

THE HUMAN FACE OF WELFARE REFORM: COMMUNICATING CHANGES TO FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY- THE SAN MATEO COUNTY APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

In this last decade of the 20th Century there have been more changes in the way services are provided to people in need in communities throughout the United States than in any period since the inception of the modern welfare (AFDC) program in the 1930's. At the same time there has been a growing recognition that the way children who are victims of abuse and neglect are being cared for must change. The mantra of "We must eliminate foster care drift" has been repeated over and over. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and others have suggested that orphanages with expedited adoptions are certainly preferable to the way we are currently meeting the needs of these children.

IS THIS ANY WAY TO SERVE A CHILD?

To help you understand why we need to change the way we serve children in Alameda County, let me tell you a story. Eight years ago, when he was two years old, "Johnny" was removed from his home when it was found to be uninhabitable - no gas, water, or electricity, no food, no parental presence, refuse everywhere within the apartment. "Johnny's" parents were both long-term drug abusers, on probation, and his father was a registrant as a drug addict under provisions of the Health and Safety Code. "Johnny" was made a dependent of the Alameda County Juvenile Court and, because no relative was located or came forward, placed in a

county foster home. His parents never participated in any reunification services and, indeed, their whereabouts were and continue to be "unknown," (although it is reported that his mother may be living in the streets of San Francisco.) An adoptions assessment was done for "Johnny," but since he had considerable physical and emotional problems, having been a "crack baby" and with a tentative diagnosis of ADHD, he was deemed "unadoptable" and the permanent plan for him was ordered to be long-term foster care. By the time "Johnny" was eight his behaviors had escalated to the point where his foster mother advised the Agency that she could no longer care for him and requested his removal to another placement. At this point "Johnny" began a pattern of multiple placements punctuated by running away to San Francisco where he began selling and using drugs. After being picked up by the San Francisco Police, he would be returned to his previous placement or a higher level of placement. There were twenty two different placements over the next one and a half years culminating in his current placement, at age 10, in the highest level of group home available (Level 14) with one-on-one twenty four hour a day supervision to prevent running away. Is this any way to serve a child?

CHANGES BEING IMPLEMENTED

While the changes in the welfare laws at the federal and local level with the end of entitlements and the institution of block grants and time-limited services

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to families in need has received most of the press, the recent changes in state and federal laws regarding permanency for children are radically changing the way public agencies work with children and families where court and agency intervention becomes necessary under provisions of the Welfare and Institutions Code.

WHY LOOK AT SAN MATEO COUNTY?

Although San Mateo County has only about half the population of Alameda County and only 2% of its population receiving welfare services (versus 8% in Alameda County) and a different demographic makeup, the fact that it is an urban county and a next-door neighbor to Alameda County means that its welfare agency is dealing with many of the same problems as our county. Further, San Mateo County has the reputation of a “can do” county and has been in the forefront of welfare reform on all levels, including the needs of children who are dependents or near dependents of the Juvenile Court. In addition, more than many other counties, the San Mateo Human Services Agency has worked hard to put a human face on welfare reform.

PERSONAL CONNECTION PRIOR TO BASSC

Prior to my involvement in the BASSC Executive Development Program starting in the fall of 1997, I had the opportunity to work with my mentor, Charlotte Brisont-Brown, one of the managers in San Mateo County Youth and family Services department, and Stuart Oppenheim, the Department Director, in my capacity as a Program Manager with responsibility for Alameda County’s Adoptions Program. As a result I was early aware of San Mateo County’s leadership in implementing changes in this particular area of welfare reform.

WHAT HAS SAN MATEO COUNTY BEEN UP TO?

In my first meeting with Charlotte Brisont-Brown as my mentor for this project she pointed out to me that importance of the partnership that the San Mateo County Juvenile Court and the County Board of Supervisors sees themselves as having in the implementation of welfare reform and other statutory changes involving services to families.

