

SHARED FAMILY CARE IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Elizabeth McGhee*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Shared Family Care (SFC) is a service in which children are placed together with their parents in a semi-supervised setting in which they receive services specific to the particular program. All SFC programs are designed to help increase the parents' ability to parent while caring for their own children. SFC can either prevent removal of a child or facilitate early reunification of a child.

SFC in Contra Costa County is a collaborative program between Children and Family Services and Families First. It is geared toward providing services to parents with substance abuse issues that need to increase their parenting skills and learn the skills that will enable them to maintain employment and housing.

FINDINGS

The result of a five-year evaluation of SFC in Contra Costa County by the Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center was that graduates had:

- an increase in income and employment.
- more stable independent housing.
- less recidivism into the child welfare system.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY

My recommendations for Santa Clara County are to partner with our wraparound service providers to develop a SFC program to be used in conjunction with existing wraparound services. SFC with wraparound services could take the form of a client family living in a residential program for short periods of time, a client family living in the home of a mentor family, or a mentor living with the client family. The purpose of using SFC with wraparound would be to increase permanency, decrease the number of placements, and decrease the length of wraparound services. Use of SFC in this manner would not require any additional funding from the county.

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INTRODUCTION

In California, and indeed in the United States as a whole, the child welfare system is faced with the challenge of improving the outcomes of children who have had to be removed from the care of their parents due to neglect, abuse, or the inability to meet the child's needs. As a society, we have made the decision that we need to protect children from physical and emotional harm and that it is important to stop cycles of destructive parenting. However, it has become apparent that the traditional services provided to parents and their children who come under the supervision of child welfare have not been as successful as one would hope. As a result of this lack of success, the various counties in California are currently involved in a massive redesign of services. Two particular areas that are problematic and often devastating to the healthy development of youth are:

- multiple placements, in particular the children and youth who suffer from emotional and behavioral disturbances (referred to in this paper as high-end youth) and
- a lack of permanency with a family, such as home with parents without court involvement, guardianship or adoption by relatives, or a foster parent

Child welfare services have struggled to meet the needs of the high-end youth. Traditionally, this population has been very difficult to maintain in placement and to move into a permanent committed family living situation. I was interested in learning about Shared Family Care in Contra Costa County

to see if it might be a program that could be combined with existing wraparound services in Santa Clara County in order to improve placement outcomes for high-end youth. Over the past twelve years, the services and outcomes for this population in Santa Clara County has improved through the increased use of intensive home-based services, such as wraparound, combined with residential treatment. One of the goals of wraparound services has been to keep the high-end youth from becoming institutionalized. With the implementation of wraparound services, there are fewer high-end youth living for long periods of time in residential facilities. As of March 25, 2005 there were 158 youth receiving wraparound services in Santa Clara County. These youth are being served through child welfare, mental health or juvenile probation. The majority of these youth are in the child welfare system. Unfortunately, many of these youth are living in foster homes that do not intend on adopting them or becoming their legal guardians. There are also youth receiving wraparound services while placed in a lower level group home.

BACKGROUND

Shared Family Care (SFC) in Contra Costa was developed through a collaborative effort between The National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center (AIA), School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley, child welfare agencies in Alameda, San Francisco and Contra Costa Counties and community-based organizations. Due to various reasons, the SFC program in Alameda County was terminated, and the SFC pro-

gram in San Francisco was never implemented. However, SFC in Contra Costa County, although small, appears to be thriving. Contra Costa County has been working with Families First Foster Family Agency to implement and maintain a successful SFC program. They are now the sole providers of this service in California and work only with families referred to them by Children and Family Services in Contra Costa County.

In 2004, Families First received a federal grant to work specifically with parents who have substance abuse issues. The grant will also allow them to expand both the size of the program and the services provided by SFC. According to Families First, they will be attempting to triple the size of SFC within the next four years. They have hired two additional staff to provide housing support and substance abuse counseling. They will also continue to provide a full-time trainer who is responsible for initial and ongoing training to staff and mentor families.

PURPOSE

Shared Family Care (SFC) in Contra Costa County is a service in which the parent(s) are placed together with their child or children in a “foster home-like” setting (referred to by SFC as a mentor home). This can occur either with or without court intervention and with or without prior removal of the child. In the cases where SFC is successful, it allows the parent a unique opportunity to observe and be coached by the mentor in how to provide appropriate parenting. This can lead to a healthier relationship between the parent and the child. In addition, the parent receives support from the mentor and the program in completing the case plan. SFC also provides the parent a chance to learn the skills necessary to develop economic self-suffi-

ciency and how to obtain and maintain housing. When SFC is successful, families’ recidivism back into the child welfare system is decreased, the parents’ income is increased, housing becomes more stable, and the parent is more prepared to take on the difficult job of parenting his/her own children.

