

CALIFORNIA'S CHILD WELFARE REDESIGN AND A CHILD'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE PLACEMENT SYSTEM IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Paula Robertson*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Child Welfare Redesign is an exceedingly ambitious and complex pattern for improvement and change of the California State Children and Family Services. The results that the Redesign aims for are:

- Safety for children within their families whenever possible
- Increased family well-being
- Permanence and stability for all children

These results are to be realized through a number of methods, among them:

- Differentiated response to referrals
- Strength-based practice
- Community involvement in planning
- Building family capacity
- Developing and supporting alternative families for children
- Primacy of developing permanency for children
- Supporting excellence in the workforce

BACKGROUND

Contra Costa County is among the first cohort to embark on the Redesign. Because the Redesign is such a complex undertaking, it became clear that I would need to focus on one area of proposed change in order to gather meaningful information. Because finding and supporting alternative families for children who will not be able to remain in the care of their biological families is a crucial and difficult

task, I decided to focus on placement in Contra Costa County and the lessons Marin County could learn from the practice there.

FINDINGS

Contra Costa County has a large variety of placements available to its youth, including: emergency receiving shelters, regular foster homes, specialized foster homes and group homes run by the county in partnership with placing agencies. The group homes include high level homes for children with severe behavioral difficulties as well as a locked facility. The appropriate placement is decided on at Placement Resource Team meetings attended by staff specializing in various aspects of placement.

There is also a great amount of specialization among staff. For instance, social workers who find placements for children have expertise in the various placements available and are thus better able to make appropriate matches. Not only does specialization assist worker expertise by limiting the number of tasks they must take on, it frees them to focus on building a relationship with the child and implementing the case plan. The downside of specialization is that a family may have to work with many more social workers during the time they are involved with the child welfare system.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
MARIN COUNTY**

Because of the difference in size, it would be impossible for Marin to have the level of specialized staffing that Contra Costa County has. However, Marin should consider some new ways of breaking down caseloads. Low maintenance cases, such as guardianships, could be paired with a specialized job, such as relative assessments or high need group home placements, could be paired with voluntary caseloads. Another way to approach this is to divide a position giving the social worker half of a caseload and a specialized job. Given the low

numbers of permanent plan cases, Marin might consider mixing them throughout the caseloads while establishing a teen caseload.

Marin also needs to better coordinate placement between all of those who are active in moving a child through placement. A Placement Review meeting is vital to coordinate services and keep all those involved focussed on the goal of permanency for the child. Marin should begin having these meetings again. Social work staff should be involved in the design of the meeting. Their involvement would lend expertise and increase investment in the process.

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INTRODUCTION

The Child Welfare System in California has not gone through a major overhaul in over 20 years. With close to 90,000 children in out of home care in the state, many consider the system 'broken'. In 2000, Governor Davis, signed legislation establishing the California Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group to take a deep look at the Child Welfare System and propose changes to enhance effectiveness and better serve families. The group consisted of people representing all aspects of the public and private child welfare community. Frontline caseworkers, former foster youth, kinship caregivers, juvenile court judges, union representatives, CASAs, service providers, researchers, and philanthropists came together for three years looking at where the system works for children and families and where it doesn't. They formulated goals for children and families in the state.

Simply put, the results that the Redesign aims for are:

- Safety for children within their families whenever possible
- Increased family well-being
- Permanence and stability for all children

The Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was first mandated in 1997. The three principles of the Adoptions and Safe Families act are virtually the same as the goals of the Redesign, safety, permanence and well-being. In 2000, the federal government adopted a set of rules resulting from the Adoptions and Safe Families Act and authorized the Department of Health and Human Services to

establish a new results oriented child and family services review process to assess how well the states were doing in meeting ASFA requirements. This assessment was the Child and Family Service Review (CSFR). No states have passed, or are expected to pass, the review. California was reviewed and failed on all but two measures in 2002. Because of this, the federal government is requiring the state of California to implement a Program Improvement Plan or PIP. AB 636, the California Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability System provides requirements and timelines for counties in the process of self evaluation and planning for improvement, as well as providing assessment. This assessment is the California Child and Family Service Reviews or C-CSFR.

The main components of AB 636 are the county self-assessment, targeted peer quality case reviews and the county system improvement plan. AB 636 outlines the results that must be made to the Child Welfare System. The Redesign identifies program improvements that will help counties achieve those results. The following is a summary of the recommended strategies for each desired result.

