

AN ASSESSMENT OF SANTA CRUZ HUMAN RESOURCES FOST-ADOPT PROGRAM

WHERE ARE WE GOING AND WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

Lois Rutten

INTRODUCTION

For my BASSC Executive Development Project, I selected Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency to examine their fost-adopt program; the forerunner of concurrent planning. It was my intent to analyze their best practices in service delivery to fost-adopt (concurrent) caregivers and staff and to extract from those services what I would recommend for Contra Costa County. Contra Costa County is a pilot county for concurrent planning, the simultaneous provision of reunification services and permanency planning. In order to have the broadest overview, I became a member of the “staff “ for the two weeks I was there to be included in all meetings, staffings, trainings, and general workings of the department to have exposure to the daily operations of the fost-adopt program. The two supervisors of the fost-adopt program, Angelica Glass and Valerie Sudduth, were invaluable in their commitment and willingness to afford me opportunities to interview fost-adopt caregivers and staff involved in all decision-making levels of the fost-adopt program. The ability to have an in-depth, as well as hands on, overview of the program assisted me in finding common elements, as well as critical challenges, in achieving early permanency planning for children placed in the child welfare system. The purpose of this paper is twofold; to outline what I learned during my project and secondly, to formulate recommendations that I could present to Contra Costa County as practices that could be implemented to strengthen the existing concurrent planning

program in my county.

In interviewing line staff, administrators and fost-adopt caregivers, I was able to determine two areas that have been under consideration, but not implemented, in Contra Costa County’s concurrent planning program that were significant and vital practices in Santa Cruz County. It is these two areas that became the focus of my BASSC project. Two common themes were prevalent throughout my project and form the basis of my recommendations for Contra Costa County. Documentation, including interviews with staff, caregivers and a thorough review and analysis of program specifics, is included in this paper to support implementation of these two service deliveries. As previously noted, these two areas are supportive services to fost-adopt caregivers and cross-training of staff to encourage teamwork and mutual decision-making conjointly with concurrent caregivers.

My BASSC project in the Santa Cruz Human Resource Agency allowed me the opportunity to examine ‘where are we going and where have we been’. I planned to focus on three learning objectives during my BASSC project:

- Recruitment and retention of fost-adopt/concurrent caregivers;
- Support services for fost-adopt/concurrent caregivers and;

*Lois Rutten is a Supervisor in the Adoption-Homefinding Unit of the Contra Costa County Department of Social Services.

- Training of staff on fost-adopt/concurrent planning regulations, laws and standard practice as envisioned by Contra Costa County.

In my current assignment as Supervisor in the Adoption-Homefinding Unit of Contra Costa County, I am directly impacted by the change in the philosophical and administrative changes that concurrent planning brings to the families and children we serve. The intent of my BASSC project at Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency was not to do a comparative study; our relative county size and administrative structure would not permit a comprehensive and accurate analysis. Instead, I was intrigued to know if issues and/or concerns that have been raised during Contra Costa County's first year pilot project of concurrent planning in 1997 were similar to a county that had long been noted to do "fost-adopt" as a practice.

BACKGROUND

Concurrent planning evolved in December of 1996 when the President directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to report to him with specific strategies to move children more quickly from foster care to permanent homes. The focus was to include promoting efforts to increase the number of children who could be adopted, increase awareness about children waiting for families, and highlighting the rewards and responsibilities of adoption. The primary goal of the Federal Adoptions Initiative: Adoption 2002, was to double adoptions and permanent placements over the next five years.

At the State level, the Governor's Initiative of 1996, followed the Federal guidelines and further developed these directives. The Governor's Initiative noted that the adoption program in California no longer serves the client population for which it was

originally designed. Subsequently, a major restructuring of the adoption program reflects themes and issues raised by adoption professionals over the past few years. Concurrent planning became a high priority for policy development as a means to expedite the adoption/ permanency planning process in the event family reunification was not possible.

It is clear given the current five-year plan to expedite and facilitate legal permanence for children that concurrent planning will be a primary tool to achieve this goal. Subsequently, the questions that needed to be answered in my BASSC project were twofold. First, what did this mean to the staff who now had to shift their thinking and practice to placements that needed to be assessed differently (first placement should be the last placement). Secondly, what did this mean to the caregivers of the children who needed to be prepared to assume a risk element in accepting children into their homes as foster children while being prepare to adopt them?

