to early crime involvement.

When these children are also involved in the child welfare system, the result is a pattern of multiple placements, leading to more and more restrictive placements, and possible involvement with the juvenile justice system.

⁵Bernstein, Nell; *All Alone In the World*. New York: The New Press, 2005, pp. 60.

⁶Wright, L. E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with children and families separated by incarceration: A handbook for child welfare agencies*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

Host County Program

San Francisco City and County Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children Services (FCS) is charged with protecting children from abuse and neglect, and strengthening and preserving families. FCS strives whenever possible to help families stay together. In those instances in which a child must be removed from home because he or she is in danger, FCS partners with parents and the court system to keep the child safe while helping parents to resume their roles as parents. FCS contracts with community agencies to offer services, such as in-home services, crisis intervention, counseling, and parent education.⁷

As part of my BASSC Executive Development Program internship, I participated in various multidisciplinary meetings and components sponsored in part by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP). This is a coalition of social service providers, representatives of government bodies, advocates and others who work with, or are concerned about, children of incarcerated parents and their families. Formed in 2000 under the auspices of the Zellerbach Family Foundation, SFCIPP works to improve the lives of children of incarcerated parents and to increase awareness of these children, their needs and their strengths.⁸

SFCIPP was convened in part by a vision that a veteran child welfare worker, now a section manager with the Family Service Units at FCS, had in 1998 after witnessing a visit between a foster child and his incarcerated mother, and attending a powerful training about the impact of incarceration on children. About this time, FCS was also seeing an increase in appeals and reversal of parental right terminations, resulting in starting the reunification process from the beginning. For these reasons, FCS was interested in pursuing better services to incarcerated parents and their children.

⁷San Francisco City and County, Department of Family and Children Services website. www.sfgov.org

⁸San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership website. www.sfcipp.org

SFCIPP and FCS are continuously working on three main issues:

- 1 Arrest protocol for law enforcement to acknowledge and attend to the needs of the children present at the time of a parent's arrest and ask about children who may not be present but will need an alternative care arrangement;
- 2 Equal treatment and services for incarcerated parents; and
- 3 Visitation between children and their incarcerated parents.

"A Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents" and a guide on "How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children, A Caregiver's Guide" were created out of this partnership. For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on the contract positions created by FCS with Friends Outside that serve incarcerated parents with children in the reunification program.

PLANNING PROCESS

FCS began its planning process by having an agency resource person locate all resources in the community that worked with and for incarcerated parents. The list included Center Force, the Service League, Friends Outside, legal services for incarcerated parents, and summer camps for children of incarcerated parents. FCS met with many of the community-based providers to do a needs assessment and find out what they each had to offer. Friends Outside brought a wealth of knowledge that included child welfare issues. They had run a Foster Family Agency near a women's prison and were able to get the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDRC) contract for inmate services and visitation centers. Friends Outside is a crime prevention and deterrence agency that has been providing services to inmates, ex-offenders, their families and communities since 1955.⁹

Initial attempts to meet the needs of incarcerated parents in the reunification program involved FCS staff attending the quarterly Friends Outside

retreats to do training on the needs of children and incarcerated parents in the child welfare system. Given the non-profit status and shoe string budget of Friends Outside, staff turnover was high and the training could not keep up. It felt as if they were always starting over and not getting very far.

When it became clear that FCS's informal collaboration with Friends Outside was not working, FCS made the decision to contract with Friends Outside for two dedicated positions that would serve parents incarcerated in California prisons and county jails, whose children had been removed from their home by FCS and had active Family Reunification cases with FCS.

Two positions (1 FTE, .75 FTE) were created in July 2006 and have become the bridge between the child welfare agency and the criminal justice system. The referrals are child welfare worker driven and the contractors are available at the county child welfare office to take referrals, answer questions, and provide outreach and training to child welfare staff. The liaison contract position handles the parents located in prisons within California and supervises the .75 FTE case manager for the San Francisco County jails.

Other roles of the contractors include:

- Facilitating and coordinating the visitation of incarcerated parents as requested by the child welfare worker, (CWW) including visits between parent-child, parent-CWW, and parent-service providers;
- Providing orientations to parents in the jail/prison to facilitate the provision of services. This includes what services are available, how to access them, and emphasizes the importance of participating in services in light of the juvenile court timelines for reunification;
- Interviewing parents face to face to obtain information about possible placement resources for their children while they are incarcerated and giving the parent information about their child, the child welfare system and the reunification process;
- Providing ongoing, regular contact with the parents about the services they are participating

⁹Friends Outside Website. www.friendsoutside.org

in and reporting this back to the assigned child welfare worker;

- Informing the CWW if a parent is transferred to another prison or is scheduled to be released;
- Participating in release planning for the parent and informing the child welfare worker of released parent's plan, location, and any needs that need to be addressed;
- Maintaining case records and documentation of all contacts and services provided;
- Maintaining an updated list of contact information for each prison, including Friends Outside liaison, phone numbers, appropriate prison officials, and other information determined by FCS;
- Facilitating contact with probation and parole officers;
- Providing information to incarcerated parents about their children, providing letter-writing materials so they can maintain contact, and relaying messages back to the CWW; and
- Providing ongoing training to child welfare staff about the needs of children of incarcerated parents and how to navigate the criminal justice system.

