

County Self-Assessments and Systems Improvement Plans: Sharing Best Practices Among California's Child Welfare Agencies

JIM PAULSEN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

California county child welfare agencies are completing second and even third County Self-Assessments (CSAs) and Systems Improvement Plans (SIPs) as mandated by the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), which went into effect on January 1, 2004. Each county has developed, revised, and sometimes redesigned methodologies for completion of four main components as mandated by AB 636. These components are:

- Quarterly County Data Reports;
- Peer Quality Case Reviews (PQCRs);
- CSAs; and
- SIPs.

The CSA and SIP are driven by federal and state mandated outcome measurements and a statewide child welfare redesign blueprint, but they also typically include some specific county identified needs and goals.

To date, the practices, processes, and staff solutions created to produce effective PQCRs, CSAs, and SIPs have not yet been formally shared between county child welfare agencies. This report examines some the lessons learned and procedural enhancements made in three Bay Area counties: Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, and Contra Costa during production of CSAs and SIPs.

Recommendations

Individual CSAs and SIPs will improve with the creation of a California Department of Social Services (CDSS) sponsored biannual, organized information exchange between all of California's county child welfare agencies. At the invitation of CDSS, in partnership with the County Welfare Directors Association and Children & Family Policy Institute of California, each county's administrative staff responsible for PQCRs, CSAs and SIPs will share information and best practices in areas including management strategies, innovative practices and services, data collection and analysis, community engagement, and the effective use of consultation, researchers, and technical assistance.

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Background

In 2000, the California legislature created a statewide Child Welfare Stakeholders Group to review the state's child welfare system and make recommendations for statewide reforms and practice improvements. This group assessed the most promising strategies being implemented nationally and in California. In 2003, these statewide stakeholders delivered a final report with its recommendations, now referred to as the Child Welfare Redesign. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and individual county child welfare agencies were compelled to turn their efforts toward addressing the recommendations made in this report. Eleven counties were selected to implement and evaluate promising strategies and practices and to measure their impact on behalf of California.

A year after the creation of the Child Welfare Stakeholders Group, following critical federal reviews of state child welfare services nationwide, the California legislature passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) to improve specific outcomes for children and families served by child welfare agencies. This legislation holds all of California's county child agencies accountable for measurable achievements in prescribed federal and state outcome areas. The four key components of this new accountability system are: Quarterly County Data Reports along with the production of Peer Quality Case Reviews, CSA and SIP every three years.

By 2004, child welfare agencies were working to meet the expectations of two parallel child welfare improvement charters, initially developed indepen-

dently of one another. CDSS provided implementation funding for services and training on both Child Welfare Redesign and AB 636 outcomes. And, CDSS, the County Welfare Directors' Association, and the Child and Family Policy Institute of California are continually assessing the effectiveness of county child welfare agency practices and services identified by both the Child Welfare Redesign and targeting outcomes mandated in AB 636. To date, attention has focused on services utilized, (e.g. Differential Response), and outcomes achieved. There has not yet been a coordinated statewide or Bay Area evaluation of the processes and practices utilized to produce accurate and comprehensive CSAs and SIPs.

Lessons Learned from Contra Costa County

Meeting the data collection, analysis, and reporting requirements of AB 636, the Redesign, as well as a number of grants, though challenging, also provided an important opportunity to Contra Costa. Contra Costa Children and Family Services (CFS) did not have the trained staff or the infrastructure needed to access and evaluate data related to child welfare outcomes. The staffing team tapped to complete the first CSA and SIP relied on outside technical assistance and available, limited internal data analysis resources, in order to compile needed baseline data during the self-assessment process. However, CFS had already committed to an agency-wide, outcomes-based practice model. Soon after the completion of the first CSA, an experienced social services researcher was hired as the agency's full-time Research and Evaluation Manager. CFS now enjoys an internal three-person Research and Evaluation team. Now, evaluation

procedures and presentations are uniform, and these evaluators are active members of all management and program committees. This has provided easily identifiable research and evaluation branding to the staff and the community.

