

Increasing Placements with Relatives and Kin: Santa Clara County's Strategies for Supporting and Familial Placements Sustaining

LESLIE WINTERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the crux of the California Continuum of Care reform are enhanced efforts to place children in family home settings. Placement efforts with biological family and kin must be prioritized and sustained with adequate services and support to maintain this effort and align with best practices.

Santa Clara County's child welfare program has implemented successful strategies to make and sustain relative placements. Sonoma County's child welfare program has experienced a steady decline of kinship placements since 2007, and can benefit from the strategies highlighted in this case study.

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Background

Children belong with family. It is an innate and a primary need for us all to feel a sense of belonging, and to have this experience with those we call family. It is with family that children experience connection, a sense of who they are and where they come from.

The majority of children who are removed from their parents in Sonoma County are initially placed with strangers: they enter the Valley of the Moon Children's Home shelter, or are placed into an Emergency Foster Home (EFH). In 2013, only an estimated 7.4% of Sonoma County children were placed directly into relative or kinship care. The rate of first placement with kinship caregivers for the state of California is 27.2 percent. On average, a Sonoma County child spends 53 days in temporary care before being placed with a relative or kin.

In January 2014, approximately 26% of Sonoma County children were placed with kinship caregivers while the county's rate of placement with relatives or kin has been steadily declining since 2007, when the rate was approximately 37 percent. In January 2014, nearly 45% of Santa Clara youth placed in out of home care were placed with relatives or kin. This is a difference of nearly 20 percent, and prompted a review of procedure and practice to uncover the strategies that lead to these outcomes.

Kinship care is defined as "any living arrangement in which a relative or someone else emotionally close to the child takes primary responsibility for rearing the child." Research across disciplines establishes the positive effects of consistent family relationships

on children's health, mental health, school achievement, and social development. Children placed with kin are less likely than children placed with non-kin to move from placement to placement (permanency), less likely to experience maltreatment with their relatives (safety), and more likely to show improvements in their behavioral symptoms (well-being). Children who have been removed from their parents experience less stress and trauma when placed with individuals with whom they have pre-existing and enduring relationships. Children placed with families (both relatives and foster families) experience fewer placement moves, less time overall in foster care, and increased likelihood of placement in the child's own community than children placed in congregate care settings. In addition, children placed with relatives exit foster care to a permanent home more often than children in other types of placements.

Social service agencies who remove children from their parents are mandated to notify relatives within thirty days so that they may be considered for placement. The Welfare and Institutions code §§ 361.3; 309(e) reads: "In any case in which a child is removed from the physical custody of his or her parents pursuant to § 361, preferential consideration shall be given to a request by a relative of the child for placement of the child with the relative, regardless of the relative's immigration status."

Sonoma County has struggled with disproportionately high rates of children placed in group home settings. Recent reform efforts across the state have focused on foster care and more specifically, the *Continuum of Care* options for children placed into

foster care. Kinship caregivers are a critical part of such options that support California's foster youth. In fact, kinship caregivers are the most utilized foster care placement type in California. Currently, over 36% of California's foster children are placed in kinship care.

Kinship Caregiver Placements a Priority in Santa Clara County

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT/KEY ELEMENTS IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Santa Clara County managers, supervisors and line staff refer to a culture shift in practice that prioritized relative placements ten years ago under agency director, Norma Doctor Sparks. Director Sparks communicated priorities attached to values that were put in writing for staff. A small team of three social workers was created, known as the Relative Support Team, to help accomplish the goal of prioritizing relative placements. Expertise on home approvals and creative strategies to make successful placements grew. Easy to follow, step-by-step instructions were generated to guide social workers through the placement process. A specific procedural checklist and an approval packet were created for temporary placements in addition to the checklist and packet for relative and NREFM approvals. According to Santa Clara County's policy and procedure, temporary, emergency placements with relatives or non-related extended family members (NREFMs) may be made for a child:

- When the child is placed in temporary custody, prior to the dispositional hearing, under Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) § 309 (d), or
- After the dispositional hearing, when there is a sudden unavailability of a substitute caregiver that requires a change in placement on an emergency basis for the child who is under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, under WIC § 361.45.

In addition to the creation of this procedure, a thorough, detailed training was provided to all social workers and supervisors across programs. The

Relative Support Team became a resource for consultation for both social workers and kinship caregivers. New social workers also receive this training as part of their initial training. A chapter of the Santa Clara County online policy and procedures is entitled *Resource Guide*, and was developed by the Relative Support Team. This guide is full of links related to health, adoptions, working with the court system, and free recreational activities within the county.

