

Timeliness of Adoption: **A Look at Contra Costa County Practices**

HELGA ZIMMERER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study discusses how some of the current practices employed in Contra Costa County may be applied in the City and County of San Francisco to help the county meet federal standards for timeliness of adoption. Timeliness of adoption measures the percentage of all children adopted within 24 months of removal. The federal standard for this measure is 36.6%. Contra Costa County meets the federal standard, while San Francisco County has had difficulty complying with this measure.

As part of this case study, I visited Contra Costa County Children and Family Services to learn more about their practices designed to decrease adoption timelines. In addition, I adapted suggestions developed by current San Francisco Family and Children's Services work groups into the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- **Ongoing training of staff on federal and state standards** as they relate to permanency and incorporating these standards into daily practice.
- **Permanency reviews** for all children in out-of-home care. These reviews are scheduled based on tracking the length of time a child is in care, utilizing the CWS/CMS (child welfare services case management system) database system. Instead of having numerous reviews as is currently the practice in the City and County of San

Francisco, these reviews, should be streamlined into one comprehensive permanency review to be conducted at certain time intervals for each case.

- **Increasing formal and informal communication** between case carrying and adoption workers by assigning an adoptions worker as a unit consultant to several units and giving an adoptions worker secondary assignment on cases where the identified concurrent plan is adoption.
- **Provision of practical tools, resources, and support** including the ready availability of written materials for caregivers in regards to permanency options and available financial assistance. A "permanency expert" who is up-to-date on recent legislative and organizational changes that impact financial resources and other support to caregivers which could be available to accompany child welfare workers on home visits when discussing permanency options with caregivers.
- **Recruitment of concurrent planning homes** that are willing to foster children and support the family's reunification efforts but are ready to adopt if the child becomes eligible for adoption.
- **Early placement of children** in adoptive homes who are willing to take children into their home with the goal of adoption, but who accept some legal risk of reunification.

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Background

The Child Welfare System is currently undergoing tremendous changes. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 required the federal government to develop a set of outcome measures for public child welfare programs. These outcome measures fall into three broad domains: 1) safety, 2) permanency, and 3) well-being. Safety indicators are related to maltreatment reoccurrence, maltreatment in out-of-home care, and re-entry into foster care. Permanency relates to early and timely reunification, adoption as early as possible if reunification does not occur, and as few placement changes as possible. Well-being indicators look at physical and mental health issues, educational issues, and preparation for independent living. In 2001, California passed Assembly Bill 636 (AB 636) in response to the federal outcomes reporting requirements, requiring each county to improve their performance on these outcomes.

The federal and state performance measures are not without problems. Researchers note that in their efforts to comply with federal and state outcomes, counties may have a strong incentive to achieve the targets even if the efforts necessary to do so do not serve children and families well.¹

As San Francisco and other counties focus their efforts to comply with these standards, it is imperative to ensure that these efforts do not negatively affect the true outcomes being sought.

For example, successful efforts to move children currently in long-term foster care into adoptive homes would negatively affect a county's performance on the adoptions indicator as currently defined, since any child adopted after having been in care over 24 months will reduce the proportion of those adoptions that are completed within 24 months. This particular measure punishes counties that focus on having children who have been in care for longer periods of time, as they will rank low on this measure. A focus on adoption within short timeframes may also impede reunification efforts with families, or result in placement instability by rushing placements into adoptive homes without appropriate planning, particularly for older children.

This case study focuses on one of the performance indicators as it relates to permanency for children, timeliness of adoption, which measures the percentage of all children adopted within 24 months of removal. The federal standard for timeliness of adoption is 36.6%.

