

SANTA CLARA COUNTY'S COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES TO PARENTS: NON-THREATENING, APPROACHABLE, AND ENGAGING

Dora Fisher*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Parents have often experienced traditional child welfare services as punitive, judgmental, and intimidating. When children are removed from their home, there is an inherent statement of parental failure, and the court process of proving a case against the parent(s) emphasizes this message. In recent years, efforts have been made to involve parents in their case planning and to focus on their strengths.

However, most child welfare services are still provided by a professional child welfare worker meeting with a frightened parent in a county office to discuss what the parent has done wrong and what needs to change if they are to get their children back. This arrangement highlights the power differential between the worker and the parent, and increases the parents' feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem, making it difficult for parents to see the worker as a helpful ally. The resulting defensiveness leads to delays in the parents engaging in reunification services, and decreases their chances of reunifying with their child(ren).

The California Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability Act (AB636, C-CFSR, 2001) requires counties to make changes in their services to improve outcomes, including reunification rates. The Family to Family Initiative provides concrete strategies for making these changes. Santa Clara County has implemented Family to Family in part by developing community-based Family Resource

Centers and utilizing the Team Decision-Making process. In addition they have developed a system of group education and peer-support services that are parent-friendly and respectful. These include very powerful and informative agency-run parent orientation groups and recovery groups. They also have hired non-threatening parent advocates and resource specialists. These services and staff communicate a message of collaboration with parents towards the goal of speedy and successful reunification.

CONCLUSION

Children want to live with their parents. When children are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, they suffer trauma from losing their parent. Teenagers in foster care often run away and return to their parents' homes. Many youth who emancipate out of foster care move immediately back to their parents' homes.

Considering these realities, it is the responsibility of child welfare agencies to make their services highly effective and accessible in order to prevent removal, whenever possible, and to reunify children with their parents as quickly as possible.

Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services has developed services that promise to achieve these outcomes, and it is hoped that we can learn from their experience to implement several positive service changes in Alameda County.

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BASSC Executive Development Training Program

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INTRODUCTION

Child welfare services agencies face many challenges in meeting their charge of protecting children and strengthening families. They must protect children from abuse and neglect without completely disrupting their lives, balancing children's needs for safety with their need for security, connections to the family, uninterrupted education, medical care, and community support services.

While prevention of abuse through early intervention and in-home services is preferable to removing children from home and placing them in foster care after abuse has occurred, funding for these preventive services is scarce.

Parents whose children have been removed from their care are usually feeling guilty, ashamed, afraid, and confused. Frequently, they mask these feelings with anger and confrontation, which impedes their ability to receive information and support from the child welfare system. As a result, many months may pass without progress towards reunification.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA, 1997) shortened the amount of time parents have to reunify, requiring a decision on termination of parental rights within 15 months after removal. While these timelines promote permanency for children, they do not allow for the long-term process of recovery from substance abuse or treatment of mental health and family systems dysfunction that led to the abuse or neglect. Consequently, increasing

numbers of children are being adopted away from their birth families and losing important connections with their birth relatives. These children might have been able to return home and maintain their family and community connections if services had engaged parents immediately and helped them resolve the reasons for removal earlier.

In order to remedy this situation, children and family services agencies must provide families with services that will enable children to remain safely in home, whenever possible, or to return home quickly after removal. These services must be parent-friendly and take into account the parents' emotional state after their children's removal.

The California Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability Act (AB 636, C-CFSR, 2001) requires county child welfare departments to implement major system changes in order to improve the outcomes for children experiencing abuse or neglect. In addition, the Family to Family Initiative has been spreading across California with system changes aimed at increasing successful reunification.

Santa Clara is a Family to Family county, and has implemented the Team Decision-Making process and the use of community-based Family Resource Centers in order to achieve better outcomes. They have also implemented group-based reunification services, parent advocates and community liaisons.

BACKGROUND

Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services (the Department) has been planning and implementing the Family to Family Initiative since 2003. The Department has also developed a System Improvement Plan as required by AB 636. Both of these efforts have as goals an increase in the number and timeliness of successful reunifications.