FUNDING

Funding sources for SFC in Contra Costa County have historically been from private foundations (Zellerback, Stuart, Hedge Funds), TANF, and State and Federal Family Preservation (Title IV-B). Starting in the year 2002, funding was from Title IV-B and private foundations. Current funding has now been supplemented by a substantial federal grant obtained by Families First which will allow the program to expand. This money will to be used for families with substance abuse issues and is available to the program for the next four years.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The following are examples of families that have successfully graduated from the SFC program in Contra Costa County:

- A father with a history of substance abuse who had never been part of his eleven-year old son’s life. The child had been raised by his grandmother most of his life. The child’s mother was in and out of jail and abusing drugs. The grandmother became ill and the father wanted to become a parent to his son but was scared and had no idea where to start.
- A twenty-five year-old woman with a long history of incest. She was socially isolated, raising a five-month old child alone. The child was discovered to have 31 fractures and extensive bruising.

- A 35-year-old woman with a fifteen-year history of serious substance abuse.

According to a continuing social worker in Contra Costa County, with seventeen years of experience in child welfare, none of her families who successfully graduated from SFC would have been able to reunify with their children and have their cases dismissed without SFC.

SFC is a program which helps parents overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of being able to provide a safe and stable home for their children. These are parents who most often grew up in abusive and neglectful homes and did not have adequate parenting themselves. They have never experienced good parenting and therefore have a very difficult time being a good parent. One of the keys to success of this program is the daily modeling and coaching provided by the mentor family.

Mentor families provide a place to live and ongoing 24 hour support to the parent and their children. The mentor families are carefully recruited and screened. All homes must be smoke- alcohol- and drug-free, must be financially stable, and it is preferable that the mentors are employed. They must meet the standards for certification as foster homes through Families First. They are brought up to the point of certification but not certified. This is due to the current restrictions on Title IVE funding which does not permit a parent to be in a foster home with a child. If the parent violates court orders to the extent of placing the child at risk, such as starting to abuse drugs again, the parent will leave the home, not the child. The mentor home can then receive emergency certification, thus preventing another placement change for the child. Mentors are also given initial training, ongoing training at a required monthly support group

with other mentors, and situation specific training to help them better support the family they are mentoring.

Social workers from Children and Family Services make referrals to Families First. To be accepted into the program, parents must be clean and sober for ninety days and have completed enough of their case plan so that maintaining employment will be possible. One of the most important characteristics of parents, if they are to succeed in the program, is a desire and willingness to work and become independent. Families First screens the written referrals and obtains signed release of information forms so that they can personally verify the parent's progress in their substance abuse treatment and other court-ordered services. If the parent is accepted into the program, two meetings are set up with the county social worker, the case manager from Families First, and another Families First staff, such as the housing specialist, substance abuse counselor, or the trainer. At this meeting, goals and transition plans are created and reviewed.

The next step in the process is to match the parent with a mentor. This is an important step and when there is a bad match the program may not succeed. Families First believes that it is very important to empower the parent and the mentor. Whenever possible, parents and mentors choose each other. Families First facilitates the process and coaches the parent as needed, encouraging the parent to think through their decision carefully.

Parents stay with their mentor families for six months. Social workers meet monthly with Families First staff, the parent and their children, and the mentor to go over goals and progress toward the goals. Parents are given support to complete their case plans, they are taught how to apply for and

maintain a job, how to find and maintain housing, how to budget their money, and are given an opportunity to improve their parenting skills. The mentor acts as a constant role model, coach, and sometimes even a surrogate parent for the parent. In my opinion, this is the crux of why this program is so important. It allows the parent to have hours upon hours of direct experience learning how to parent.

At the end of six months, if the parent is successful, they move with their children into their own housing. The housing support staff helps the parent prepare for this move throughout his/her stay in the mentor's house. The parent is given support to find and maintain housing. SFC provides six months of general aftercare support and one year of housing support to make sure that the parent is successful.

PROGRAM EVALUATION SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES

Through a grant from the Zellerbach Foundation, the AIA Resource Center completed an evaluation of SFC in Contra Costa County in August of 2002. These are some of the successes that they found:

- Upon graduation, participants in SFC had a 40% increase in employment.
- Upon graduation, participants in SFC more than doubled their monthly income from \$520.00 to \$1,100.00.
- Upon graduation, 76% of participants were able to live independently with their children.
- For graduates from SFC, the recidivism of families coming back into the child welfare system was 8% as compared to 15% in Contra Costa County without SFC.