WHY COMPARE SANTA CRUZ AND CONTRA COSTA?

Santa Cruz incorporated this unique service delivery of fost-adopt placements, or the informal process of placing children in the homes of licensed foster parents prepared to adopt, long before the 1996 Presidents and Governors Initiatives. Concurrent planning is defined, now by law, as the simultaneous provision of reunification services and permanency planning. Though fost-adopt, e.g., concurrent planning, sound quite the same, it is only recently that talking about adoption planning with birth parents and fost-adopt caregivers at the same time were congruous. A comprehensive review of Santa Cruz's fost-adopt program, though dissimilar in structure, had required them to address these

potentially conflicting practices that are now raised for Contra Costa County.

Interviews with adoption staff and line staff identified the issue of workers voicing concern over “who owns the case.” This territorial stance, on who is the decision-maker when determining the appropriateness and timeliness of a foster-adopt placement, seems to resolve itself by training staff on delineating what is the difference between a foster parent and a foster-adopt parent. It was essential to focus on the identified criteria for a placement in a foster-adopt home and a recognition that ALL should focus on less disruption for the child. Staff also indicated need for clear and consistent written guidelines when utilizing a program that is more familiar and accessible to adoption staff.

Foster-adopt parents form a relationship with adoption staff that is inherently different given the nature and focus of the in-depth interviews required for adoption homestudies and adoptive placements. The support group, while primarily an opportunity for caregivers to support each other, also provided a forum for information sharing which included dissemination of roles and responsibilities of adoption staff and line staff. This appeared to be essential in assisting caregivers and staff in understanding that while roles and relationships may vary, the critical element was planning for the child in which all parties had input.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency’s foster-adopt program has been there “since forever,” according to adoption supervisor, Valerie Sudduth, who has been in her current position for ten years. The relative size and centralized location of Santa Cruz County child welfare staff allow for early identifica-

tion of potential children for foster-adopt placement. Child welfare staff are housed in one building that facilitates informal conversations as well as formal staffings regarding children entering the child welfare system. Santa Cruz Human Resource Agency has five adoption-homefinding social workers who place approximately forty children in adoptive placements per year. In comparison, Contra Costa County has sixteen adoption-homefinding workers who place approximately one hundred and fifty-five children in adoptive placements per year. The size and structure of the counties are different, the input from the staff speaks for itself.

Most who were interviewed were generally supportive of the concept that children in foster care deserve prompt, timely, decision-making from the adults serving them. All concurred that the time frames for placement and permanency planning decisions must bear in mind a child’s developmental needs. All casework decisions must assess the child’s health and safety as paramount in all placement and permanency planning decisions. While notable successes in implementing laws and programs to serve the needs of children in foster care have emerged, there continue to be challenges that are inherent in any new service delivery. What is most important is the consistency in practice and procedures in the service delivery which happens when “we know where we are going “. All believed that both child welfare staff and concurrent caregivers need to be fully engaged in the process of converting to concurrent planing. Let us look at how this can happen in Contra Costa County based upon my findings from Santa Cruz’s foster-adopt program.

LESSONS LEARNED

My project at Santa Cruz indicates that there are

two identified areas for potential implementation at Contra Costa County:

- Supportive services for concurrent caregivers;
- Concurrent planning team building activities between staff and concurrent caregivers.

It is not the structure, i.e., forms, orientations or recruitment strategies that make or break the program, but the people who live and breathe it. These are the staff and the caregivers who are the backbone of a successful program. Both child welfare staff and concurrent caregivers need to be fully engaged in the processes we are all integral partners in this philosophical shift of addressing a variety of permanence options. To do this, we must work together and support each other. Supportive services to foster-adopt caregivers is vital as early placement, including contact with birth parents, reflects enormous practical and theoretical movement in adoption planning. This change in emphasis must have on-going structured support in order to recruit and retain the caregivers who are called upon to accept the challenge of concurrent planning. Contra Costa County has been cognizant of this need and has begun the ground work for implementation.