Contra Costa also chose to add practices, policies, and outcome measures related to the disproportionate number of children of color entering and lingering in the child welfare system into each SIP. This has been a concrete and public method of ensuring the agency staff works alongside the community to address disproportionality within child welfare.

Lessons Learned from Santa Clara County

Though Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) also created a process and procedure for completion of their CSAs and SIPs, this county had previously made significant staffing and infrastructure investments in support of outcomes-driven service delivery and internal project management. Prior to the passage of AB636, DFCS had three important specialized staffing teams that have been invaluable through the generation of two CSAs and SIPs: 1) an internal research and analysis team, 2) an internal projects management team, and 3) an internal parent advocate team.

The Office of Government Relations and Planning, prior to 2004, was already charged with extracting outcomes data related to child welfare services, including disproportionality. This group was able to quickly expand its evaluation activities in support of the CSA and SIP development planning activities.

Santa Clara's Board of Supervisors has provided county general fund monies for the county's Social Services Agency to maintain full-time project managers within its director's office. These experienced professionals are assigned to new initiatives throughout the agency, acting as internal consultants. Two of these managers were assigned to the first CSA and SIP development team. One of these managers was also assigned to the creation of Santa Clara's Differential Response protocol and remains an active member of the management teams overseeing both Differential Response and CSA/SIP.

Prior to the initiation of the first CSA, DFCS operated a number of well-established family resource centers, with attached paid former adult DFCS client mentors, called Parent Advocates. These Parent Advocates were tapped to engage families in the CSA and SIP committees and work groups.

Santa Clara County also benefited from a well-established community collaborative structure that included a Board of Supervisors staffer prior to the first CSA and SIP. Though creating the initial process was very challenging, having a Board of Supervisors representative with pre-existing relationships with many of the community partners selected to participate in the CSA presented another important aid to the CSA development team.

Lessons Learned from Santa Cruz County

The Human Resources Agency (HRA) and Family and Children's Services (FCS) of Santa Cruz County were criticized by some segments of the community upon the submission of the county's first SIP. These community partners felt the initial CSA and SIP were not inclusive and did not provide enough transparency. HRA and FCS administrators and the county's Board of Supervisors have made a coordinated response to these concerns by launching a year-long, comprehensive CSA and SIP effort led by one of the County Supervisors. This effort has already yielded some significant reforms and innovative practices during greatly expanded assessment activities.

Supervisor Mark Stone is the System Improvement Plan Steering Committee Chairperson. His presence has contributed to the addition of key management team members, often directors, from both public and private agencies to the Steering Committee. The community is assured of an improved level of impartiality and transparency during the development process, as the county's child welfare management team is not directing the process. All information shared at the meetings is, de facto, information passed directly to the Board of Supervisors. Even a casual observer will find that the level of organization and collaboration of the attendees has been enhanced by the presence of a County Supervisor.

Santa Cruz's County Self Assessment is an expansive effort designed to ensure that as many questions and concerns surrounding child welfare outcomes and services are addressed within the assessment. HRA has expanded the duties of some of their existing contracted researchers and has made some relatively small investments (maximum of \$15,000) in two other research and evaluation partnerships. The intent is to improve methods and tools used for gathering information related to the CSA while also greatly increasing the amount of information collected to better inform the current CSA. Santa Cruz secured the services of a group of outside researchers and an outside independent quality assurance consultant to ensure their data and data collection techniques are untainted and as informative as possible. A research partner is being utilized to develop valid and reliable community survey instruments.

Santa Cruz's commitment to ensuring that consumer and community partner concerns and suggestions are considered carefully within the CSA and SIP has led to a decision to survey members of all four hundred families receiving child welfare services over a recent two year period. Additionally, the initial assessment activities include efforts to secure answers to over two hundred questions, including questions directly mandated by AB636 outcomes and a number of questions addressing concerns unique to the Santa Cruz community.

