

# **A CASE STUDY OF MONTEREY AND SANTA CRUZ COUNTIES' CHILD WELFARE PLACEMENT PROGRAMS**

**Nick Honey\***  
**Executive Summary**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I examined the provision of placement services in counties that are of a similar size to Sonoma County in an attempt to discover more effective and efficient programs for working with children who are dependents of the court. I identified Monterey and Santa Cruz as the most appropriate comparative counties for my case study.

## **PROGRAM IDEAS**

Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties are providing some services (organized here around three different themes), which in my view could enhance the programs provided in Sonoma County.

- **Court related issues.**

The interactions with the Court are focused on children and families rather than the court process itself. In particular, Six Month Court Reviews are replaced by Administrative Reviews at which a panel of community representatives periodically discusses a child's case. This was an effective way of addressing the needs of each child in a non-adversarial forum. In addition, court procedures regarding such issues as the placement of a child in a higher level of care were simplified to facilitate social workers' management of cases.

- **Organizational Structures.**

I observed different ways of structuring programs including combining Family Maintenance and Family Reunification caseloads, organizing Social Workers in Ongoing Services units with combined Family Reunification and Permanency

Planning cases, and in Santa Cruz County the construction of a Teen Unit to target services for teen foster care youth aged fourteen and over.

- **Use of placement resources.**

In both counties, a Placement Resource Coordinator has the responsibility for referring all children to appropriate placements, and acts as a liaison with foster family agencies, group homes and treatment programs to facilitate the placement process.

Kinship support centers in Monterey County provide much needed support services to family members who are caring for children related to them.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SONOMA COUNTY**

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These ideas should be incorporated into an action plan with the following steps

- 1) Work with the existing community network to identify and apply for specific sources of foundation funding so that kinship support services can be expanded.
- 2) In collaboration with the other parties involved in the Court process, work to reduce the amount of Court intervention, and develop a plan to implement administrative reviews.
- 3) Reevaluate the current program structure to include more flexibility for vertical case management, and a Placement Coordinator position.

## **A CASE STUDY OF MONTEREY AND SANTA CRUZ COUNTIES' CHILD WELFARE PLACEMENT PROGRAMS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In my position as a Section Manager of the Placement Section at the Family, Youth and Children's Division in Sonoma County, I am responsible for managing six units of social workers. These units include a Court Services Investigation unit, two Family Reunification units, two Permanency Planning units, and an Independent Living Skills / Support Services unit. All the social workers in this section work with children who have been made Court dependents as a result of child abuse or neglect, and are in placement.

As a relatively new manager, I have recently been looking at different ways to improve the services provided to children and their families in Sonoma County and at the same time relieve some of the stress on social workers who are often overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs. To this point some changes have been made by restructuring some of the job responsibilities of social workers and reassigning specific tasks to other workers or clerical staff within the division.

When the opportunity came for me to participate in the BASS C program and complete a case study, I realized that this would give me the chance to review the provision of child welfare services in other counties. I wanted to learn more about how placement social worker's jobs are structured and evaluate ideas that could be applied in Sonoma County.

In my experience in this arena, it has become clear to me that some of the larger counties are able to provide innovative and creative programs in part because they have the flexibility afforded to them by economies of scale and bigger budgets. For example, it is easier to assign a social worker to a specialized non-caseload carrying assignment and have them perform some specific specialized services when that social worker's cases can be spread between a large number of remaining case-carrying social workers. The repercussions are different when the workforce is smaller. Since Sonoma County is a medium-sized county, it seemed to me that it would be much more useful to study Bay Area counties which are a similar size and therefore subject to the same constraints and limitations.

My goals were to identify different ways of providing services more effectively or more efficiently and to look at interesting and creative positions, programs, or services which could be replicated in Sonoma County. Subsequently, I want to work on incorporating such ideas and changes that I found were beneficial to clients and workers into the way services are provided in Sonoma County without significantly affecting caseloads. With this in mind, I made arrangements to spend time in Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties to take a closer look at the way their services were organized.