In the second quarter of the fiscal year 2007–2008, the San Francisco Department of Family and Children's Services (FCS) met 6 out of 17 federal performance standards. In regards to timeliness of adoption, San Francisco's performance is well below the federal standard and state average. Performance indicators show that during the 2007 fiscal year between 15 to 20 % of adoptions were finalized within 24 months of entry into the child welfare system. Contra Costa County passed the federal standard with 37.3%.² While it is difficult to compare counties,

¹The Center for Social Services Research, University of California, Berkeley, hosts an excellent website identifying relevant studies related to understanding and measuring child welfare outcomes, concurrent planning and promising practices in the field of child welfare. <http://cssr.berkeley.edu>

²Recent and up-to-date data can be obtained from the Center for Social Services Research, UC Berkeley. <http://cssr.berkeley.edu>

as they differ in size, population, and local politics, I believe that many of the practices described here can be applied to the City and County of San Francisco.

This case study looks at structural changes and practices which can be implemented within San Francisco FCS. There are other factors which may significantly impact timeliness of adoptions, such as the courts and court processes, which are not within the scope of this study.

Contra Costa County Promising Practices

PERMANENCY PLANNING REVIEWS

Permanency Planning (PP) reviews are attended by the case-carrying social worker, his/her supervisor, an adoptions supervisor, and the division manager. PP reviews are kept fairly short, approximately 15 minutes per case, due to the volume of cases being reviewed. Cases are reviewed with a focus on determining the most appropriate plan for the child and whether or not a concurrent plan of adoption is recommended. In addition, relative/NREFM (non-related extended family member) placements are reviewed early on in the case in order to determine if the caretaker is willing and available to be a concurrent placement and/or willing to adopt the child should reunification fail.

Cases are reviewed 45 days from the date of placement for relative/NREFM placements, two months before the 6-month status review and two months before the 12-month status review.³ All cases in long-term placement status are reviewed every six months.

Reviews are held once per month and are scheduled based on a CWS/CMS (Child Welfare Services Case Management System, California's child welfare data base) report listing children in out-of-home care with a 6 or 12 month review hearing within two months. The report highlights children who were under age three at the time of the removal, since these children fall under shortened time frames.

³Court requires Child Welfare Departments to submit a report on every child in out-of-home placement in 6 month intervals, informing the Court on the status of the child, outlining parents' progress toward reunification or recommending a permanent plan, should reunification fail.

Contra Costa County uses a single-page county form titled "DC 131: Long Term Planning Assessment Tool" as a tool to conduct the review (*see Attachment*). At the top of this document, a single statement summarizes Contra Costa County's general philosophy about adoption: The assumption that "children are generally adoptable unless there are other factors that make adoption unrealistic or not in the best interest of the child." Using this form as an outline, case workers identify factors which might make adoption planning difficult, provide information on the current caregiver, such as whether or not the current caregiver is interested in considering adoption or guardianship, and if Aid to Adoptive Parents (AAP) and the financial impact of guardianship was discussed with the family.

At the end of each review, a determination is made regarding the plan: adoption, guardianship, long-term foster care, or reunification. The case may be called for a re-review if there are particular questions regarding the feasibility of a particular plan. If the identified plan is adoption, an adoptions worker is assigned as a consultant and receives secondary assignment of the case on CWS/CMS. Adoption workers are assigned on a rotational basis, and receive primary case assignment once reunification services terminate and adoption is the permanent plan.

ADOPTION CONSULTANT

While Contra Costa County does not have a written protocol defining the role of the adoptions consultant, the role is well integrated into Contra Costa County's child welfare system. The role of the consultant is to initially meet with the proposed caregiver, ideally with the assigned case worker, to make a quick onsite assessment as to whether the caregiver is likely to pass an adoptive home study, and to discuss the plan of adoption in more detail so that the caregiver can make an informed decision. If the adoptions worker determines that adoption is not appropriate, the permanent plan is changed as the adoptions worker is considered the "expert." In case of a disagreement, the assigned adoptions worker, the case worker, their supervisors and the division man-

ager meet to further discuss the case. According to Holliedayle Hertweck, Contra Costa County adoptions supervisor, disagreements are minimal and are usually resolved during this second meeting or after further discussion.