While the strategies of Team Decision-Making and Structured Decision-Making are primary efforts towards reaching these goals, the Department is also planning changes in how reunification services are provided. Specifically, the Department is evaluating whether the provision of orientation groups, peer parent advocates, and topic-focused parenting classes might increase parents' ability to engage in reunification services earlier and therefore reunify sooner. The hope is that providing these supports and services will:

- Increase parents' understanding of the child welfare system
- Increase parents' ability to work effectively with their child welfare worker in order to receive needed services.
- Allow parents a venue for venting their feelings without alienating the child welfare worker and undermining the helping relationship.
- Enable parents to get support and guidance from other parents who are or have been in their situation.

I chose Santa Clara County for my internship once I learned from a fellow BASSC participant that Santa Clara has implemented many of the services considered in Alameda County. My goal was to learn whether the services are experienced as more parent-friendly by staff and parents, and whether they

have increased parents' ability to reunify with their children. In addition, I hoped to gain insights about the implementation process, including challenges and solutions.

FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS

Santa Clara County's services to parents are provided in four regionally-located, culturally sensitive Family Resource Centers (FRCs). Uji Rani FRC and Nuestra Casa FRC are both located in North San Jose and focus on the needs of the African American and Latino communities, respectively. Asian Pacific FRC is located in Central San Jose and focuses on the cultural needs of the Asian Pacific community. Gilroy FRC is located in South County and serves this rural community.

Each center has its own calendar and series of services tailored to the needs of the specific community. They also have several essential components in common. They provide orientation groups, parenting classes, and drug treatment programs. All FRCs have a Parent Advocate and a resource specialist/Community Liaison.

The Uji Rani and Gilroy centers are located in mall-based office complexes that look business-like from the outside, but are relaxed and welcoming within and beautifully decorated with culturally rich art. The meeting rooms have culturally relevant posters, drawings, and other art decorating the walls, some of it created by class attendees. The decor clearly communicates that these centers celebrate children, families, and the varied cultures of their communities, as well as recovery and positive parenting. Tracy Bowers, Program Manager for Uji Rani comments, "you have to make it what you want people to feel." Handouts in the resource folders given to parents repeat this message with multi-

lingual information about cultural events and services. Brochures and flyers contain quotes from cultural leaders on the importance of the family and community.

Child welfare units are located on site at both the Uji Rani and Gilroy centers, creating a spirit of openness. Parents are welcome to relax in the reception areas and share the kitchen facilities. While there are guidelines for parents entering staff areas, the general feeling is welcoming with a sense of lowered boundaries. The staff I talked with about this agree that it can be an adjustment for staff to be less separated from their clients, but that it shows a commitment to mutual respect and acceptance that changes and improves the relationship between parents and staff.

PEER PARENTING/ ABUSE PREVENTION CLASSES

The Family Development Academy is a peer prevention program for parents who do not have an open protective services case. This is a seven-week program, covering issues of self-esteem, nutrition, communication, and abuse prevention. The resource specialists do the outreach for the program, distributing flyers and talking to staff at schools, childcare facilities, and community centers. The program focuses on parents with children 0-5 years old, and involves children and parents in activities that give opportunities for hands-on parenting instruction. The group facilitators also make home visits to observe interactions in the home setting and assist parents with problem resolution.

Lucretia Thompson, the Academy facilitator at Nuestra Casa FRC, says the program has been so popular that they have started a support group following graduation at the parents' request.

PARENT ORIENTATION

The parent orientation is a 3-session introduction to the child welfare system. Madelyn Lee, social worker and group facilitator in Gilroy, got involved in developing the groups out of her concern for parents. Because she "thought it was needed because I saw the parents' frustration. They don't know what they're dealing with. No one is telling them what to do and not do. It's not fair to parents. The bottom line is that kids need to be with their parents. A lot of kids lose their entire family."

The groups start immediately after the detention hearing, when the parents are overwhelmed, and do not know what is going on. The group facilitator sends a letter to parents giving them a brief description of the orientation and inviting them to the next series. A copy of the letter is sent to the child welfare worker to document "reasonable efforts", and the group facilitator also sends a memo to the worker regarding whether or not the parent attended the orientation. The groups are not court ordered, but are required by the Department.

During the first session, they go through introductions, discuss confidentiality, allow some time for venting, and describe "how the system works." The second session is a more in-depth discussion of the court process and the parents' rights and responsibilities. Either an attorney for parents or a social work supervisor conducts the second session, depending on availability. The third session is about resources, and topics covered may include housing, tenants' rights, establishing credit, budgeting, transportation, and child support. The Parent Advocate, ombudsperson, and/or a foster parent attend this session.