Most significantly, Santa Clara County ensures that all kinship caregivers receive funding equivalent to foster care payments. Often it is determined that a child is not federally eligible for foster care, in which case the relative must apply for TANF to receive any funding to support the foster placement. This amount is significantly less than foster care, does not increase with age and is not calculated per child. Santa Clara subsidizes this lower rate with all county funds so that relatives receive a rate equivalent to foster care. Santa Clara also provides an annual clothing allowance to these relatives, and 8.5% of kinship caregivers receive subsidized childcare.

SUPPORT FOR KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

Once a kinship placement is made, the family is contacted by the Kinship Support Program within one week. Currently this contract is held by Catholic Charities, who employs two resource specialists embedded within the Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) office to include a bilingual specialist. The program receives a weekly placement list to prompt their contact with new family placements. They meet with the family in person, often in their home. They offer resources, navigate concerns, and offer training and behavior specialists when needed. In addition, they work with relatives on the home study application and paperwork to ensure permanency moves to finalization.

Case carrying social workers complete the home approval process for all kinship caregiver placements. Once a social worker makes a placement with a kinship caregiver, they provide a resource packet modeled after the one given to foster parents at orientation.

The packet includes extensive information to include required pamphlets, permanency options, training opportunities, and extensive resources including access to the EMQ Adolescent Mobile Crisis Team that responds 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

IN-HOME SERVICES AND CRISIS INTERVENTION FOR PLACEMENT SUPPORT

Santa Clara has several service options that target the goal of maintaining children in their family setting to include family maintenance with parents, or placement with kinship caregivers/foster parents. Two dedicated social worker positions have been created to screen service referrals and provide consultation: Coordinator for Resource and Intensive Services (RISC) and System of Care Coordinator.

Although *Wraparound* services are available in Sonoma County, they are utilized more liberally in Santa Clara County with an “Assess and Invest” versus “Fail Up” philosophy. Wraparound is an inclusive team approach to addressing behavioral challenges exhibited by a child. Support is provided in the home, community, and school settings, and includes support to the caregiver. Wraparound services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The ultimate goal of wraparound is to help a family gain the confidence and competency to be successful in meeting challenges and celebrating achievements. Youth must be at risk of a RCL Level 10 or higher, or of stepping down from a group home to qualify for wraparound services. This service is only available to dependents of the court. In 2013, 119 Santa Clara children placed with kinship caregivers received wraparound services.

System of Care (SOC) is a federally funded service delivery system in partnership with the county Mental Health Department, Juvenile Probation Department, County Office of Education, and the Department of Family and Children's Services. The services provided through SOC are comprehensive, community-based, and target seriously emotionally and behaviorally disturbed youth separated from their families or at risk of separation. System of Care is an in-home therapeutic service that focuses on the

child or youth, though the child does not have to be a dependent. Services are sometimes offered out-of-county. Further, children receiving Wraparound services should only be referred for System of Care services if it is being used as a step down, i.e. least restrictive, service. Treatment services include: individual/family counseling offered in-home or at other sites as appropriate; medication support services; and community referrals, as needed.

In addition, *Therapeutic Behavioral Services* (TBS) are available as an adjunct service to Wraparound or SOC, and can also be utilized independently. Therapeutic Behavioral Services are one-on-one mental health services for youth with serious behavioral challenges. The referral for TBS is screened by mental health and must meet their criteria.

Success/Barriers

Santa Clara County social workers report that relatives are considered the first priority and are exhausted before other types of placements are explored. They report competency around home approvals and have a model of “Assess & Invest” versus “Fail Up” when youth are struggling with behavior or mental health issues. Social workers report that Wraparound referrals are seldom declined, and many placements receive at least one of three support service programs: System of Care, TBS, or Wraparound. Social workers report that they are able to be creative when relatives are located out-of-county or out-of-state. In 2013, thirty percent of Santa Clara kinship placements were made out-of-county. Team Decision Making meetings are utilized prior to making placements, and creative decisions are often made wherein the parent agrees to less frequent, extended visits and travels to the child's location. Team Decision Making meetings often take place after-hours. Social workers report that the most frequent barrier to kinship placements is a criminal record that includes felony offenses, and report being tasked with the time consuming step of going to court to obtain records to better understand criminal offenses and determine if exemptions are possible. One social

worker reported that she often sits down with the family to assist them in writing their exemption letter to the director when appropriate, as a means to move the process forward and alleviate barriers such as illiteracy, language differences, or general discouragement around bureaucratic red tape.

Two other notable factors in Santa Clara County are: 1) the Santa Clara County emergency shelter closed in 2010, and now operates as a 23-hour assessment center only; and 2) the Santa Clara foster parent association is open to all caregivers, including relatives, and is an additional source of support and advocacy. The group has a resource center adjacent to the lobby of Child Protective Services that serves as a drop-in center for all caregivers where they can spend time and have coffee while waiting for visits to take place.