The role of the adoptions consultant may also include the early recruitment and matching of the child with an adoptive home. In “bypass cases” or fast track cases where the parents are not offered reunification services per Welfare and Institutions Code 361.5 (b), an adoptions worker is assigned very early on in the case to assist with concurrent planning and early matching/placement. Once reunification services are terminated, the case is transferred to the adoptions worker consultant. The adoptions worker is responsible for writing the .26 court report, recommending termination of parental rights. This role is new for Contra Costa County adoptions workers, as previously a separate unit of six child welfare workers (the “termination unit”) was solely assigned to writing .26 court reports. Contra Costa County disbanded the .26 unit last year after a determination was made that this was not an efficient use of staff and resources and resulted in an unnecessary transfer of cases.

FOSTER HOMES AND ADOPTIVE HOMES

Contra Costa County licenses most of its foster and adoptive homes in-house. Only some of the relative home studies are contracted out to private agencies. According to Holliedayle Hertweck, the agency makes a concerted effort to recruit “concurrent homes” for placement.⁴ These homes are willing to foster children and support the family’s reunification effort but are also willing to adopt the child if they become eligible for adoption. Concurrent planning homes increase placement stability, minimize moves, and are based on the philosophy that adults, rather than children, should assume the emotional risk in foster care. Children may be initially placed in emergency shelter foster homes and moved into

concurrent planning homes early on during their placement. In addition, Contra Costa County uses “Early Chance” homes which are foster-adopt families who are willing to take children into their homes with the goal of adoption but who understand that a legal risk remains that the parents may reunify and that adoption may not occur. The concurrent and early chance homes already have approved adoptive home studies.

Applications for San Francisco County

CURRENT SITUATION

As part of its efforts to comply with AB 636, San Francisco FCS has been actively involved in looking at its policies and procedures, and staff at all levels have been engaged in developing a strategic plan to improve San Francisco’s outcomes.

In 2000, San Francisco FCS utilized a pilot project to see if a “dual assignment” for family reunification cases would improve outcomes for children. As part of this pilot project, two child welfare workers were assigned to the case: the family reunification worker worked with the parents on reunification, while the adoptions worker was assigned to the child in order to focus on concurrent planning. The adoptions worker completed monthly compliance visits with the child and out-of-home caregiver. This pilot project was discontinued due to the inherent conflicts of having two child welfare workers assigned to the same case and because it was assessed that this was not the best use of staff and resources.

During the past year, San Francisco’s adoptions units have met and discussed ways for San Francisco FCS to improve its performance related to adoption outcome measures. At an adoptions retreat in February 2008, suggestions were developed to shorten time frames for adoptions. These suggestions included: having adoptions staff act as consultants to other units, adoptions staff making formal presentations to units, triaging cases transferring into the adoptions units for timeliness within the 24-month goal where possible, triaging home study requests, and changing the current joint adoptability assessment.

⁴Concurrent planning is the practice of simultaneously offering reunification services to a child’s parents while searching for a permanent home should reunification fail.

There are also a number of workgroups in place which meet twice a month to look at ways that San Francisco can improve its services to families and children. One of the work groups, the “Organizational Structure Work Group”, focuses on organizational changes that may increase compliance with federal performance measures. Recommended strategies include: timeliness of adoptive home studies, increasing communication between line staff and adoption workers, early placement of potential fast track minors in foster-adopt homes, implementing a system of prioritizing cases, conducting an analysis of cases that finalized within the last two years to identify barriers to timely finalization, review of court processes that impede timeliness, and creation of a tracking system.

Recommendations

Based on my research in Contra Costa County, my review of the recommendations made by current San Francisco FCS work groups, and a review of relevant literature,⁵ I would like to propose the following changes:

Ongoing training of staff on federal and state standards as they relate to permanency and incorporating these standards into daily practice. San Francisco is already doing an outstanding job in this area. The agency’s deputy director has been visiting individual units to discuss federal outcomes, and this message has been reinforced on all levels, including section meetings, and division meetings.