These case managers do not provide any actual transportation of staff, clients or children. They provide services for a minimum of 30 cases each month and will complete a minimum of 20 face-to-face contacts with parents each month. The liaison's face-to-face visits with parents incarcerated in prisons outside of San Francisco County count toward Division 31 requirements. The CWW is still expected to meet with the parents when they are incarcerated in the county jail system.

The outcome objectives based on the contract positions focus on the quality of information, services and documentation provided by the contractors, and the quality of the visitation component. These outcomes are based on the ratings of the child welfare workers who have cases served by this contract. No outcomes were available to report as the liaisons and the case managers are relatively new to the agency.

BUDGET

San Francisco FCS has contracted two positions. The Liaison Social Worker (1 FTE) and the San Francisco Jail Case Manager (.75 FTE) cost FCS approximately \$90,220 per year for salary and benefits for both positions. Operating expenses boost the total up to \$125,522. Operating costs include phone, postage, office supplies, advertising/personnel expenses, and local and out-of-county travel.

The Friends Outside contract is claimed as an overmatch to the Promoting Safe/Stable Families allocation. This means that they front county general funds for the contract, but include it as overmatch in their PSSF claim, hoping that if there are any leftover PSSF funds from other counties, they may get a percentage of their expenses reimbursed from the redistribution of leftover PSSF funds.

CURRENT EXPERIENCES OF CONTRACTORS

FCS hired a liaison that provides the services listed above to all the referred incarcerated parents in the prisons across the State of California. Before becoming the liaison for FCS, she worked in San Quentin as the Friends Outside inmate services counselor. She brings with her a wealth of knowledge about the politics, dynamics, and culture in prison settings. Even with her experience and ability to navigate prison systems, she still runs into many challenges as she is trying to serve the clientele. She has a prison card that shows she has been cleared to visit prisoners. Even with this card, she often gets the run-around when she arrives at more distant places and has to work her magic to get through the doors. The liaison travels up and down the state to have face-to-face visits with parents and does her best to maintain current information on visitation policies and services to help substitute care providers get children to the more distant locations to visit with as few hassles as possible. She also knows the services that are available in each of the prisons and encourages the incarcerated parents to contact the inmate services counselor to enroll.

FCS recently hired the case manager for the San Francisco Jails. Forging relationships with the cor-

rections personnel and learning how to navigate the criminal justice system are the greatest challenges. She has successfully facilitated incarcerated parent orientations and has met one on one with a few clients. The biggest success to date was providing information to parents about where their child was and interviewing parents about their child's father and/or other available relatives for placement resources.

She plans on meeting with the parents periodically, especially close to court dates, to remind them of the services available to them and checking on their progress. She fills out a response sheet that she faxes to the child welfare worker. Barriers continue to exist in the visitation arena. Every jail has different protocols which are different depending on who you talk to and which also may be different from the information available on the website or phone line.

Recommendations for Alameda County

I recommend that Alameda County pilot these contract positions with a community-based agency, such as Friends Outside, to be the "specialists" who are able to navigate the prison and jail systems so the department can be more successful serving incarcerated parents, able to obtain early family-finding information from incarcerated parents more quickly, and also prepared to facilitate contact between incarcerated parents and their children.

In Alameda County there are 36 children with incarcerated fathers and 25 children with incarcerated mothers out of approximately 430 children in the family reunification program. This is point-in-time data and accuracy of these numbers relies on data integrity around entering related fathers, addresses at penal institutions, and updating of likely addresses. This number is likely low, especially for those parents who experience multiple incarcerations.

A typical experience of an Alameda County reunification child welfare worker attempting to serve an incarcerated parent is as follows:

- The worker contacts the Santa Rita Jail to find out how to get a visit with an incarcerated mother.

- The worker follows all the instructions given over the phone, shows up at the jail, which is at least a 45 minute drive, and is turned away.
- The worker is told to write a letter to a certain sergeant stating who she is, why she needs to see the parent, and, if they approve, they will inform her if she can visit.
- The worker calls the inmate services coordinator more than once to learn about services that are available, how the parent can access them, and to find out if the parents are participating and what progress has been made. The phone is only occasionally answered, and the inmate services coordinator rarely calls back with the information needed that is crucial to reporting requirements to the juvenile court.
- The child is placed with a foster parent willing to take the three-year-old child to see his mother. However, the few times they did get to visit, they are no-contact visits (booth with plexiglas between them) that last approximately 20 minutes.
- Other times, the foster parent may bring the child for a visit but the mother is in administrative segregation due to her behavior and unable to visit.

