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## INNOVATIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

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### KINSHIP SERVICES IN THE PUBLIC AGENCY CONTEXT: AN EXAMINATION OF SAN FRANCISCO'S KINSHIP UNIT

Susan Schorr\*

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When children are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect and then placed in foster homes, increasing priority is given to placing children in the homes of relatives, or in kinship homes. At the federal and state levels, legislation enacted over the past 20 years has favored such kinship placements. Practice and research in the field of child welfare is recognizing that placing foster children in kinship care can be seen as an extension of the family preservation philosophy. In many instances, it makes good sense to have children grow up in their extended family if they are not able to live with their birth parents; but research is also demonstrating that not only do kinship homes need to be supported, they need different kind of supports than do non-kinship foster homes.

San Francisco County has taken decisive steps to support kinship families served by its public child welfare agency by creating a separate kinship unit located in its community-based office in Bay View/Hunters Point. In the so called Southeast Program, county child welfare staff are located in a county office in the community; county child welfare staff are also co-located in the Edgewood Center, a community based organization with a target client base of relatives caring for children in or at risk of entering foster care; and all public agency staff working with kinship families have an outlook that recognizes the distinct needs of relative caregivers.

In neighboring Alameda County, approximately 40 percent of children in foster care reside in kinship homes. The current strategy for working with these families is two pronged: first, for children in stable kinship homes, the plan is to dismiss dependency, have the relative assume legal guardianship of the child, and support these families with a stipend known as KinGAP (Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payments), which is close in amount to foster care payments. The county is also planning to contract with a community based organization to operate a Kinship Support Services Program, meant to provide a wide array of services and supports to relative caregivers and their children, as they transition out of the child welfare system and interaction with the Juvenile Court. The Edgewood Center in San Francisco serves as the state (and indeed national) model for this type of support services program.

Alameda County needs to also focus on how it can best serve kinship families remaining on public child welfare caseloads. Currently, such families are predominantly served by the Long Term Foster Care Program, which mandates face-to-face contacts with child welfare staff only once every six months. With caseloads of 45, child welfare workers are overburdened and thus unable to provide the intensity of services that kinship cases often require.

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\*Susan Schorr is a Program Specialist with Children and Family Services in Alameda County's Social Services Agency.

The implementation of KinGAP should go a long way toward reducing the high caseloads in the Long Term Foster Care Program: it is estimated that approximately 1,200 cases could be dismissed today if bureaucratic constraints were not slowing down the start of this program. With lower caseloads and training around the needs of kinship families, the Department of Children and Family Services could create a kinship unit that would improve the quality of services currently being offered to relatives caring for foster children.

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### **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

When children are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect and then placed in foster homes, increasing priority is given to placing children in the homes of relatives, or in kinship homes. At the federal and state levels, legislation enacted over the past 20 years has favored such kinship placements. Practice and research in the field of child welfare is recognizing that placing foster children in kinship care can be seen as an extension of the family preservation philosophy. In many instances, it makes good sense to have children grow up in their extended family if they are not able to live with their birth parents; but research is also demonstrating that not only do kinship homes need to be supported, they need different kind of supports than do non-kinship foster homes.

In Alameda County (this author's home county), approximately 40 percent of children in foster care reside in kinship homes. The current strategy for working with these families is two pronged: first, for children in stable kinship homes, the plan is to dismiss dependency, have the relative assume legal guardianship of the child, and support these families with a stipend known as KinGAP (Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payments), which is close in amount to foster care payments. The county is also planning to contract with a community based organization to operate a Kinship Support Services Program, meant to provide a wide array of services and supports to relative caregivers and their children, as they transition out of the child welfare system and have interaction with the Juvenile Court. The Edgewood Center in San Francisco serves as

the state (and indeed national) model for this type of support services program.

For kinship families that are assessed as being in need of continued child welfare services from the Social Services Agency (SSA), the current plan is to continue to serve these families as part of the Long Term Foster Care Program, where all children in foster care are served once family reunification timelines have run their course. There has been some discussion about forming a "kinship unit" within the Long Term Foster Care Program, whose function it would be to conduct assessments on all kinship and potential kinship families. There has yet to be detailed discussion about whether such a kinship unit would also carry a caseload or provide specialized services to kinship foster homes. The formation of such a kinship unit in the City and County of San Francisco was the focus of this project.