Regular collaborative case reviews that encourage thoughtful discussion of concurrent planning alternatives, and provide collegial and supervisory support for workers making difficult decisions within limited time frames. Reviews should begin early in the case. Early concurrent planning, which positively impacts timeliness to adoption, can be a very difficult process for the case carrying worker. It is therefore essential that

meetings are conducted in a collaborative and supportive way to truly assist the worker in developing the best concurrent plan. I recommend that reviews begin while the case is still in court dependency, prior to the dispositional hearing. San Francisco County may want to implement a process used in some other counties, where an adoption supervisor reviews all detention reports and highlights cases that may fall under W&I 361.5 (b), or where the likelihood of reunification appears low. These cases are flagged and a review is set up as soon as possible, before the jurisdictional/dispositional report is submitted to the Court. If the decision is to recommend adoption as a concurrent plan (or if no reunification services are offered to the parents), an adoptions worker should receive secondary assignment at this time. Because San Francisco timelines for submission of court reports differ from Contra Costa County timelines (1 month as opposed to 10 days before the review hearing), I recommend these permanency reviews be scheduled 3 months before the 6-month review as well as the 12-month review.

Streamlining of current meetings/reviews into one permanency review meeting. At this time, San Francisco FCS uses multiple forms of meetings to review placement and permanency options: Team Decision Making meetings (TDM), Multi Disciplinary Meetings (MDT), a placement review committee (PARC), as well as Administrative Reviews. Although they have specific intent, much of the content is duplicative and not a good use of time and resources. I am strongly recommending streamlining these reviews and meetings into one comprehensive meeting, which allows a thorough review of reunification efforts and early permanency planning. I am recommending a format similar to the PP reviews used in Contra Costa County, but allowing for more time to do an in-depth and collaborative review of the case.

Provision of practical tools and support for implementing concurrent planning. All child welfare workers should be trained on permanency options for the children on their caseload, and written materials should be readily available for workers to give to caregivers. Workers must develop an expertise in the

⁵The Center for Social Services research provides numerous publications related to child welfare permanency reforms. In particular, I have incorporated the series on “Concurrent planning: Core Principles and Promising Practices,” “Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning” and “Implementation of Concurrent Planning Practice in California” in these recommendations. CSSR / School of Social Welfare, <http://cssr.berkeley.edu>.

different permanency options and be able to competently discuss the different options with the caregiver. Regulations in regards to financial support, rate structure, and services available to adoptive caregivers and legal guardians change frequently, making it difficult for workers to be up-to-date. This gap could be addressed by creating a “permanency expert” who is up-to-date on recent legislative and organizational changes that impact financial and other support to caregivers. This expert would be available to accompany the child welfare worker on home visits, and could act as a consultant to child welfare workers.

Integration of the adoptability assessment into the permanency planning review. Currently, the adoptability assessment is completed by the “duty worker of the day” in the adoptions unit and the carrying case-worker, and then signed off by the respective supervisors. It does not provide much information and is not a useful tool for permanency planning. I am recommending revision of the form, possibly using a similar format to the DC 131 used in Contra Costa County, with the idea that the form is simple yet informative and captures all necessary information. The tool is then incorporated into the PP review, instead of having a separate adoptability assessment.

Increasing formal and informal communication between workers. The creation of a “unit consultant,” an adoptions worker who is assigned to two or three units as an informal consultant and who can answer questions pertaining to adoptions guidelines, will aid in increasing informal communication between adoptions staff and the case carrying workers. An adoptions worker should be formally assigned to a case with a secondary assignment on CWS/CMS once a concurrent plan of adoption has been identified. The adoptions worker will ensure that specific home studies and parent searches are submitted in a timely manner and that the needed documents are on file.

Use of an automated system that tracks the length of time a child is in care, and flags cases for presentation to a permanency review meeting. I recommend that San Francisco use the CWS/CMS report to cre-

ate a list similar to Contra Costa County and utilize that list to schedule cases for PP reviews.