SAFETY FOR CHILDREN WITHIN THEIR FAMILIES WHENEVER POSSIBLE

First and foremost, children must be kept safe. In order to prevent removing children from their families, child protection agencies will need to provide a differential response. Instead of waiting until families meet a standard of 'imminent risk', assistance is to be offered to families whenever they come to

the attention of child protection agencies. Redesign theorizes that if intervention occurs with the first referral, problems will not be as likely to escalate to the point where removal from the family is necessary for the safety of the child. Child protection agencies will work closely with community partners to meet the goal of differential response with the hope that families will respond less defensively to non-governmental agencies, allowing fuller utilization of services.

INCREASED FAMILY WELL-BEING

Redesign recognizes that virtually all families want to provide the most positive environment possible for their children. Increased well-being brings increased capacity to care appropriately for children. Working in close collaboration with community partners, child protection agencies will be able to obtain the most comprehensive, family centered and accessible services possible for the families they work with. Whenever possible, the family should be assisted to develop a Safety Plan to keep the children safe within their home. When removal from the family home cannot be avoided, foster parents or relatives should be carefully screened, educated and supported to be sure that they will be able to assist in strengthening the family. Case planning must be inclusive and comprehensive, utilizing non-adversarial approaches such as mediation.

PERMANENCE FOR ALL CHILDREN

While moving through the life of the case, the social worker must be able to utilize concurrent planning fully. The first goal is always return to family, but there must be a backup plan to form a new family for a child if their family of origin is unable to keep them safe. If a child is not able to

safely remain in their family of origin, the next most favored placement is with relative caregivers. Child protection agencies must recognize the unique characteristics of kinship care. Guardianship with kin must be recognized as a permanent plan and may be preferable to adoption outside of the family. This is the only instance in which adoption is not preferred over guardianship as a permanent plan. Restoration to the child's family of origin must continue to be considered if adoption or guardianship cannot be established for a child. A family may take years to adequately deal with their difficulties and a home that is inappropriate for a young child may be acceptable for a teen. Focused recruitment may be able to find a home for an older child who would have been considered "unadoptable" in the past. For children that remain in long-term foster care, active efforts must be made to identify and reach out to important supportive people in their lives. These people will provide a safety net for the youth when they have emancipated from the system. Also, youth moving toward emancipation from the system must be actively involved along with CASA, foster parents and other supportive people in planning for their transition to independent living. Youth growing up in foster care must be systematically prepared for adult life and a community network of services must be developed to assist them in their transition to adulthood.

WORKFORCE GOALS

In addition to these child and family oriented goals, the Redesign also intends to build capacity in the workforce by building community partnerships, providing flexible funding, and protecting the case-worker's time. Training is to be intensified and aimed at building a work style of joining with the client. Along with this, it is anticipated that man-

agement will receive training to assist in mentoring staff through these changes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACEMENT

Clearly, Redesign will be an intensive, long-term process. Current budgetary concerns will be something of a barrier. I also believe that a major barrier to the goals of Redesign will be the difficulty of recruiting and retaining foster parents and relative caregivers with the maturity, flexibility and commitment necessary to simultaneously form an attachment to a child, assist their parents in reunification and be ready to provide permanency for the child if reunification fails. The quality of placement is key to well-being of the child. The most highly trained social workers, knowledgeable and creative courts, and supportive service providers cannot make up for a lack of stable and supportive placement in a child's life. For this reason CSFR will be monitoring the number of placements a child has during the life of their case, as well as the time it takes to achieve permanency.

Clearly, placement is crucial to success in achieving goals for children who have been removed from their families. I chose to focus on a child's journey through placement in Contra Costa County to see if I could identify ways that Marin County could improve service to the children we have in out-of-home care.

PLACEMENT IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

In some communities in Contra Costa County, collaboration begins when it appears that a child is at imminent risk for placement. Contra Costa uses Team Decision Making (TDM) to assist in deciding if it is necessary for a child to be taken out of the home. This team can consist of family, friends,

community partners such as; clergy, school personnel and therapists, and social services. The team is brought together very quickly, risk is explained and an attempt is made to craft a plan for safety for the child in the home and services to address the problems they family is experiencing. This plan is meant to provide the child with resources occurring naturally in the community. If it is not possible to protect the child without removal from the home, the placement begins.