In the above scenario, the worker and the foster parent needlessly drive up to 45 minutes each way just to get turned away. The worker is unable to get the information she needs to meet with the parent quickly, learn about services available or the progress of the parent. The non-contact visit, a ride in a car for 45 minutes to see his mom, and then not being able to, can create a lot of confusion and anxiety for a young child.

There are approximately 315 children that are either on their way to permanency, languishing in the child welfare system, or in the adoptions program with at least one incarcerated parent, 25 with two incarcerated parents. Approximately 35% of these children are currently in the Adoptions program, 40% are in permanent youth connections (long-term foster care), 9% with non-relative legal guardians, and about 15% of these children are assigned in the Group Homes Unit.

Having a “specialist” that has forged relationships with the corrections staff increases the likelihood that a child welfare worker will obtain meaningful information from incarcerated parents early on in the child welfare experience and be able to locate kin or fictive kin. Children placed with kin or fictive kin are less likely to have multiple placements, are more likely to find permanence, and are more likely to have consistent contact with their incarcerated parents. Spending approximately \$125,000 would help us meet many of the outcomes of our SIP and improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children and families we serve.

Alameda County DCFS has opted into a Title IV-E Waiver that affords the department the opportunity to use flexible funding to create prevention services, enhance existing services once children are in the foster care system, and decrease time to permanence through reunification or alternative permanent plans. Cost savings are important in every part of the system in a waiver environment to be able to fund innovative services. The first year plan of the Title IV-E waiver includes enhancing early family-finding search efforts, diverting children from entering the child welfare system, keeping or moving children into the least restrictive placements possible, and quickly finding permanence for children through reunification, legal guardianship and adoption where possible.

Hiring these two specialists could help meet each of those goals. Case managers with an ongoing relationship and clearance to meet with incarcerated parents would allow the child welfare worker to get information about kin and fictive kin quickly. Having a jail or prison case manager, who can facilitate contact between a child and an incarcerated parent, will help the child feel more secure and less likely to show increasingly negative behaviors over time. This, in turn, will reduce multiple placements that lead to re-entries into the child welfare system after permanency and higher levels of care. Given that there is an over-representation of African American children in the child welfare system and African Americans in general in the criminal justice system, facilitating

consistent contact between children and their incarcerated parents could ultimately chip away at this disproportionality. Consistent parent-child contact may decrease negative behaviors of the children in the child welfare system, causing multiple and higher level placements, and give an incarcerated parent hope and meaning once they are released back into the community and reduce recidivism.

In Alameda County, future cost savings linked with funding these types of positions include decreasing children moving into higher levels of care by doing early family-finding and increased, consistent contact with their parents. Cost savings could also be realized by reunifying more parents with their children by enhancing services to parents while in prison and communicating more efficiently. Parents are more likely to engage in services available to them if they have consistent contact with their children and have an advocate in the prison system helping them navigate the system. Once they complete their sentence, early follow-up services and the foundation of the contact with their children will reduce re-entry rates within the child welfare system and criminal justice system. Finally, having a dedicated person, or persons, will increase efficiency and reduce workload on each of the child welfare workers trying to navigate the criminal justice system, decrease travel to remote locations to attempt contact with parents, and reduce “no reasonable efforts” findings.

Beyond cost savings, having dedicated contractors to work with incarcerated parents will likely positively impact DCFS’s goal of permanence, safety and well-being. Having children in safe, stable homes in their communities with contact with significant people in their lives has been a primary goal of Family to Family and the efforts that DCFS has made in the last several years. These contractors could also assist in creating better visitation conditions for children, innovative visitation options, such as video conferencing, and facilitate incarcerated parent involvement in Team Decision-Making meetings.

Different from San Francisco FCS, these contractors should be available earlier than the reunification process to facilitate the goal of diverting

children from foster care. Having easier face-to-face contact to obtain and give information to parents would facilitate this process when child abuse is not necessarily an issue. Other potential benefits are the continuous cross-training efforts. These contractors could work with the District Attorney's Office to include impact statements from parents during the sentencing process.

Although San Francisco County has not recorded any specific outcomes, it is clear that these contractors would reduce the day-to-day workloads of child welfare workers, positively impact the experience of parents and children through consistent communication and contact, and create systemic change through continuous training and resource-gathering.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Susan Arding, Section Manager of Family Units in the City and County of San Francisco's Division of Family and Children Services. She facilitated contacts with key people within the FCS and the San Francisco's Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership. Members of this collaboration made me feel welcome and a part of their group. Members include: Nell Bernstein, Ellen Walker, Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, Cassie Pierson, Yolanda Robinson, and many others.

Kris Weigle worked her magic to get me a tour of San Quentin prison and has been instrumental in providing me information for this project.

Roshawn Singleton, the newest member of SFFCS and Friends Outside, shared with me her successes and struggles in her initial work with the SF County jails.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge Erika Shore, Division Director, for supporting me through my BASSC experience and Carol Collins, Assistant Agency Director, and Chet Hewitt, Agency Director, for the opportunity to participate in the BASSC Executive Development Program.