Qualitative case reviews of adoption cases that were finalized during the past years to see which factors contributed to finalization within 24 months. A number of San Francisco FCS adoptions workers, as part of their participation in the organizational workgroup “timeliness to adoptions” subcommittee, have begun to analyze the cases they finalized within the last few years. An analyst, who is also on the subcommittee, has offered to assist them with this process. Based on a more extensive analysis, factors may be identified that contribute to shortening time frames. These factors should then be incorporated into policy recommendations.

Use of concurrent planning homes and “Early Chance” homes. I recommend that San Francisco FCS, in partnership with its licensing unit and home finding/adoption agencies, explore recruitment and support of concurrent planning homes. In addition, I recommend the adoption of the concept of “Early Chance” homes. According to the FCS recruiter, there are currently a number of traditional foster-adopt families available to the agency who are willing to take “low risk” cases early on in the placement process. A formalized process should be put in place where a child could be placed into one of these homes within a week or less, instead of the extended process currently in place.

Many of the above changes can be implemented without any additional staffing or significant expense. Staff in San Francisco appears ready and willing to embrace promising new practices and are energized about improving outcomes for children and families.

Regardless of the policies and procedures adopted, one must not lose sight of the significance of the engagement process and the daily effort put forth by child welfare workers in successfully meeting permanency outcomes for children. I would like to end this case study by quoting a letter from an adoptive parent. The letter serves as a reminder to administrators and supervisors to focus on supporting child welfare staff in their daily difficult work, so they will, in turn, be better able to support families:

“Dear Mr. M, my name is Constance J. I am the mother of Laroy S. I am writing this letter to let you know about my experience with Mr. Gustavo G. When I first took Laroy home with me, people scared me about taking on a foster child and dealing with the social workers. They said that they are not my friends and that they are there to make my life a living hell. I became afraid of what I was getting myself into. When I spoke to a few other people about adopting Laroy and they told me about the problems that came with it, and how the social workers are going to lie and pressure me. That made me afraid to adopt Laroy. But then I meet Mr. G; he was just the opposite. This man is one of the most caring and honest people that I meet in a long time. He did not pressure me. He just told me what was going to happen telling me to take my time and to be sure. He was always there for any questions that I may have even if they were stupid. He never got upset with me even when I asked the same question over because I was unsure. He was so patient and understanding. He was there for Laroy with his best interest at heart with whatever he needed. Mr. G made this experience so easy that I did not fear what I was doing. I knew I was doing the right thing. I am telling you, Mr. M, that if there were more social workers like him a lot of people would adopt their foster children. And not be afraid of their workers. I would just like to say thank you so very much to Mr. G. And I am so glad to have met him. He is such great human being and may god bless him. It is so hard to put what I felt into words and what I am feeling now.”

Acknowledgements

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A special thank you and deepest appreciation goes to my former Section Manager, Kimberly O’Young, who has seen me through this process and has always supported and encouraged my professional development.

Last but not least, my acknowledgement goes to all the dedicated child welfare workers in both San Francisco and Contra Costa Counties. It is their daily work that makes a difference in so many children’s lives.

ATTACHMENT

DC 131: Long Term Planning Assessment Tool

Contra Costa County

Children and Family Services

LONG TERM PLANNING ASSESSMENT TOOL

WE BEGIN THE ASSESSMENT OF LONG TERM PLANNING WITH THE ASSUMPTION THAT CHILDREN ARE GENERALLY ADOPTABLE UNLESS THERE ARE OTHER FACTORS THAT MAKE ADOPTION UNREALISTIC OR NOT IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD.

CHILD'S INFORMATION:

CHILD'S NAME: _____ DOB _____ ETHNICITY _____

(CIRCLE ONE) SIBLINGS MATERNAL OR PATERNAL PLACED W/CHILD?