PLACEMENT OPTIONS

The first stop for a child removed in Contra Costa County is likely to be the Receiving Center. This is not a placement, it is a center where a child can get immediate assessment, food, clothing and medical care while the social worker locates a placement for them. Receiving Centers cannot hold a child for longer than 23 hours. Staff at the center are able to recommend the next stop for the child. Like all counties throughout the state, Contra Costa is utilizing relatives whenever possible. Given the current regulations surrounding placement with relatives there may be an interim stay while the relative is approved as a caretaker, so the next stop is usually an emergency foster home. Children can remain in these homes for up to 30 days.

The social worker then schedules a meeting regarding the child with the Placement Resource Team. This team includes managers, supervisors and line staff from placement, adoptions, mental health and the ongoing units as well as the case-carrying worker who presents the information regarding the child. Those present at the meeting discuss the child's needs and decide the best direction to take in placement for the child. The case is co-assigned to the placement unit so that the placement worker can find a home for the child. There are four full-

time social workers that find placements for children.

There are a number of alternatives for placement in Contra Costa County. Children can be placed with a relative or in a basic foster home. If they have greater needs, they can be placed with a foster home through a Foster Family Association (FFA) or in one of the county's 15 therapeutic foster homes.

These therapeutic foster homes are given a tremendous amount of support from Social Services. They receive a higher rate of reimbursement for caring for the children than the basic homes. When a child is placed in one of these homes, they are transferred to the caseload of a worker who only works with these particular homes. The worker is then better able to visit all of the children within the home and understand the dynamics of the home. The foster parents meet weekly with the social worker and are given regular specialized training. The foster families are very pleased with this system. Contra Costa County is very large, and I believe this system feels much more accessible for the foster parent than the larger organization would be.

Contra Costa County also has contracts with group homes providing a more highly structured level of care for those children who need it. Rose Manning is a level fourteen home where children can be placed when they are finished with a hospitalization in a mental health facility. This level fourteen home is run by Families First. Children can be placed there up to ninety days while their next placement is found. There is also a locked facility for children who are most in need of mental health treatment that is run in collaboration with Seneca.

The goal of placement across the state is permanence for the child. The first choice is always to

return a child to its family of origin. If this is not possible, the child will need to be placed in a home that can provide a long-term home. Contra Costa County has homes available that are identified as Concurrent Planning homes. These homes work to assist in reunifying the child with its family while also being available to adopt the child if reunification is unsuccessful. If an adoptive family cannot be found for a child, the next choice is guardianship. The last choice for a child is an alternative planned placement (formerly known as long-term foster care.) Children in these homes emancipate to live on their own when they turn eighteen. A child can be in a plan of alternative planned placement in a foster home, relative home or in group home care. Contra Costa has many group homes within its borders.

When a child is on the track of emancipating from foster care, they can live in a transitional home that helps prepare them to live on their own. All children in foster care are also eligible to receive services from Independent Living Skills Program from the age of 16–21.

Preparing for emancipation

The Independent Living Skills Program in Contra Costa County is housed on the upper story of a large building. It consists of classrooms, a kitchen, workspace for staff (including social workers whose caseloads are solely devoted to emancipating teens) and even showers. The program has many workshops and activities for the youth focussing on their growing needs. They are given instruction on all aspects of living on their own such as how to access higher education, get work, find housing, and manage finances. They even offer a ropes course. The social workers are expected to shift their workday so that they can participate in the workshops and

meetings the youth attend. Transportation is provided by bus and van for youth from around the county to the center. Youth in Contra Costa also have access to a transitional living home when they are emancipated to move gradually into adult life.

FOSTER CARE IN MARIN COUNTY

While in many ways a child's journey through placement in Marin is similar to that of children in Contra Costa County, in Marin, that child is likely to meet fewer people. The decision to remove a child in Marin County is made by the social worker in conjunction with the supervisor. The worker will attempt to make a plan of safety for the child. If the only way for the child to be safe is to be out of the home, the child will be removed. Once a voluntary plan is signed, or the court has detained the child, the case is transferred to the ongoing unit. This second social worker will be likely to work with the child and family for the next year or two.

The first stop for a child in Marin is often one of two shelters. Marin contracts with Sunny Hills / Children's Garden for a six bed facility for children twelve and under and with Huckleberry Youth for three of their six beds for children thirteen and up. Both of these homes can assist in assessment of children while the social worker looks for a more long-term solution for placement. While in the shelter, Marin has mental health and nursing staff that can visit and refer the child to needed services. Marin also uses a variety of foster homes to provide immediate care for children when the shelters are full. Babies are not placed in the shelter, but with foster homes specifically set up for babies.