It is not my intention in this Case Study to give an exhaustive description of the services provided in each county. Instead, after a brief overview, this case study will describe several areas of service that I thought were interesting and could potentially be incorporated into service provision in Sonoma County.

## **COMPARATIVE INFORMATION**

### **Sonoma County**

Population: (2000 Census) 458,614  
Number of Court Dependents: (2/28/02) 584  
Number of New Petitions filed in 2001: 231  
Caseload Sizes: -  
Family Reunification: 15 - 20  
Permanency Planning: 25 - 30

### **Monterey County**

Population: (2000 Census) 401,762  
Number of Court Dependents: (1/31/02) 324  
Number of New Petitions filed in 2001: 153  
Caseload Sizes: -  
Family Reunification: 16 - 23  
Permanency Planning: 30 - 39

### **Santa Cruz County**

Population: (2000 Census) 255,602  
Number of Court Dependents: (4/25/02) 496  
Number of New Petitions filed in 2001: 185  
Caseload Sizes: -  
Ongoing combined Family Reunification/  
Permanency Planning/Family  
Maintenance: 20 - 25  
Permanency Planning: 30 - 35

## **SIMILARITIES**

After spending time in both counties, it became clear that there are a number of similarities between them and Sonoma County in terms of service provision.

First, the universal requirements for services set out in the Division 31 regulations, conformance with which is required by the State, mean that the overall picture of the provision of services looks very much the same. Social worker's roles are identified around similar functions, and the requirements of the Dependency Court cover the same areas. Also, the two managers who helped to facilitate this case study were each responsible for a similar range of programs with a similar span of control. They experience the same inherent pressures of the work and had similar dilemmas in terms of budgets and caseloads although both reported that the volume of work had decreased recently. The statistics noted on this page indicate that Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties have fewer dependents, and filed fewer petitions in 2001. This is particularly noticeable when comparing Sonoma to Monterey County, which proportionately has significantly fewer dependents. The reasons for this are unclear. It is important to note too that since caseloads in all three counties are a similar size, the large volume of work that Social Workers in Sonoma County are experiencing must be related to other factors.

All three counties have similar population characteristics, which include a large Hispanic community because of the large numbers of migrant workers who travel to these counties to work in the agricultural industry.

## **HIGHLIGHTED DIFFERENCES**

### **1) Court related issues**

It became clear to me as I spent time in the Dependency Courts in Salinas, and Santa Cruz, that the formal and informal interactions with the Court can drive an enormous workload for child welfare social workers as well as other professionals that interact with the Court. The Court process develops a life of its own as more and more issues are contested and increasing numbers of trials are set. Each person involved is motivated by acting in what they think are the best interests of the child and/or the family, but the result can often mean that the client's focus is on pursuing every issue through the Court instead of working on the changes that they need to make, or taking responsibility for their own actions. Conversely, structuring processes in a way that reduces the interactions of the Court keeps participants' focus away from that inherently adversarial arena and maintains the direct focus of all those involved on the needs of children and their families.

### **Administrative Reviews**

One major area where this is played out is the structured process of Administrative Reviews, which takes place in both Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. Section 366.3(d) of the California Welfare and Institutions Code provides that the status of a child who is living in an out-of-home placement must be reviewed at least every six months. The court must conduct these reviews at least once every twelve months and "an appropriate local agency" can conduct the interim six-month reviews. In both counties a child welfare supervisor chaired these reviews. The review panel can vary but in Monterey County was comprised of a foster

parent representative, an education representative, a public health nurse, a mental health representative, and a community representative. The Court report is prepared in draft by the assigned social worker and distributed to the panel members prior to the review. When the review takes place the social worker presents the case and the child, parent, and the Court Appointed Special Advocate, are invited. An informal discussion takes place about the child's case plan, the services being provided, the child's placement and any other issues that need to be addressed. The results of the Administrative Review are then incorporated into the Six Month Review Court Report, and along with the formal findings are filed at the Court and reviewed by the Judge. Since the setting is more informal, clients are not only more likely to attend, but they are also more likely to feel comfortable discussing their thoughts and opinions in this kind of environment. The collaborative discussion, which takes place at these reviews, is focused on the needs of particular children and their families rather than the legal points of order.

