

TWO CHILDREN'S SHELTERS

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The Valley of the Moon Children's Home in Sonoma County has been plagued with numerous difficulties for many years. The Department Director, Yolanda Lenier Rinaldo, requested that I review the San Mateo County Children's Receiving Home and compare its operation to the one in Sonoma to see if there were any ideas that we could use to make improvements in our own operation. Ironically, during the course of this internship, I was promoted to a Section Manager position with my primary charge being the Children's Home. Thus, what started as an academic exercise has now turned into a project with a practical application!

Our own shelter operation came under the control of the Human Services Department only eight years ago. Prior to that time it had always been operated by the Probation Department and was referred to as "The Unit," "The Dependent Unit," or "The D.U." A juvenile hall mind set prevailed and staff from "The D.U." worked interchangeably at the secure juvenile institutions. There have been cost overruns, injuries to staff, dangerously high populations of children ranging in age from 0 to 18, lengthy stays for many children, and no control over the intake or exit of children from the shelter. The removal of the first social worker as shelter director put the staff in revolt. Any ideas would be better than what we had going on.

Thus, I went my merry way to that Mecca of modern welfare reform and home to at least a half dozen interns from the BASSC program: San Mateo County. This county could be "The Village" in Mrs. Clinton's book. There is an enviable community concern for welfare. They have an overmatch, they have private donors, they have private and non-profit boards eagerly helping and overseeing. There is a strong, proactive approach to prevention starting with the Futures project and continuing through to the Success project. So who cares about this in relation to the children's shelter?

One might argue that the most vulnerable members of our society are the children whose families cannot take care of them. How we treat these casualties of the social system determines the future of the next generation of vulnerable children. San Mateo doesn't have very many children in its shelter. On the day of my visit, which was on short notice, there were seven teenagers in residence and only one at the home that afternoon. That immediately got my attention. How do they do this? On the same day in Sonoma, there were 23 children in residence, including two infants.

I found four significant differences in our two programs. The first and most significant difference between San Mateo and Sonoma is the control over the admissions of new cases. There is a social work intervention and decision making process prior to every admission to the shelter. Law enforcement, while possibly present during a family crisis, does not have the authority to admit children to the shelter system. Only social workers do this. And only as a last resort.

Secondly, the shelter staff tell the social worker where to take the child, if an admission is necessary. There are at least 40 satellite homes in the county that are used as emergency shelter beds. Children under 12 are admitted to the shelter on paper but after a physical exam are taken

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directly to an emergency shelter foster home by the social worker. The use of the shelter by the Child Welfare Emergency Response system is only as a last resort.

The third component is the Placement Review Committee. This committee, chaired by a second level administrator, meets to establish the placement needs of every child in the shelter and the satellite system. All possible knowledge is brought to bear on moving the child into the appropriate foster care setting as quickly and as reasonably as possible. Several people attend this meeting. A home finding worker works on locating appropriate vacancies and presents these alternatives at the meeting. The assigned worker presents the update on the history and the family situation and discusses the family issues and pros and cons of the placement alternatives with the committee. The mental health counselor who sees the child regularly, if indicated, can be aware of the timing of the placement. The licensing supervisor attends and can quickly arrange a waiver, if necessary. The satellite home worker, who trains and nurtures the satellite home parents, can keep them quickly informed about the plan for the child's movement. This system has the potential for tremendous support for the placement worker. My observation of the process was that it was highly professional, supportive and quick moving. There was no blaming or second guessing. Very impressive, and they tell me, it has taken years to develop the process. The down side of this process is an arena to take the placement worker to task for not doing enough fast enough. The tone is clearly set by the administrator.

There is a close and congenial working relationship between the supervisor of the shelter and the licensing supervisor. The placement review process supports the worker in finding suitable resources for permanent placements quickly so that the satellite homes do not turn into long term placements. There is mandatory training for the foster parents, and additional training and support group meetings for the satellite home parents. This clearly has benefited the satellite program which in turn is the key to keeping the physical admissions to the shelter low.

The fourth aspect is the bureaucratic structure of the Youth and Family Division. There are three major sections: Intake, Continuing and Prevention. The Receiving Home is in the Intake Division. This administratively supports the concept of control over the admissions to the shelter. I was surprised to see that the shelter supervisor positions are not management positions. The Senior Counselor at the shelter supervises the shelter staff, and in turn is supervised by a line supervisor in the intake section. The line supervisor, a Social Work Supervisor 11, was adamant in her defense of her line position. Given the level of responsibility that both of these positions have, I am surprised that these positions haven't been upgraded. I was struck by the level of authority and the span of control of the line supervisors in San Mateo County. The units are large and there is clearly a lack of patience for interruptions and additional assignments. These are very high stress positions.

There is also administrative support in the areas of training and statewide advocacy that I believe ultimately affects the fact that this shelter is truly the last, not the first choice for children in crisis. There is concern for the support of the staff while going through the many changes and the reorganizations that have been part of the work life in San Mateo County. Notably, the entire Youth and Family staff is being trained in Conflict Resolution. The administrator acknowledges the tension that the changes have brought to the interactions of the staff. Also planned for the Agency as a whole is "Workplace Safety, 9 to 5." I doubt that the level of cooperation that

appears to exist in this program happened by accident. There is a sense of tense professionalism and people seem to be extremely tightly scheduled. This can, coupled with the difficult work and another reorganization apparently on the horizon, create serious tensions in the workplace and casework decision making can suffer as a result. I think San Mateo is very wise to implement these programs now.