Ms. Lee states that there is much repetition in the groups, as the parents are in crisis and have difficulty absorbing information. In the beginning the parents have lots of questions and fears that need to be answered and alleviated. “By the third session things start to sink in.” Parents are given a binder with information on the court process and resources and also receive a certificate of completion. Ms. Lee says the parents share their binders with each other and use them as a reference tool to be more organized. She feels the groups have helped parents have fewer complaints about their worker, as they now know what is expected of them.

Beth McGhee, Social Work Supervisor, co-facilitates the orientation groups in San Jose with a Dependency Investigations (DI) social worker. She states that it has been helpful to the parents to have perspectives of both an intake worker and someone with experience in ongoing services. It also helps to have a supervisor there, as it makes the parents realize they are important. About her participation Ms. McGhee states, “I absolutely love doing it. My experience is that people respond very positively. At first they’re defended and won’t talk about why they’re here, but by the end they are more open.”

“We really stress that this is for you, to show you how to get what you want, how to handle things with your social worker. We teach basic social skills, how to treat people, that you should not yell at them. We use lots of humor, and tell them to try to put themselves in their social worker’s shoes. ‘If you keep calling and yelling at them they won’t want to call you back.’ We also teach them their rights – it’s ok to be angry and you have resources to resolve concerns.”

Ms. McGhee states that the first session involves lots of venting and that the instructors try to

address the parents’ frustration by explaining the social worker’s role. They provide basic coaching on taking notes and how to write down questions for the social worker and attorney, how to document phone calls and conversations. “In the second session, with the parent attorney present, we model working together. It sends a powerful message.”

In the third and last session, a foster parent talks about why she provides foster care and what her experience has been. “She’s talking also about what it’s like for kids to be taken away from their parents, what they go through and how serious it is. The parents really listen.” A representative from the child support unit attends, and emphasizes how important it is that they respond immediately if they get mail from them. “The Parent Advocate has come to the third session a few times. It’s wonderful. She had her own experience with the system that she shares, and you can see people listening hard.”

Ms. McGhee feels the groups are successful in conveying information to the parents in a way that the courts are not, because they relax the parents enough so they can take in the information. The groups work to get the parents engaged in the process. “It also evens the playing field a bit, so they can advocate for themselves if their DI worker isn’t hearing them.” Ms. McGhee has heard no complaints from workers about the groups, even though it might concern them that the parents get the ombudsperson’s number and information about how to advocate for themselves.

DRUG TREATMENT GROUPS

Daniel Esparza developed agency-run drug intervention groups in Gilroy over ten years ago. At the Gilroy site, the weekly schedule includes two intro-

ductory women's groups and one men's group. These services are six months, and are court-ordered. After graduating, women can join an advanced women's group. There are also advanced relapse prevention and aftercare programs for families in recovery.

I attended a session of the women's group and was greatly impressed with the openness, positive rapport, and strong sense of support and camaraderie between the group members and staff. Long-term group members and the group facilitators gave advice, compassion, and encouragement to newer members. The women spoke about the pain of not having their children with them, and their determination to get them back home. They practiced communicating assertively and respectfully with caregivers and social workers. They repeated frequently the importance of staying focused on their children, instead of getting into power struggles or negativity. It was clear that the women were engaged in the group, and that this one session had helped them in their struggle to overcome the challenges in their lives, including their own abuse, substance abuse, and/or domestic violence. Sitting in with this group, I experienced the power of the group process which, as Sharon Olson agreed, "can't be described."

Ms. McGhee states that the county-run groups are preferred by many social workers who feel confident that the instructors know the child welfare system and can address the recovery, parenting, and other issues that must be addressed prior to reunification.

PARENT ADVOCATES AND RESOURCE SPECIALISTS

A social work coordinator supervises the Parent Advocate and Community Liaison who work as a team to help clients get connected with services. The coordinator also co-facilitates the drug intervention groups with them. Referrals to the advocates come from the case-carrying child welfare worker, the team decision-making meeting, or the parent orientation group. The Parent Advocate also attends one of the three parent orientation sessions. She meets the clients there, discusses her services, and provides contact information. Both the liaison and advocate reinforce the importance of communicating regularly and respectfully with the social worker. Ms. Campos, Parent Advocate, tells the parents "You don't have to like your worker, but you need to treat them with the same respect that you want." Ms. Kato, Community Liaison, emphasizes the significance of sharing her own experience, letting the client know "I've been there and done that." She says, "It gives them hope."