Secondly, line staff and concurrent caregivers must team together to work for the best interest of the child. Territorial issues, which at times interfere, need to be put aside in order to achieve permanency planning for the child whether that be a return to the birth family or adoption/permanency planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS/CHALLENGES

Research supports the concept that preparing and training families to commit themselves to see a

child ALL THE WAY through permanency dissolves the traditional categories of “foster parents” and “adoptive parents.” The expedited paths to permanency bring with it increased anxiety for concurrent caregivers who must be willing to support the goal of reunification, including contact with birth parents. It poses a dilemma for caregivers to seek support/direction from child welfare workers whom they believe may perceive them as unprepared for the challenge of concurrent planning. A support group could address this stated need.

The song “Everybody Needs Somebody Sometime” reveals what a concurrent caregiver’s support group could be about:

The group process itself demonstrates to families the value that comes from sharing when anxiety is likely to be high;

The group process maximizes the opportunities for new caregivers to meet and listen to experienced families, an invaluable aid to sound decision-making or adults learning from their peers;

- Support and guidance;
- Mutual learning and openness;
- Comprehensive training to prepare them to facilitate reunification and to meet the legal needs for permanence;
- Assist in the integration of the child(ren) into the family unit;
- Support for the emotional toll that “legal-risk” placement inherent in concurrent planning entails.

What I found insightful were my interviews with several of the foster-adopt parents who participate in Santa Cruz's monthly support groups. They were direct and firm that a support group was not for the agency to tell them what to do, but to "be there for each other through the good times and the bad." They saw an agency facilitator as the conduit who brought them together but it was their function to build supportive relationships. Therefore, the availability of space for the group, a staff facilitator and use of the monthly foster parent newsletter to notify caregivers of the place and times of the groups is critical. Implementation of these assets would require minimal staff time and resources once established.

The second recommendation for Contra Costa County is their continued focus on building a collaborative working environment. Staff and caregivers need to be fully engaged in the process of viewing a child's first placement as their last. The ability of staff to make timely determination about permanency is dependent upon the quality, availability, and accessibility of concurrent caregivers. Many factors serve as a barrier; the one most inherent is staff's inaccessibility to have team-building activities with concurrent caregivers. These activities would serve to foster relationships built on shared experiences, and more importantly, an understanding of the preparation and commitment these caregivers are able and willing to provide children in need of permanence.

An opportunity to facilitate this is built into the PRIDE training that is developed to create a teamwork approach between staff and caregivers. PRIDE is a comprehensive training curriculum developed by child welfare workers and caregivers that focuses on all the needs of the child, including grief, loss, child development and working with the

natural family. PRIDE is offered during evening and Saturday hours for concurrent caregivers that is not conducive to staff attendance outside normal working hours. This training could be incorporated into the staff development curriculum for staff working hours as to encourage participation and needs to include concurrent caregivers to be primarily experiential. Recommendations for facilitating PRIDE as a team building experience will work as:

- Curriculum has been revised to incorporate the concepts and practices inherent in concurrent planning;
- Can be structured over seven-week period to encourage participation as it takes into account realities of workloads and competing priorities for staff;
- Staff can be rotated through the classes to ensure all staff have the opportunity to participate;
- The simple idea that having a face to a name between staff and caregivers will go a long way in building trusting relationships which will ultimately benefit the children we serve;
- It would allow for breaking down the barriers between "them and us" which prohibits mutual decision-making for children in need of permanency;
- The PRIDE curriculum fosters teamwork and builds relationships through experiential activities.

Contra Costa County has considered and factored in these recommendations in its long range plans for its concurrent planning program. PRIDE training

utilizes adoption staff as co-facilitators and line staff, once trained, could rotate through as co-facilitators also to cover the six PRIDE trainings now scheduled per year. My project and research at Santa Cruz served to solidify the need to implement these service needs as soon as feasible based upon what “history “has taught Santa Cruz Human Resource Agency to maintain a quality program.

We must not only change, because laws and regulations mandate it, but to provide the people who make it work the tools necessary to ensure the best interests of the children are met. Support for caregivers and staff, whether a support group or supportive training, will go a long way to meet this need.

I enjoyed my BASSC project at Santa Cruz Human Resource Agency and the caring and committed people that I met. It provided me an opportunity to reflect on what Contra Costa County is doing and what we can continue to do to meet the needs of the children we serve.

*“Let us watch our beginnings and results
will manage themselves.”
Alexander Clark*