Services provided to many kinship foster homes in San Francisco County look quite different than they do in Alameda County: county child welfare staff are located in a county office in the community; county child welfare staff are also co-located in the Edgewood Center; and all public agency staff working with kinship families have an outlook that recognizes the distinct needs of relative caregivers. This case study will describe San Francisco's kinship services in more detail. It is this author's strong recommendation that Alameda County revisit its own plans for the development of public agency services to kinship families, with a focus on San Francisco as a model for supporting these families.

## SAN FRANCISCO'S KINSHIP UNIT: HISTORY

By the mid 1980s, half of the foster care caseload in San Francisco consisted of children placed with relatives. Child welfare practice supported placing foster children with relatives when at all possible. Thanks to the 1979 *Miller v. Youakim* federal court decision, kinship foster families were entitled to the same foster care payments as non-kinship families. This decision was a boost for kinship placements, as most family members responsible enough to care for children were on fixed incomes. In order to fund these placements, dependency was maintained for these children so that they would be eligible to receive foster care dollars.

While *Youakim* offered federal financial support to kinship families, it also tied families to the child welfare system when, for example, options like legal guardianship or adoption might provide a more permanent home and legal arrangement for the dependent child. In July 1991, policy in San Francisco changed to become in accordance with other California counties, which called for dismissing dependency when children were able to be cared for by legal guardians. This policy quickly deterred foster parents from becoming legal guardians, as it meant that foster care funding for those placements was no longer available.

Not only were children thus remaining in foster care longer, but those children's needs were more challenging than in the past, with larger numbers of children being born to drug-dependent and drug-involved parents. In San Francisco, as in many other parts of California, relatives caring for children also tend, on average, to be poor. When the federal government realized that all these factors were combining to keep the foster care population

high (nationwide), attention started to be paid to the special needs of kinship foster families. There was recognition that children in relative placements needed to access the special care rates through foster care funding streams. If these children were going to exit the foster care system, stronger supports for these children and their caregivers would have to be put in place.

## THE CONTRACT WITH EDGEWOOD

Through most of the 1990s, kinship families were still case managed out of San Francisco's main child welfare office, at 170 Otis Street. The Long Term Placement program had a public health nurse attached to it, and this nurse administered a survey to the relative caregivers in order to assess their medical needs and the needs of the children in their care. With the promise of one week of respite care provided by Family Support Services of the Bay Area, the survey had a high response rate of 30 percent. With this information, and some dollars from the foster care budget, quarterly meetings were held to further address the needs of relatives caring for foster children.

The contract with Edgewood, a community-based organization in Potrero Hill, started with an idea that grew out of these quarterly meetings: after school tutoring for the children living in kinship homes. This program, while successful, could not continue due to transportation problems—there was not enough money to pay for a van and driver for the children. As the need for more work with schools around Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and tutoring for younger children became apparent, the public child welfare agency encouraged relative caregivers to enroll themselves in Edgewood, so that they could access the array of services offered there. Eventually, the county contracted with

Edgewood to provide services and case management for all kinship families with cases open in the public agency.

### **THE SOUTHEAST PROGRAM**

The Southeast Program has been located on Third Street in the Bay View/Hunter's Point section of San Francisco since 1998. This office is a neighborhood-based child welfare office, offering the full range of public agency child welfare programs to residents who live in the Bay View/Hunter's Point, Visitacion Valley, and Potrero Hill neighborhoods. Roughly 300 children are served by this office. One of the programs unique to this office, however, is the kinship unit. Indeed it was determined that a high percentage of San Francisco's kinship placements were in the neighborhoods now served by the Southeast Program. Further, there had been a history of hostility between these neighborhoods, with a predominantly African American population, and the child welfare system, which had a disproportionate number of African American children in the foster care system relative to the city's overall black population. The creation of this neighborhood based office, was thus a strategic move on the part of the public agency, in order to improve community relations by becoming more accessible.

From what this author observed, the Southeast Program is well on its way to accomplishing its mission. When I arrived for an appointment with the Section Manager, Tracy Burris, in charge of the office, she kept me waiting while she spoke to a grandmother who had stopped by the office without an appointment, but was feeling overwhelmed by her teenage grandson and needed to talk with someone about the situation. While not a front line child welfare worker or even a supervisor, Ms. Burris stepped in when direct service staff was not avail-

able, in order to offer some support. In this spirit of an "open door" policy, this site is open extended hours (7:00 am-7:00 pm Monday through Friday, 9:00-5:00 on Saturdays), acts as a drop-in center, with a food pantry in place and plans to add a clothes closet.