Overall, Santa Clara's culture is one that prioritizes kinship placements and takes a multi-faceted approach to supporting kinship placements so they are sustained and result in permanency.

Implications for Sonoma County

Sonoma County has taken an active part in the Continuum of Care reform movement. It is time for Sonoma County to review and enhance practice that promotes kinship placement as part of these efforts.

Recommendations

Strengthen the Temporary Placement Program within Sonoma County.

- Review and revise the current policy and procedure for temporary placements to allow for placements with NREFMS; and build in a provision for temporary placements post disposition.
- Create a step-by-step procedural guide for social workers making temporary placements.
- Train all staff and supervisors on temporary placement and relative/NREFM home approvals to include required documentation when someone is denied for placement.
- Include a placement specialist in all Team Decision Making meetings that could result in removal/placement outside the home.

FISCAL IMPACT:

This would result in thousands of dollars in savings due to the high cost of housing children at Valley of the Moon Children's Center and in the county's Emergency Foster Care Program.

To house a child at Valley of the Moon Children's Home in fiscal year 2012/2013, the cost was \$792 per day, or \$23,760 per month. Within the first 30 days, the county is responsible for \$3,564. After 30 days, the county is responsible for \$11,880. In January 2014, twelve children were residing at the shelter who had been there less than 30 days, with a cost of \$42,768. Ten children resided at the shelter for over 30 days, resulting in a cost of \$118,880. The cost for all 22 children during the month of January was \$161,648. The cost for a child placed in emergency foster care is \$1,357 per month, of which the county cost is \$407. The cost for a child placed with a relative ranges from \$657 to \$820 per month, of which the ideal county cost is a high of \$246, with \$146 reimbursed through realignment dollars. (This dollar amount reflects the cost when all children are federally eligible, which is not always the case.)

Strengthen Support to Kinship Caregivers

- Create subsidized payments for relatives receiving TANF so that all caregivers receive a rate equivalent to foster care.

FISCAL IMPACT:

In 2013, thirty-four Sonoma County relatives were ineligible for foster care. At the minimum foster care rate of \$657 per month, a relative receiving a TANF payment of \$345 per month would require the county subsidy to be \$312 per month for one child, 0-4 years old. This would be an annual cost of \$3,744. If all 34 relatives received this subsidy, the annual cost would be \$127,296.

- Address the fidelity of our kinship services contract: clearly define outcomes and ensure monitoring at regular intervals.
- Create a kinship caregiver coordinator position, much like the one created for Emergency Foster Care (EFH). This could possibly be an expansion

of the existing contract for kinship services versus a county employee.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The cost of a Social Service Worker IV position is \$193,138 per year.

- Provide mentoring opportunities to kinship caregivers across the entire foster care program, and create an inclusive support community.
- Ensure the inclusion of all potential kinship caregivers at Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. Currently, relatives comprise 45% of TDM participants in Sonoma County.
- Expand the TDM program to address all placement changes.
- Include kinship caregivers in the county's Quality Parenting Initiative.
- Strengthen service delivery to all children in placement who have mental health or behavioral needs, to include a 24/7 crisis response for kinship caregivers.
 - Create a priority for the wraparound slots when children are placed with kinship caregivers who are known to have significant behavioral needs.
- Collaborate with Sonoma County Mental Health to create a model equivalent to System of Care that allows for in-home therapeutic services to address the mental health needs of children placed with kinship caregivers. Referrals should be prioritized and time-sensitive.
- Create a resource packet for kinship caregivers that mirrors the one provided to licensed foster parents.

Explore placement of children with kinship caregivers out-of-county during reunification.

- Create resources to transport parents out-of-county for visits.
- Research locations for supervised and unsupervised visits.
- Create space for discussion and agreements regarding visits during TDMs.

- Educate the local court community around the importance of kinship caregivers, and collaborate on creative ways to meet court visitation requirements.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sonoma County can learn from the strategies implemented by Santa Clara County that have resulted in a 44.77% rate of placement with kin; the benefits of which are far-reaching; and address the safety, permanency, and well-being of our most precious resources, our next generation.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to Tracy Bowers for her willingness to take on my custom project, creating space and connection for me within Santa Clara County. Tracy shared a wealth of information with me on subjects far beyond this project, and introduced me to all the right people. For that I am grateful. I also want to thank Marie Sanders for her in-depth and personal overview of Santa Clara County. Thank you Kuei-Ting Huang, Gilbert Murillo, Leslie Griffith, Cynthia Elkins, Elena Burn, Jennifer Hubbs, Mirna Lau, Michele Jackson, and Linda Franks for taking the time to answer my questions and share your expertise; you are such an amazing team. Also, thank you Katie Greaves and Kerry Stokes from Sonoma County Planning Research and Evaluation for pulling together some amazing statistics that support this important case study.

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