### **Court Procedures**

In addition to the Administrative Reviews, there are other areas where the interactions with the Court can be reduced without diminishing the service to the clients. Examples include rewording the findings and orders which the Court makes at a dispositional hearing to enable the social worker to subsequently place a child in a higher level of care, without filing a petition, a court report, and attending a series of hearings. A second example is eliminating the need for a dismissal hearing in cases where the child's adoption has been finalized, by submitting a petition, which is off calendar.

Overall, in both counties, there was a sense that the judges and all parties involved in the Court process were using their discretion to reduce the amount of time spent in Court and limit the number of issues that needed to be litigated. In Monterey County, the "Beyond the Bench Brown Bags" improves communication between members of the court team. This is a monthly lunch meeting where the Judge, child welfare workers, and providers discuss issues related to court activities as well as collaboration with all the community providers.

There was not a significant difference in terms of the amount of mediation, or family group conferencing used between these two counties, and in fact, Sonoma County uses these processes at least as much as the others. However, I think that increased use of both of these areas would help to decrease the amount of time spent in court.

## **2) Organizational Structures**

### **Structure of Placement programs**

I looked at the way the Family Reunification and Permanency Planning functions are organized to determine what benefits could be derived from combining them. In Sonoma County, currently, each worker performs a distinct function such as Family Reunification with a separately identified group of clients.

In Monterey County the programs are structured in almost the same way as Sonoma County with separate Permanency Planning, Family Reunification and Court Services units, except that in the Family Reunification unit, social workers are also assigned court-ordered Family Maintenance cases. Since in Sonoma County there is only one worker assigned to this type of Family Maintenance caseload, the benefit gained from spreading these cases would be minimal.

In Santa Cruz County there is no distinction between the Family Reunification and Permanency Planning units, but instead children's cases are assigned to social workers in the Ongoing Services units. Within these units social workers work with children and families towards family reunification, and keep the same children as clients if reunification services are terminated and the permanent plan is long-term foster care. Children are able to keep the same social worker for a longer period of time, so that they and their family can benefit from the continuity of care and the stronger relationship with the social worker that this arrangement provides.

### **Teen Unit**

All clients at the age of 14 in Santa Cruz County are then assigned to a social worker in the Teen unit. This unit is composed of two child welfare social workers, two Independent Living Skills Specialists, three mental health workers, and one supervisor each from Child Welfare and Children's Mental Health. The team collaborates together to provide targeted and specialized services to teen foster care youth. They work as a unit to support the adolescent participant toward specific goals that are identified based on an assessment of the teen's history, current situation, and level of functioning. The early referral of children to this unit enables the team to begin to address the academic, vocational, emotional, and life skills needs of the participants at an early stage instead of waiting until it is too late to work on these areas in any meaningful way.

### **3) Use of Placement Resources**

Sonoma County Child Welfare Services, like every County in California, is struggling with issues arising from the lack of placements available for dependent children. I identified in Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties some ideas about how to ameliorate that problem.

#### **Placement Resource Coordinator**

In both Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties, an individual social worker is specifically assigned to the task of locating placements for children in the placement programs. After receiving a referral from the social worker assigned to the specific case, it is then the coordinator's task to identify an appropriate placement and negotiate with the placement providers. Although there are a large number of group homes, foster family agencies, and treatment programs, it is common for there to be few vacancies for emotionally disturbed children who are dependents of the Court. In this type of competitive environment there is much to be gained from having one individual calling these programs. Not only do they develop a deeper knowledge of the programs, the types of children they are successful with,

and can more quickly identify current vacancies, but they also develop a relationship with different programs, which may result in agencies being more willing to accept that particular counties' kids for placement. When each program receives numerous referrals from child welfare social workers from different counties that they don't know they are much more likely to accept a referral from a specialist who they have worked with before, and whose judgment and expertise can be trusted. Indeed one supervisor from Monterey County told me that the Unity House program in San Jose had recently accepted a dependent from Monterey County for placement when apparently no vacancy existed, because of the relationship that they had developed with the Placement Resource Coordinator.