The advocate and liaison positions have been in place for 2-3 years. They are funded through contracts that the county has with community providers. In answering the question of whether she sees a difference in parents' ability to work with the system, since having the liaison and advocate available, Ms. Olson responded, "Oh, yes. You bring a client into the system. They are totally intimidated and overwhelmed. Once they meet with a person who says 'I've been through the system. I got my children back and you can too', their eyes light up and they're ready to listen."

FUNDING AND OUTCOMES

The group services are provided primarily through Department funds, and include some contracts. The Parent Advocate and Community Liaison positions were funded through a 3-year Family Advocacy Initiative grant, which is currently in its third year. Sharon Olson states that since this funding may not be renewed, they need to focus on applying for other grants to support the services. Mary Grimm states that Santa Clara is currently evaluating whether the changes in service structure have affected the number and timeline of reunifications, as well as the recidivism rate. Due to the timelines involved, it takes 18-24 months after initiating a system change to determine if reunification and recidivism rates have been affected. While it is important to gather this factual data to show the effectiveness of the services and justify future funding, Ms. Grimm feels that the services have definitely made an impact on families. "We have called on the Parent Advocates during stressful times in parents' lives, and they have been able to work with them better than a social worker would because they have 'walked a mile in their shoes.'"

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

Compared to Santa Clara County, Alameda is early in the process of implementing the Family to Family Initiative. We have been gradually increasing our use of Team Decision-Making for eight months, and are actively engaging resource families and parents in leadership roles. Santa Clara County's orientation and peer support services to parents can be initiated in Alameda County fairly quickly. Other services, such as the development of Family Resource Centers, warrant further consideration as important steps towards connecting our ser-

vices with the community and making them more approachable for parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review current contracts, collaborations, and staff roles and responsibilities to determine whether a reallocation of resources can be made to provide:
 - Parent Advocates
 - Community Liaisons
 - Abuse prevention classes
 - Initial orientation groups
 - Ongoing reunification support/recovery groups

Possible resources include:

- Parenting contracts
- Drug treatment contracts
- Child welfare staff
- CASAs, attorneys, child support staff
- First Five Initiative and ICPC

While in some instances this would be an addition to workloads, the benefit of having a positive experience working with clients will attract many staff. Line staff could also receive a caseload reduction during the time they are facilitating a group. The group facilitator could also be a position used as part of the Department's effort to return injured staff to work quickly, as a temporary accommodation. If one or two core orientation group facilitators can be identified in each North and South County, they can coordinate volunteer speakers and temporarily accommodated staff to assist at various sessions. The Department has been actively participating in the First Five Initiative and the Interagency Children's Policy Council (ICPC), and can use these collaborations to explore resources for pro-

viding abuse prevention classes in various community settings.

2. Revise parenting contract to include topic-specific, short-term (2-4 hours) parenting classes to include:
 - Parenting teens
 - Parenting disturbed children
 - Conflict and stress management
 - Assertive communication
 - Limit-setting and boundaries

Initial discussions have taken place with our contract administrator, and the ideas will be presented to the Department Senior Management Team. If approved, a meeting can be scheduled with the contractor to discuss contract changes.

3. Incorporate peer advocate and community liaison/resource specialist positions into the current RFP for drug treatment contracts. In addition, explore feasibility of providing on-site recovery groups with county staff involved.
4. Explore possibility of developing a Family Resource Center at Eastmont Mall. There is vacant space in this facility, and the county already provides many services there. The Department has a beautiful visitation room, "A Kids' Place", that is under-utilized primarily because staff are not located on site. The Department is currently facing space challenges due to closing the Harbor Bay site. Moving staff to community-based centers could be part of the solution.
5. Explore possibility of expanding Kinship Support Centers to become Family Resource Centers. The current contractors who run these facilities may be open to having orientation and

recovery groups provided at their sites. There may be space for some county staff to be located at these sites, and the existing contracts may be able to be revised to cover the expense of sharing space. A possible barrier to this idea is the challenge of providing Child Welfare Service/Case Management Systems computers at non-county sites. Solutions to this barrier are already being explored due to the Department's goal of holding TDMs at community sites.

While not all of these suggestions will result in immediate changes, the exploration of possibilities may lead to unanticipated opportunities. My experience in Santa Clara showed me that persistence in working towards positive change can lead to miracles.

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