The case carrying social worker is responsible for finding the next placement for the child. If a relative home is available, the worker does the relative

assessment. If not, the licensing unit assists the social worker in identifying an appropriate foster home.

Marin County has four levels of foster homes that give varying levels of care for varying levels of compensation. They range from basic foster homes that provide a home for children that present low levels of need to homes for very difficult children and fragile infants. About seventy five families are licensed for care in Marin. Not all of them are currently active. Marin also has fost-adopt (concurrent planning) homes that can provide a home while attempts are made to reunify the family but are willing to adopt should reunification fail. Group homes in the county are provided by three agencies but very few of Marin's foster children are in group home care. Full Circle has recently opened a transitional house to help youth get ready to emancipate.

Preparing for Emancipation

As throughout the state, youth in Marin can receive services from the Independent Living Skills Program. The facility in Marin is quite small with a computer for youth to use, and a comfortable sitting area for youth to meet with the two staff of the program. Their social workers are in the two offices that house all of Marin's social services staff. Youth are offered a class in assisting them to prepare for adult life through the local community college. They also get a tremendous amount of individual attention from the ILSP staff. Marin County sends over half of their emancipating youth to college and is very successful in getting scholarships for them. Marin does not have housing for emancipated youth. In spite of this, due to the low number of emancipating youth and the personalized services Marin rarely has youth who are homeless.

DIFFERENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The differences between the Marin and Contra Costa County foster care systems are largely differences of scale. While Contra Costa has around 3,000 children in out of home care, Marin has 122. The advantage to our small numbers is that it is relatively easy to focus on the children served and keep track of their progress. Marin County's record of times a child moves before permanency is very good. Due to concurrent planning and efforts of staff to reunify youth that have not achieved a long-term home well after reunification has ended, our permanent plan population has shrunk by more than a third. We have varying levels of placement available for children. Marin County does lack available placements for children whose need for mental health services are greatest.

There is very little specialization among social work staff in Marin. In Contra Costa County, there are individual workers who do court investigations, find placements for a child, supervise particular foster homes and specialize only in teens. Contra Costa has support staff to re-evaluate children's eligibility, do transportation, visitation and some home visits. The advantage to Marin's system is that a family has a limited amount of staff to get to know and the staff has an opportunity to take control of all aspects of the case. The family and social worker get to know each other well. The downside of this is that each worker, particularly those with ongoing cases, has too many individual tasks to take on. Some of these tasks, such as relative assessments, would surely benefit from specialization. It would be impossible for Marin to have the level of specialization that Contra Costa has, there are too few workers.

In order to continue to offer Marin's families the level of continuity that having one social worker can bring while allowing some specialization to exist, Marin County should consider some new ways of breaking down caseloads. Pairing low maintenance cases such as guardianships with a specialized job such as relative assessments or pairing high need group home placements with voluntary caseloads. Another way to approach this is to divide a position giving the social worker half of a caseload and a specialized job. Given the low numbers of permanent plan cases, Marin might consider mixing them throughout the caseloads while establishing a teen caseload. Social Work staff should be involved in deciding what changes would work best. Because of this project, I have initiated a work group to look at these issues in Marin. This active group is discussing just such changes.

Marin also needs to better coordinate placement between all of those who are active in moving a child through placement. At one time, Marin had an active Placement Review Meeting. It did not prove useful enough to staff and dissolved. This meeting needs to be reinvented and invigorated.

BACK TO REDESIGN

In closing, I would like to point out that change is daunting. The coming Redesign can seem threatening and agencies may have difficulty deciding where to start. The state of the California budget threatens the plans for Redesign. Social work staff may view the statement that the state child welfare system is broken as demeaning of the good hard work they have been doing. It is useful to realize that many of the changes that Redesign recommends are already in force. Through the BAASC experience, I have been able to speak with social services professionals from many counties. Many of

the Bay Area Counties are using very innovative practices. Contra Costa County has promising practices such as Team Decision Making. Marin utilizes flexible funding and family conferencing for many of its high-risk families. Alameda County has Another Road to Safety to allow for a differentiated response. The Redesign is here, Marin's task is to innovate for better outcomes for families while supporting staff in their work.

Heather Ravani, Program Manager II Marin County Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services has been an invaluable support in helping me decide on a focus, sift through the information, and get through it all intact. I am fortunate to be part of such a supportive team.

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