Having one person performing this task was reportedly identified by social workers in placement units in both Monterey and Santa Cruz as the most significant area of workload relief for them. From my perspective, the benefits are twofold. First there is a huge amount of time saved because the time consuming work around referrals such as making phone calls and providing documentation, is not duplicated. Secondly the children benefit because they are more likely to be placed in the most appropriate placement available because of the expertise of the placement resource specialist.

### **Kinship Support Services Program (KSSP)**

In 1999, Monterey County in collaboration with a number of other community agencies obtained funding from the state to provide services to assist relative caregivers, which would protect and promote the safety, permanency and well being of children in kinship families. At that time the county qualified for KSSP funding because approximately 45% of dependent children were placed with relatives.

After obtaining KSSP funding from the state, Monterey County worked with the local Family Service Agency to provide a program of comprehensive services for relative caregivers called "Family Ties". Services are provided out of two kinship centers located in Seaside and Salinas. The site that I visited in Salinas consisted of indoor and outdoor play areas, two meeting rooms, office space for three social workers, two of which are relative caregivers themselves, a food bank, clothes closet and an office for the director. Services provided include support groups for caregivers, counseling for individuals and families, self-esteem building groups for children, recreational events, case management services, legal assistance, information and referral, advocacy and parent education.

I observed a real sense of community at the center, which if I were a relative caregiver would feel very supportive. Indeed the flier for the "Roots" training for caregivers at the local Community College has "You are not ... alone" written in large print across the top. As well as the less concrete benefits to be gained from attending groups or parent education classes, there were the very real benefits of the clothing exchange, the food bank, and assistance in obtaining free furniture. Relatives were also given advice about how to apply for legal guardianship of their relative children. The program director informed me that most cases that they work with (approximately 75%) are informal and are not referred to them through Child Welfare Services.

From my perspective as a Section Manager, there are tremendous benefits to be gained from this program. First, these services probably prevent a large number of children from becoming part of the Child Welfare system because significant supports are available to relative caregivers before they get to the point that they can no longer cope. Second, it is more likely that relative caregivers will look after children in their family if they know that comprehensive services are available to them, and therefore the overall pool of potential placement resources for children is enlarged. Third, placements of dependent children with relatives are much less likely to break down because of the support services this program provides.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SONOMA COUNTY**

I embarked on this project not really having any idea about what I would find, and not knowing if what I did find could be usefully applied to services in the Placement Section at the Family, Youth and Children's Division. I spent a lot of time discussing programs and service provision with staff from Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties, and came away with a clear sense of where changes could be made.

In my opinion the work in the Division needs to continue to focus on the needs of children and their families, in the face of the competing demands and pressures placed on social workers by the court, the lack of resources, and increasing state and federal requirements. I recommend that the management team at the Family, Youth and Children's Division in Sonoma County evaluates and implements some of the ideas noted throughout this case study. Specifically the plan should be as follows:

- Work with the existing community network to identify and apply for specific sources of funding so that kinship support services can be expanded, with the ultimate goal of duplicating the KSSP services provided in Monterey County.
- In collaboration with the other parties involved in the Court process, work to reduce the amount of Court intervention, and develop a plan to implement administrative reviews.
- Reevaluate the current program structure to include more flexibility for vertical case management, and identify a position that can be reallocated to a Placement Coordinator role.

With these changes in place it is my view that services will be provided more efficiently and effectively to dependent children and families in Sonoma County.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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