I was also able to observe the Division Director in action in his role as lobbyist with the statewide organization, CWDA. There are many aspects of the Governor's Welfare Reform package that adversely affect children, and there is an urgent need for knowledgeable professionals to carry the word to the state staff about the havoc that their planned regulations will wreak on the worker in the field. One major issue is the state effort to reduce teen pregnancy by referring pregnant teenagers for child abuse assessments. I could see that sometimes the gatekeeping for the intake system begins in Sacramento, not in San Mateo's Emergency Response System.

A missing piece for me, and a disappointment, was my inability to really understand the Emergency Response function and how it interacted with the shelter. The system is obviously effective, but the stress on the staff was most obvious and my requests to meet with this supervisor were unsuccessful.

I decided to view this problem as another dimension of learning for the internship process. As managers move around within and between counties, the skill of "getting in" must be developed. It is useful to look at other systems with the knowledge that people don't want to tell you everything that is going on unless it makes them look good. The hard part is figuring out what is not working and what people would like to do to improve their program. This becomes sensitive ground especially when everyone is change weary and wary of outside criticisms and tinkering. My observation holds true for my own new assignment, where "getting in" will seem somewhat easier; however, this same knowledge may make people more guarded, since there have been so many efforts to "fix" our Children's Home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the paper, Figure 1 summarizes the differences in our two systems. Hopefully, it will be useful in studying our problems.

My recommendations for improving our Children's Home operation include examination of other public shelter operations before adopting the San Mateo model. I found the San Mateo program to be excellent; however, we would need to make major systemic changes to adopt the entire model. First, we would have to rework our emergency response program. Second, we would have to develop a completely different way of interfacing with the law enforcement jurisdictions. Consideration of adopting any aspect of the San Mateo systems will take months of effort and planning with staff, unions, and the legal community. I believe that this effort may be necessary; however, before launching any major changes, we will want to be certain that we have reviewed more systems and involve the staff in the planning process.

An easier change to implement would be the placement review process. Our program has done a similar process in the past, with noticeable results in the reduction of children waiting placement at the shelter. Our process was abandoned when the top administrator left the department. A further problem to overcome is perceived criticism of placement decisions made by the home finder or the satellite worker by the ongoing placement staff. A number of steps could be taken to involve staff in reviving the review process with consideration given to building in protections for support rather than criticism of decisions. With staff participation and buy in, there may be a way to affect an improvement in our operation without waiting for major changes to occur.

A foster home recruiter position was reinstated and assigned to a newly formed unit in the newly formed Child Welfare Section. Separating this support function from the program operations may give it more protection from being abolished in the face of caseload pressures. Maintaining and developing a reliable base of foster and satellite homes will be a longer range goal, but one that can be addressed more easily.

San Mateo has been developing its foster care System in a more progressive and politically supportive environment over several years. It is important to keep this in mind when reviewing changes for our system. Several change efforts have been abandoned because they were poorly thought out and did not involve staff input. We can ill afford to continue these costly mistakes.

Figure 1: Two Children's Shelters

Element	San Mateo	Sonoma
Community Support	Vigorous, over all community effort, starting at the top. County Administrator supports prevention efforts with top-down administrative edicts and funding	No structured, comprehensive community prevention programs; although some are in the planning stages. County Administrator highly critical of shelter operation and involved in decisions about residents; critical of costs.
Administrative Support	Shelter part of the CWS continuum. Located administratively with intake.	Until recently, completely administratively separate, even when under same Department.
Foster Parent Training	Required training of all foster parents and additional training and support meeting required of satellite parents	Training has only recently been required of all foster parents. Voluntary training program has been available for many years.
Recruitment	Constant effort actively pursued.	Sporadic effort; recruiter position has been abolished several times.

Staffing	Turnover low. Staff do move up to positions in Child Welfare. Highly qualified and numerous applicants for any vacancy. Seen as a status position; difficult to get on full time. No connection to juvenile hall. Line supervisor supervises senior shelter counselor who supervises shelter staff.	Turnover low. A few promotions in the past to Child Welfare. Minimum qualifications recently increased, but still draw on pool of staff that work relief at juvenile hall. Management level supervision of Home manager who is also management level.
Gatekeeping	Strong control of admissions and exits. Admission only by social worker decision and only after other options fail. Law enforcement not allowed to admit. Children under 12 admitted directly to satellite foster care. Worker assigned to maintain, develop satellite homes. Highly developed position. Placement review committee, chaired by management level staff, meets regularly to focus and support moving children out of shelter quickly, thus preserving satellite slots.	Minimal control of admissions. Law enforcement admits all new and unadjudicated children; social workers admit placement failures. Institutionalized attitude that the Childrens Home is the first choice in an emergency. Children under 6 moved to satellite care if an opening exists and the judge allows. Worker recently assigned to maintain satellite homes; mission seems somewhat unclear and undeveloped at present. Committee effort collapsed. New effort being developed at the Home. No managerial presence. Satellite slots frequently become permanent placements. Lengthy stays at the Home.