The two most difficult challenges of SFC are funding and recruitment of mentor families.

LESSONS LEARNED

Critical components for implementing and maintaining a successful SFC program are:

- it is important to determine that there is a need in a county for SFC
- the agency interested in developing and implementing the program must have the resources, the readiness, the experience, and capacity and commitment from top level staff with decision-making authority
- alternate funding sources need to be explored since, thus far, this has been a difficult program to fund
- for SFC, as implemented in Contra Costa County, at least twelve to eighteen months need to be allowed for start-up and program development
- housing availability for graduates of the program is critical

WRAPAROUND SERVICES IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

First as a social worker and then as a social work supervisor, I have directly observed many successes using wraparound services in Santa Clara County. I have seen many situations in which children with extreme emotional and behavioral problems have been successfully reunited with their parents or relatives with the support of wraparound services and had their court cases dismissed. Unfortunately, there is still a significant number of youth whose placements with their parents fail, or they are in foster or relative homes that are not willing to adopt or become legal guardians. Much of this hesitancy is due to fear on the part of the caregivers, that the necessary resources will not be available to help them maintain these youth in their homes.

There is a great deal of interest from the wrap-around providers in Santa Clara County in developing some form of SFC to be utilized with the existing wraparound services. The hope is that the significant increase in coaching available to the caregiver by a mentor would help the caregiver gain the skills necessary to parent a high-end child. A modified version of SFC was implemented in Santa Clara County when a single mother and her three children were placed together for one month on a residential unit in a level 13/14 facility. The mother was housed in a nearby hotel and came to the unit in the morning before the children woke up and was with the children throughout the day. The family received intensive family therapy during this time. The outcome for this family is not yet known, but regardless, there were many lessons learned that showed how valuable this approach might be for other families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY

My hope is that by utilizing some form of SFC with wraparound services for high-end youth, the Department of Family and Children's Services will be able to:

- reduce the number of placements
- increase permanency (home with parents, adoption or guardianship)
- decrease recidivism into the child welfare system
- decrease time needed for wraparound services and residential care
- save the county money

BARRIERS IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Some of the anticipated barriers to implementing SFC in conjunction with wraparound services in Santa Clara County are as follows:

- high cost of housing in Santa Clara County
- the lack of available and appropriate low-cost housing in Santa Clara County
- inability of families to utilize some treatment programs without dependency
- the current disconnect between Mental Health, Juvenile Probation and Child Welfare
- availability of appropriate families willing to become Mentor families
- current wraparound programs are not as effective at helping families develop natural support systems as they could be

Once they have been successfully returned to a home and their cases have been dismissed, a significant number of the high-end youth will need ongoing support to maintain permanency and not come back into the system. For success to be complete, parents will need to know how to access both natural and traditional support systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I am recommending that the Department of Family and Children's Services in Santa Clara County and the wraparound providers begin the planning process for implementation of SFC to be utilized with existing wraparound services. Based on the need to improve outcomes for high-end youth and the successes of SFC in Contra Costa County, I believe that there is a need and place for these services in this county. The benefits of combining SFC with wraparound are that:

- funding would initially be through existing wraparound monies which would not necessitate additional resources from the county
- a strong collaborative relationship already exists between DFCS and the wraparound providers
- there are already existing committees, consisting of staff from DFCS and the wraparound providers, that could take on this task
- there already exists a strong strength-based family-oriented philosophy in wraparound services which is consistent with the philosophy of SFC
- start-up time would be significantly less than in a program, such as the Contra Costa model, due to the above benefits
- what is learned from developing SFC in conjunction with wraparound services could then be used to develop and implement a similar program to the Contra Costa model and possibly used as a step-down from House on The Hill

NEXT STEPS

Although there are a few barriers to implementing SFC in Santa Clara County in conjunction with wraparound services, I do not think that they are insurmountable, and these barriers exist for our families with high-end youth with or without SFC. The next steps in moving forward with planning and implementing this program are to:

- gain support by executive management for moving forward with the planning stage of the program
- write a Request For Proposals (RFP) and distribute to the existing wraparound providers
- use existing collaborative workgroups between the Department of Family and Children's Services and the wraparound providers to develop and plan the program

- present the program to executive management prior to implementation
- form an implementation and oversight committee consisting of all stakeholders, including but not limited to, Department of Family and Children's Services staff and staff from wraparound providers including a parent partner

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