All counties work to ensure that its frontline child welfare staff have ownership of each SIP. Santa Cruz made direct inquiries of all staff prior to the initiation of this CSA. In an effort to keep FCS staff engaged throughout the year long development effort, the Steering Committee is providing child welfare staff with written updates within a week of each monthly meeting.

The HRA and the Board of Supervisors anticipate that all services and strategies identified to address AB 636 outcomes will be included in the SIP, including activities to be completed by private agencies and community partners. This will ensure that the plan is supported and implemented as a collab-

orative effort with shared responsibility for measurable improvements.

Challenges

Contra Costa, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz have developed differing agency structures and strategies for meeting the expectations of AB 636, but these counties have identified a number of the same challenges while producing their current CSAs and SIPs.

Ensuring that all child welfare staff, particularly direct services staff, are aware of, engaged in, and accept responsibility for the creation of an accurate and useful SIP remains a challenge. All staff cannot be included in all development activities, but must, in the end, support the activities and outcomes identified in the SIP.

These three counties continue to wrestle with ensuring historical information regarding development efforts, community input, and staff input are considered but not wholly drive future CSA and SIP development activities. Community and agency needs and resources change, sometimes quite significantly due to economic, political or population shifts. Thus, a question remains as to how to incorporate these changes without creating disjointed and historically blind CSA and SIP.

How to best incorporate the county's Peer Quality Case Review results into CSA and SIP development remains a question. Contra Costa, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz have all infused their CSAs and SIPs with some PQCR results, but representatives from each county voiced a desire to improve connectivity between the PQCR process and CSA and SIP development.

These three county child welfare agencies have all embraced the opportunity to demonstrate to their communities, CDSS, and, ultimately, to Congress, a sustained ability to make measurable improvements in child welfare outcomes. What to include in the SIP remains an unanswered question. Child welfare agencies have concern that adding non-mandatory goals and outcomes to a SIP is taking a risk on improving child welfare outcomes not yet formally recognized by state and federal oversight officials. There

is currently a suspicion that any goal not achieved, even those inserted beyond the expectations of AB 636, will be judged as failure.

Thus, some agencies have chosen to generate separate agency strategic plans beyond their SIP in order to support internal innovations aimed at child welfare improvements without drawing negative state or federal attention. The challenge for the counties then becomes ensuring that families, community partners, and staff have access to both the SIP and the strategic plan, and that everyone understands the difference between the two.

Conclusions

California's county child welfare agencies have generated a myriad of planning, management, evaluation, and community engagement practices and tools in order complete Peer Quality Case Reviews, County Self-Assessments and System Improvement Plans. Many counties received technical support from CDSS, Regional Training Academies, and the California Social Work Education Center, yet this assistance was provided primarily during the creation of each county's initial SIP. County agencies, due in part to limited time and resources, continue CSA and SIP development without any consultation and information-sharing with other counties. A review of three Bay Area counties suggests that important, practical lessons learned by individual counties through the development of just two CSAs and SIPs could aid others during future development cycles.

Recommendations

Contra Costa County is encouraged to explore the following recommendations:

- 1 Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services (EHSD) Management Team should consider expanding the internal Research and Development team to include existing staff development personnel and an internal, newly created project management specialist(s) to support
- and monitor all EHSD initiatives and projects. Monies for the newly created position can be secured from current and future grant funds along with monies current utilized to support outside consulting.
- 2 Contra Costa County Children and Family Services could take a leadership role in contacting the California Department of Social Services, the Child Welfare Directors' Association of California and the Children & Family Policy Institute of California to organize a bi-annual PQCR-CSA-SIP Best Practices Conference supported through CDSS SIP technical support funding.
- 3 The county could join with CWDA in lobbying for a change to AB 636 that would allow counties to include "Innovations Outcomes" categories and goals beyond those mandated. If counties achieve or surpassed goals detailed in their Innovations category, they would be rewarded with additional funding beyond the current one-year stipend provided. Additionally, the amended legislation would assure counties that there would not be any monetary penalties or formal criticisms when innovative efforts fall short of desired outcomes.

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