THE SUCCESS PROGRAM

Early in the history of welfare reform San Mateo County Human Services prepared a comprehensive plan to implement comprehensive, integrated, and effective services to welfare recipients in the county, a four year demonstration project which they called SUCCESS (Shared Undertaking to change the Community to Enable Self-sufficiency). This was presented to the County Board of Supervisors and approved on 4/8/97. When enabling legislation in California was passed to implement federal welfare reform in August of 1997 the Agency went back to the Board on January 5, 1998 to make CalWORKS a part of the SUCCESS plan.

As an integral part of SUCCESS the focus on providing special services for families and individuals with either acute or long-standing barriers to self-sufficiency, the Agency has established or is in the process of establishing three Family Self-Sufficiency Teams (FSST) located in the community to serve the South, North, and Central regions of San Mateo County. These teams are composed of specialists in eligibility, employment, mental health, drug and alcohol problems, and child care with a Primary Case Manager assigned to the family to facilitate access to the appropriate services and treatments. Families or individuals with issues

including domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, and potential child abuse/neglect are eligible. Currently the Process/Policy Team for FSST meets bi-weekly to evaluate the progress of FSST and review any requests for changes or to consider other issues around FSST.

It is still a little early to tell what the full impact of FSST will be, but it is certainly giving a positive message to the community and to the families and individuals it is serving. All of the FSST sites were scheduled to be up and running by the end of February 1998, and the tracking of the progress of this program as well as other aspects of SUCCESS is to be tracked by a PC based computer system called SMART.

THE FUTURES PROJECT

In addition to FSST the Agency is also providing additional services to low income and at-risk children, youth, and families through a joint project with the San Mateo County Office of Education and in partnership with the three school districts in Daly City called the FUTURES Project. The project consists of four multi-disciplinary teams located at four school sites and serving six schools in Daly City. The services provided at the sites are multi-disciplinary, collaborative, client derived, multi-modality, outcome based and prevention and early intervention oriented. The Agency has been able to draw in team members from other agencies such as public health nurses and mental health workers to assist in providing services through this project.

WHAT ABOUT FOSTER CARE DRIFT?

With regard to “foster care drift,” we need to first look at why it happens and then consider how San Mateo County is addressing it. When a child has to

be removed from his or her parents because of abuse or neglect the placement in foster care is to be as short as possible, perhaps only for a few days, while support services are put in place so that there is no need to even make this child a court dependent. The preferred plan for an out-of-home placement, for a few days or a longer period, is with a relative caregiver. Often this done informally and the matter never comes to the attention of Child Protective Services (CPS). However, if the case is serious and the child is made a court dependent, and there are no relatives or family members available to care for the minor, she or he is placed in a licensed foster home. If the child has serious physical or emotional problems, she or he may need to be placed in a therapeutic foster home or even in an institutional setting. Payments for the care of these minors to foster parents or institutions will range from \$345.00 per month to over \$5,000.00 per month depending on the child's needs. And here's where “drift” begins to happen. The County Social Worker is supposed to continually (and no less often than once a year) assess the child for the appropriateness of the permanent plan, once it has been determined that the parents cannot meet the requirements for reunification. The current caretaker is to be asked to consider legal guardianship or adoption. If they are not able to do so, the worker is to look for such a permanent placement elsewhere. Needless to say, if the placement is stable there is not a whole lot of incentive on the part of either the children's county worker or the foster parent to make a change. Thus the “drift” begins. Then, when the child approaches adolescence and begins to have more behavioral problems or continues to suffer from some debilitating injury or illness, the care provider may ask that the child be placed elsewhere because they can no longer handle the situation (like “Johnny” in my story), and by this time an adoptive or guardianship placement may be

almost impossible to find. Thus the minor begins to move from one foster placement to another until she or he becomes an adult and “ages out” of the foster care system.

