

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY'S CHILD WELFARE REDESIGN EFFORT AND ALAMEDA COUNTY'S PARTICIPATION IN CALIFORNIA PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH: THE IMPACT ON OLDER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Child welfare is undergoing dramatic changes in how social services agencies work with children and families. Contra Costa County is one of 11 Cohort One counties, also known as early implementers, of the states' Redesign efforts. The emphasis of the Redesign is to improve outcomes for children and families. The Redesign states that in order to improve outcomes for children that the voice of the child must be heard and that the community needs to be engaged.

Contra Costa County has been working on the Redesign since 2002 with implementation scheduled to roll out in June 2004. Contra Costa County has developed tools and has engaged staff in the Redesign efforts, in particular in increasing positive outcomes for youth.

Alameda County has not begun its Redesign implementation. However, it is fully engaged in an initiative called California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP). CPYP focuses on youth between the ages of 11–18 who have been in foster care for a minimum of two years and are not in a permanent home. The goal is that no youth leave foster care without either an adoptive placement, a legal guardianship relationship, or a permanent, lifelong connection to a committed and caring adult.

FINDINGS

Outcomes for children and youth that are raised in the foster care system are dismal. According to state data, 25% of children emancipating from foster care are homeless, 30% are on welfare, 33% have been arrested, 45% are unemployed, 50% do not complete high school, and 75% work below grade level. Both Contra Costa County's Redesign efforts and

CPYP intend to achieve better outcomes.

Contra Costa County has:

- established a workgroup that is looking at youth emancipation issues
- developed the Placement Review Team, which screens children into higher levels of care
- recreated its adoption tool to include permanence
- included the voice of youth in permanence discussions and decisions

Alameda County through CPYP is improving outcomes for youth by ensuring the following:

- Youth are active participants in placement decisions that impact their lives.
- Youth are the key to searching for prior connections and relationships when looking for a permanent, lifelong connection.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that no child leave foster care without a committed, caring, permanent relationship with an adult, the following recommendations are made:

- Training will be provided to staff, sharing their perspective as former foster youth on permanence and on how to speak with youth about permanence
- Implement the new Permanent Assessment/Adoption Assessment, which includes the voice

of the youth and has a focus on permanence rather than adoption, will be implemented

- Staff will participate in supervisor-led training on how to use the new assessment tool
- Funding will be pursued to “case-mine” files
- Community members will be engaged in recruitment strategies via a public relations campaign.

All children have a right to grow up in a safe, stable and nurturing environment. Contra Costa County’s Redesign efforts and Alameda County’s participation in CPYP share in this vision.

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INTRODUCTION

This case study looks at Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Redesign efforts—with the focus on youth, and Alameda County's efforts in working on the California Permanency for Youth Project, with focus on ensuring that no youth exit the child welfare system without a permanent, committed, caring, lifelong connection with an adult.

BACKGROUND

Child Welfare Redesign is an effort that the State of California is phasing in across the state. The purpose and goal of the Child Welfare Redesign is to better protect children, strengthen families, and support youth in a system that focuses on outcomes, accountability and the inclusion of community and partner collaboration.

Implementation of the Redesign efforts has been arranged into three cohorts. Each cohort represents a number of counties assigned to a specific phase in the Redesign timeline.

Contra Costa County is one of the 11 Cohort One counties. The state began its Redesign efforts in the year 2000 by creating and establishing a diverse and varied group of 60 individuals that had a vested interest in the functioning of the Child Welfare System. Through a variety of stakeholder meetings, a plan was developed identifying six modules that counties would be asked to follow. The 11 Cohort One counties were provided technical assistance from the State as well as some fund-

ing incentives to assist in the development and implementation of Child Welfare Redesign. Contra Costa County is scheduled to implement its Redesign in June 2004.

Alameda County is in the third cohort with implementation expected to roll out in 2009. Because Alameda County has not yet begun to address the Redesign efforts and strategies for Redesign implementation, I wanted to focus on Redesign efforts in conjunction with an initiative where Alameda County is an active and full participant.

This case study will specifically focus on how Contra Costa County's Redesign efforts in planning for youth between the ages of 11–18 mesh with the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP).

Alameda County is one of four target counties that is working with CPYP, a Stuart Foundation funded project. In addition to the four county agencies, there are private agencies, including adoption agencies, FFA's, and group home providers. The premise of CPYP is to increase permanence outcomes for youth in foster care either through adoption, legal guardianship or locating a permanent, committed and caring adult for a youth who may be emancipating from the foster care system.

In comparing the Redesign efforts for older youth and CPYP, both share in the goal of providing safe and stable homes for children—thus increasing the likelihood of a successful adulthood. Though each effort has very specific language as outcomes, the overarching goal is for children and families to be

strengthened whether the child remains in the home of their birth parent, with a family member, or by helping to create a different version of a family. Both efforts also share the goal of ensuring that all children must have, and are entitled to have, the opportunity to grow up in a home that is safe, stable and nurturing. To this end, community engagement must occur and partnerships must be forged.