In addition to housing the full array of child welfare programs, the kinship unit was moved to the Southeast Program as well. All kinship cases residing in the Southeast neighborhoods, together with all kinship cases open at Edgewood, are case managed from this unit. Kinship cases who elect not to participate in Edgewood programs, and who do not live in the southeast neighborhoods are served by Long Term Placement units at the agency's main office in downtown San Francisco. The kinship unit has also outstationed two child welfare workers at Edgewood itself. These workers have become part of the Edgewood culture, although they are technically not part of the Edgewood staff, but continue to be supervised by public agency personnel, based on Third Street.

### **THE WORK OF THE KINSHIP UNIT**

Why do kinship families require different services than non-kinship families in the foster care system? The answer is fairly simple. The philosophy around serving kinship families is akin (pun intended) to that of Family Preservation: a kinship placement, after all, is family, and extra effort is made to maintain the stability of such placements. The Supervisor of the Kinship Unit, Sari Wade, has likened working with kinship families to working with families at the front end of the system because the parents are still involved, even if formal Family Reunification efforts have ceased. Indeed continued parental involvement is one of the issues that sets kinship families apart. Relatives raising foster chil-

dren must negotiate their own relationships with the child's birth parents. These relationships are often fraught with a variety of tensions around appropriate parenting, the need for the relative to become the primary caretaker, and the need for boundaries to be in place between all involved.

Child welfare workers with kinship caseloads realize that working with such families is complex but also rewarding. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), in recognizing the nature of such cases, recommends a caseload of 25 kinship cases. In reality, child welfare workers' caseloads hover around 50 (in both San Francisco and Alameda Counties).

In terms of services, the Southeast Program has substance abuse counselors, public health nurses, and mental health personnel all on site. Child welfare workers are encouraged to conduct home visits. A variety of support groups are also hosted on site: Sister Sister, a public health/child welfare joint effort to offer prenatal care; and a domestic violence group also meets. Quarterly meetings are held for relative caregivers, featuring guest speakers on topics of their choice. Transportation, child care, and a meal are provided at these gatherings. And each year, a formal evening event is also held to honor relative caregivers.

Case management for kinship families is shared between the public agency and Edgewood, and this partnership has been the source of some confusion. Families can be confused as to who their worker is, and workers themselves can duplicate roles and responsibilities. But this coordination challenge is all about there being too much service and not enough, which can be problematic, but may be the preferred problem to have when a family needs a lot of support. Issues of particular importance to child

welfare workers with kinship caseloads include learning to climb around family trees without being intrusive and becoming confused—genograms help!

The biggest difference in terms of services offered to kinship families versus non-kinship families concerns family meetings or family conferences. This intervention involves coordinating a meeting between the foster child's family, extended family, neighbors, teachers, and other professionals involved with the family, in order to create a safety plan for the child that is family-centered and strengths-based. These meetings have proven very effective in maintaining the stability of kinship placements. Of course, Alameda County's Department of Children and Family Services is also implementing family conferencing, though not specifically targeted toward kinship families.

### THE EUREKA MOMENT

The greatest, and at the same time simplest, aspect of the kinship unit is that it is community-based. As a component of working with kinship families that are being dismissed from the dependency system, California is requiring that counties contract out with a community-based organization to provide services to these families. The assumption is that kinship families feel more comfortable accessing community based services than they do public agency services. So why not create public agency services that feel more like community-based services? This is exactly what the Southeast Program, which houses San Francisco's kinship unit, has done.

In Alameda County, per recommendations from the CWLA, the Department of Children and Family Services is considering a restructuring, so that the full array of child welfare services will be offered

throughout the county on a regional basis. This reorganization would make the Department look very much like San Francisco's Southeast Program. The next step will be to focus discussion around the formation of a unit (or two) that is dedicated to serving kinship families. Much like the Neighborhood Unit attracts child welfare workers with a more community-oriented focus, so too, should the kinship unit recruit workers with a commitment to preserving families and understanding the complex dynamics at work holding such families, however precariously, together.

Alameda County has already dedicated much staff time to implementing KinGAP, and is now concentrating on designing a Request for Proposals for a Kinship Support Services Program, to be located in a community based organization. The Department of Children and Family Services now needs to focus attention on the needs of the kinship families that will remain in the foster care system.