SOME ANSWERS TO FOSTER CARE DRIFT

San Mateo County has worked to address the issue of “foster care drift” on several different levels, two of which are worth a closer look as a paradigm for Alameda County. First, San Mateo County actively recruits adoptive homes and generally has a surplus of homes available for adoptive placements. Part of the new state legislation to increase adoptions directs counties to work together to share resources for meeting this mandate. San Mateo County has taken a leading role in developing an inter-county protocol for increasing adoptive placements. This county is already meeting the requirements for the number of such placements called for under the state Adoptions Initiative.

In order to increase the awareness of dependents needing permanency San Mateo County has also received a license from the State Community Care Licensing Bureau to operate as a Foster Family Agency and recruit foster homes where a higher level of care is necessary. San Mateo received their license and rate to operate as a therapeutic FFA in April of 1996, but had been moving toward establishing such a program since 1992. According to Ellen Bucci, one of the supervisors who works with this program, families who wish to become county FFA homes are recruited from new families being trained through the County’s MAPP program (the same foster parent training program Alameda County uses) or from current county licensed foster homes. These families receive additional specialized training after their basic MAPP training. Currently there are approximately ten licensed FFA

homes in the county and 47 minors have come through these homes in the past two years. The two county social workers assigned to these FFA case-loads carry only 15 cases. The children placed in these homes have ranged from 3 to 18 years of age and almost all came into the program through emergency or regular placements at dependency or while in the family reunification program. San Mateo’s license is as a therapeutic FFA, so they are able to provide services to minors with significant levels of need. Ellen reports that their FFA has just been opened to probation youth and that the San Mateo County Probation Department is very pleased with this. One placement has rolled over to a guardianship and one is in the process of becoming an adoptive home. Eight minors have gone to successful adoptive homes and fifteen have been able to reunify with one or both parents (a very high average for FFA placed minors.) The County has experienced considerable cost savings in operating this FFA because of the reduction in administrative expenses (i.e. no separate FFA administration to need to be funded). A packet has been prepared on San Mateo’s experience in setting up this program and this has been forwarded to Alameda County.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

How can Alameda County learn from San Mateo County’s example? First, and in the big picture, Alameda County Social Services Agency should consider how the proactive work toward partnership by the San Mateo Human Services Agency with their juvenile court, their county board of supervisors, the county school systems, and the community in general has produced an atmosphere of shared commitment to the common goal of prevention of the need for dependency due to abuse and neglect as well as getting a dependent minor into the best permanent home as quickly as possible. Alameda

County SSA appears often to be in an adversarial role with some elements in our community who then bring their issues to the county board of supervisors and further escalate any conflict. Better and more timely communications with all of our potential partners in improving services to children is warranted.

More specifically, Alameda County needs to commit more resources and people to improving these services. Currently we have a small neighborhood based program focused on prevention and education in the Prescott neighborhood of West Oakland and in the Harder-Tennyson neighborhood of South Hayward. These programs would benefit from a close look at San Mateo's FUTURES program in Daly City.

In addition, the county is currently launching an integrated System of Care program bringing together people from Social Services, Behavioral Health Care, Probation, the schools, the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program, and others to provide intensive services to high risk minors in order to support families and prevent minors from entering the system and to maximize efforts to either return children home or get them into permanent placements. The coordinator of this program, Jeff Rackmill, comes to Alameda County from San Mateo County and so is able to bring the perspective of San Mateo's experience in proactive partnerships with all those concerned with the needs of children.

Also, Alameda County SSA has talked for a number of years about seeking a license to operate an FFA to improve services to our children. The Agency should look closely at San Mateo's venture in this area and commit fully to implementing a similar program to increase our options in meeting the

needs of our dependent children.

Finally, Alameda County SSA and all social services agencies in the state and country are in the midst of massive changes in the way we do business. San Mateo County over the past number of years has set an example of initiative toward positive change to improve services to children. Should we not look to our next door neighbor across the San Mateo Bridge for ideas and examples in making these changes work for the betterment of our children, our future for the 21st Century?