In looking at youth in foster care, the importance of data, and the need to look at data when analyzing how youth emancipate from the child welfare system, furthers the position that Contra Costa County and CPYP are pursuing. The following information emphasizes the need for increasing positive permanence outcomes for youth in California and specifically in Alameda County.

According to the PIP facts “At a Glance” (12/15/03) more than 700,000 children are in the child welfare system annually. Alameda County has approximately 4500 of those children. Of children who come into contact with the child welfare system, more than 50% are age 5 or older. In Alameda County there are currently close to 787 children between the ages of 0–5 and currently 1,948 children and youth between the ages of 11–18 who are placed in out-of-home care. These children and youth are not in an adoptive placement or a permanent home. This latter age group is the targeted youth for CPYP.

For those youth emancipating from foster care in the state, 75% work below grade level, 50% do not complete high school, 45% are unemployed, 33% are arrested, 30% are on welfare, and 25% are homeless. These are not the statistics for youth who on their way to having productive and successful lives who are receiving support from permanent, committed and caring adults in their lives.

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY’S EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE PERMANENCE

The component of Redesign that focuses on permanence is a Module titled Permanency and Transition. The outcome is achieved when, “Children experience greater stability and youth receive the supports they need to become successful adults.”

To achieve this outcome, Contra Costa County set up a workgroup that included managers, line staff and former foster youth that focused on permanence and youth. To increase the likelihood of successful outcomes per the Redesign, Contra Costa County included community partners. Involving people from faith systems, small business groups, and education into the Redesign efforts reminds the community that they too have a vested interest in these youth. There must be mutual buy-in and support in order for these youth to be successful in the community.

Contra Costa County also made adjustments to its permanence adoption tool that brings together the child welfare worker, supervisor and an adoptions worker to discuss the direction of the case plan for the child in terms of permanence. In addition, there is an expectation that the youth’s wishes and desires are known at the time of the assessment, as their voice is what is most important.

Contra Costa County also created the Placement Review Team (PRT). The PRT consists of placement staff that assist in determining which type of placement a child needs to meet their needs. The idea is that in order for a child to be placed into an FFA home or a group home an intensive screening in process will first occur. This truly benefits youth in their emancipation efforts because once a child

or youth is labeled a “group home child,” the likelihood of stepping down into a lower level of care becomes increasingly more difficult. This lends itself to children and youth having a more difficult time in locating an adoptive home, a legal guardianship relationship or a permanent lifelong connection.

CALIFORNIA PERMANENCE FOR YOUTH PROJECT (CYPC)

California Permanence for Youth Project also has strategies to improve the outcomes for youth.

One of the strategies of CPYP to increase permanence is to engage county agencies, private agencies and community members in the taskforce to work together to achieve higher levels of permanence for children and youth. By engaging all members of a community, successful outcomes have a greater chance to be realized.

A second strategy is to engage the youth in all decisions that pertain to them as well as their placement options and any potential permanent connections.

A third strategy is to create an atmosphere, in both the public and private sectors, in which openness for an attitudinal shift regarding permanence for older youth is encouraged and implemented.

Lastly CPYP, via the Stuart Foundation, provided each of the four counties with \$5,000 to develop a work plan for improving outcomes for permanence for youth.

ALAMEDA COUNTY'S EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE PERMANENCE

Alameda County, via its CPYP initiative, and with the goal of increasing permanence, will implement several strategies during the year 2004. The path that Alameda County has begun is to incorporate CPYP in a variety of ways.

First, child welfare staff believes that changing the name of the long-term care section, which currently has close to 2200 children in out-of-home placement, is a great first step on the path towards creating a different vision of youth permanency. Since the goal is to eliminate long-term care as an option for children, a contest was held for a section name change. The new name for the section is Permanent Youth Connections or (PYC). A \$50 gift certificate was given to the winner.

Second, a new tool was developed to include not only what was previously called the Adoption Assessment but to include permanence. The new tool is now called, Permanence Assessment/Adoption Assessment tool. The tool includes a place for the names of adults that the child or youth may know of and how to contact the identified individual. This could be a family member, a friend, or someone who was significant for the youth at some time in their life. Every youth undergoes this assessment on an annual basis.

Third, PYC Supervisors, along with Adoption Supervisors, participated in a joint training on the purpose and use of the new tool. It is imperative that there be a uniform effort between the two programs regarding the need for permanence regardless of the option chosen. The supervisors of both sections have been charged with the responsibility

to train each of their units. This training began successfully in April 2004.