FULL / HALF SIB	1.	DOB _____	_____	YES	NO
FULL / HALF SIB	2.	DOB _____	_____	YES	NO
FULL / HALF SIB	3.	DOB _____	_____	YES	NO

DATE OF DETENTION _____ CURRENT STATUS (CIRCLE ONE) PRE-DISPO FR PP

OF PLACEMENTS SINCE DETENTION _____ CURRENT PLACEMENT DATE _____ DATE OF DISPOSITION _____

NEXT COURT DATE _____ DATE OF PP ORDER _____

CHECK ANY FACTORS WHICH MIGHT MAKE ADOPTION PLANNING DIFFICULT:

1. <input type="checkbox"/> AGE	5. <input type="checkbox"/> RELATIONSHIP W/CURRENT CAREGIVER
2. <input type="checkbox"/> SIBLING GROUP	6. <input type="checkbox"/> RELATIONSHIP W/PARENTS OR SIGNIFICANT OTHERS
3. <input type="checkbox"/> CHILD'S OPINION/FEELING ABOUT ADOPTION	7. <input type="checkbox"/> FAMILY HISTORY / GENETIC FACTORS
4. <input type="checkbox"/> EMOTIONAL/BEHAVIORAL ISSUES	8. <input type="checkbox"/> MEDICAL/PHYSICAL ISSUES
	9. <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER FACTORS?

INFORMATION ON BIOLOGICAL FAMILY:

MOTHER'S NAME: _____ DOB _____ MARRIED? _____

FATHER'S NAME: _____ DOB _____ MARRIED? _____

PROGNOSIS FOR REUNIFICATION: EXCELLENT VERY GOOD GOOD SATISFACTORY POOR

IN THE **LAST 6 MONTHS**, HOW OFTEN HAS THIS CHILD VISITED WITH:

MOTHER _____ FATHER _____ SIBLINGS _____ OTHER EXTENDED FAMILY _____

(Identify Relationship)

INFORMATION ON CURRENT CAREGIVER:

NAME _____ PHONE _____

ADDRESS _____

PLACEMENT TYPE: CONCURRENT HOME FOSTER HOME GROUP HOME OTHER RELATIVE

NON-RELATED EXTENDED FAMILY RELATIONSHIP TO CHILD _____

YES	NO	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. CURRENT CAREGIVER INTERESTED IN CONSIDERING ADOPTION
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. CURRENT CAREGIVER INTERESTED IN CONSIDERING GUARDIANSHIP
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. CURRENT CAREGIVER WILLING TO RAISE CHILD TO MAJORITY
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. CURRENT CAREGIVER UNWILLING/INAPPROPRIATE TO RAISE CHILD TO MAJORITY

IF BOX 1, 2 OR 3 ARE CHECKED, WAS AAP DISCUSSED WITH FAMILY? YES NO

AAP PAMPHLET GIVEN ON (DATE) _____

IF BOX 1, 2 OR 3 ARE CHECKED, WAS THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF GUARDIANSHIP DISCUSSED WITH FAMILY? YES NO

GUARDIANSHIP PAMPHLET GIVEN ON _____

ISSUES OR CONCERNS REGARDING CURRENT CAREGIVER: _____

SOCIAL WORKER'S RECOMMENDATION FOR PLAN: REUNIFICATION BY: _____ LTFC

ADOPTION GUARDIANSHIP/KINSHIP EMANCIPATION

ALTERNATE PERMANENT PLAN: _____

SUBMITTED BY: _____ (SOCIAL WORKER) DATE: _____

APPROVED BY: _____ (SUPERVISOR) DATE: _____

COMMENTS: _____

AGENCY DECISION: ADOPTION GUARDIANSHIP LTFC REUNIFICATION BY _____

REVIEWED BY: _____ (ADOPTION SUPERVISOR) DATE: _____

_____ (CHILD WELFARE DIVISION MANAGER) DATE: _____

COMMENTS: _____

CASE TO BE RE-REVIEWED ON _____