A fourth strategy has been to establish a contract relationship with a private agency for a small “case-mining project”. In this trial, supervisors in PYC will identify 6 cases, or one per unit, where a youth has been in out-of-home care for at least two years, is age 11 or older and is not in a permanent home. This strategy is being funded by the \$5,000 grant received from CPYP and will cost \$3,000. This portion of the project will begin in June 2004. In addition to working on the mining for six youth, the contracted agency will maintain a time log so that future efforts will be able to be measured in terms of a cost analysis.

A fifth strategy is to have supervisory and line staff participate in a youth-driven and youth-focused training about permanence. The most critical voice is that of the youth, so training to ensure that youth are incorporated into the decision-making process regarding their permanence is key. Staff will be trained to explore options for child-specific recruitment, how to engage caregivers at the outset about permanence, and to identify all children over the age of 11 and in placement for two years on their caseload and begin to involve the youth in their search for permanence.

The last strategy is to have a public relations campaign. With the remaining grant money, \$1450.00, staff will develop a brochure for staff and caregivers and other staff members and a booklet that discusses permanence options and who to call for additional information. The PR campaign will include outreach to caregivers, agency staff and community groups. The vehicle will be to have forums and to participate in existing community meetings requesting time on the agenda to discuss permanence.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Incorporating the Redesign by having supervisors attend the PIP training has begun to provide direction towards improving outcomes for children. Supervisors from all counties are meeting and being trained together. This encourages discussion about the Redesign as well as permanence initiatives that other counties are working on. Alameda County can also take the opportunity to discuss CPYP.

BARRIERS TO A SUCCESSFUL REDESIGN

- One barrier to a successful Redesign implementation for Contra Costa County is the potential loss of incentive money. If the county is unable to have measurable outcomes regarding permanence for children in a timely fashion, the state could withdraw the initial start up and implementation funds.
- Children emancipating from foster care because no other permanent plan was achieved is not considered a positive outcome.
- The Redesign is a new way of working with children and families. The focus is outcomes-based with an emphasis on quality of service delivery. Change can be viewed as a barrier.
- In a time of budget crisis and reductions in workforce, the implementation of new procedures creates the need for staff training regarding the new mandates, changes in practice and incorporating a different style of how services are provided and how staff interact with families. In reading the redesign and looking at Contra Costa’s efforts to implement, the costs can be tremendous both in dollars and in staff time.
- Another potential barrier to successful Redesign for Contra Costa County is that the Redesign outcomes will be measured through CWS/CMS. The state audits all data online and, if staff do

not put the data into the CWS/CMS system, the outcomes will not be met and funding will be further impacted.

WHAT SUCCESS WILL LOOK LIKE

CPYP has similar outcomes as the Redesign effort. CPYP focuses on:

- Having children exit the foster care system more effectively and timely.
- Having children leave foster care if not via adoption or legal guardianship then with a permanent connection to an adult.
- Involving and asking the youth whom they identify as an important adult in their life.
- Having the child welfare worker and the youth work together. The key is that the youth provides the information when known so that they are empowered to participate in planning for their futures.

This interaction is key in order to reduce the poor outcomes that the state has already identified when children emancipate from the foster care system. According to state data, a percentage of these young adults end up in the prison system, are homeless, and have substance abuse problems and mental illnesses. The goal of CPYP is to increase positive outcomes by ensuring that no youth leaves foster care until there is a permanent, lifelong connection with a caring and committed adult in the life of every youth. By working towards this goal, the isolation of emancipating youth would be reduced. The youth would have someone to call, spend the holidays with, and be a part of a family.

The efforts of Contra Costa County's Redesign and CPYP hinge on how effectively child welfare staff and administrators are able to adjust pre-existing attitudes toward youth in foster care, what consti-

tutes a family, and finally what determines a successful outcome.

FISCAL IMPACT

The final consideration for any new initiative is its fiscal impact. What will it cost Alameda County Social Services to fully implement CPYP?

Though this question is critical, the answer remains unknown. After the time log is established with our "case-mining" project, we will have a clearer vision of the time it takes to speak with a youth, follow-up on potential adult connections and then assist in the re-establishment or creation of a relationship. At this time, there is no quantifiable information.

In Alameda County, due to the current budget crisis, training allocations have been reduced so adjusting and prioritizing staff development will have a fiscal impact.

The potential of developing a unit of child welfare staff who focus on better outcomes for youth between the ages of 11 and 18, though priceless, will be very costly as the staff will either be pulled from other programs or their workload will be increased.

Though there are fiscal ramifications, I believe that to move forward in trying to achieve better outcomes for youth in foster care will ultimately prove to be right thing to do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a training curriculum with emphasis on how to speak with youth about permanence.
- Pursue funding for California Youth Connection to return to Alameda County to provide training by former foster youth.

- Pursue funding for ongoing “case-mining”.
- Consider developing age specific units that focus on permanence.
- Engage staff and community partners in the efforts of CPYP.

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