

Maintaining a Low Rate of Foster Care Re-Entry in Sonoma County: Lessons for Santa Clara County

WENDY KINNEAR-RAUSCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Those involved with the child welfare system are entrusted to ensure that “every child in California will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities” (CWS Stakeholders Group).

As social workers in child welfare know, one of the ultimate goals for a family is to develop enough supports, education, and protective capacities so that a family never re-enters the child welfare system again. It is important work that occurs at the case level as well as on an organizational level through an evaluation of how agencies perform on measurable outcomes.

There is a unique mix of demographics, resources, individuals, and modes of practice within each county, yet it is a challenge to look at the struggles and triumphs within each county in the hopes that one can learn something about our own individual work.

Background

Sonoma County is historically known for its low rates of removal of children into foster care. Due to their cautious removal policy, those children and families that do receive family reunification services are often intense cases with long-standing needs that result in a lengthier time for these families to reunify.

Findings

Sonoma County has performed well with low rates of children re-entering the foster care system. However, Santa Clara County has struggled with efforts to lower its rates of foster care re-entry. Interviews and reviews of information throughout both counties revealed the following information. Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children (FY&C) Division’s rate of foster care re-entry is at 4.5%, as measured by the state outcome measures; whereas, Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children’s rate is at 13%. These compare with state and federal rates of 12.7% and 10.1%, respectively.

Sonoma County FY&C Division’s track record of low rates of removal, small case loads, and longer lengths of time receiving family reunification services, all contribute to low rates of foster care re-entry. However, equally as impressive is Sonoma County’s FY&C’s excellent communication throughout the agency and at all levels. All line workers, supervisors, and managers interviewed were able to independently convey the same messages of strengths and concern and how agency policy relate to Sonoma County’s System Improvement Plan and outcome goals.

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Implications and Recommendations

Just as it “takes a village to raise a child”, so it takes an entire coordinated team within child welfare to help support parents and children overcome the barriers that create risk and prevent safety. Directors along with managers set the stage and help create the vision that everyone should collectively work toward. They help establish the building materials with contracts and budget restrictions.

Supervisors organize the tasks of child welfare workers. The workers put it all into practice, using creativity and hard labor. Everyone needs support for the work. Consistent messages and training are critical, as well as focus on common goals. Individuals at all levels within child welfare need to be acknowl-

edged and supported with regular supervision and support. Everyone knows what is at stake - the lives of children and families.

It then takes the discussion at all levels within child welfare to evaluate the work that is being completed in the hopes that better outcomes can be developed.

It is recommended that Santa Clara County change its current training procedures to allow for discussion and more individualized training. It is further recommended that Santa Clara County set standards for supervision, training and support at all levels within the department. It is further recommended that forums for discussion are create to discuss systemic concerns and held on a regular basis.

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Introduction

Child welfare agencies are challenged with the task of intervening in cases of child abuse and neglect in an effort to provide services and supports to both children and families in the hopes of ensuring the family will not encounter abuse again.

It is individualized work, best accomplished on a case-by-case basis, where the unique needs of each family are considered in order to ensure a child's safety and well-being. Agencies, however, are further challenged to evaluate their performance on a larger scale. They need to examine the strategies utilized and ensure consistency in performance by the county as a whole.

Reviews of California's Child Welfare System by the federal Agency of Children and Families (ACF) starting in 2002, revealed a need for increased accountability and consistency in this challenging work with children and families. California's response resulted in a shift throughout the state over the past few years to an evaluation of how services are provided based on measurable outcomes. Every county in California must now utilize strategic, individualized System Improvement Plans (SIPs) and self-evaluations to enhance performance and work toward measurable outcomes.

One such outcome upon which child welfare work hinges is the rate at which children re-enter the foster care system after receiving services. It is an outcome measure that Santa Clara County has struggled to address and one in which Sonoma County has consistently done well. It is this stark contrast between counties that led me on an exploration of how

Sonoma County is able to achieve and sustain a low rate of children re-entering care and whether there were any lessons to be learned for Santa Clara County.

Background

Sonoma County is a mid-sized county located north of San Francisco in the beautiful rolling hills of the wine country. It is the largest county in the North Bay, with a population of over 440,000. This amazing backdrop of vineyards, orchards, redwood forests, small towns, and the Russian River is known for successful practice in child welfare. One of these areas of impressive work is their low rate of children re-entering foster care.

Sonoma County historically is known for a low removal rate of children and has the seventh lowest removal rate in the state. There is also a low rate of children returned to families within the first six months of services. In addition, Sonoma County has struggled with the length of time children stay in "out of home" care away from their parents and has identified this challenge as one of its goals in its System Improvement Plan (SIP).

Sonoma County Juvenile Court has one commissioner who presides over dependency hearings. Sonoma County Family, Youth & Children's (FY&C) Division is represented by County Counsel, and the children are represented by a local private law firm that has served in this capacity for over 15 years. There is one court services social worker who attends all court hearings as the agency representative and provides detailed court information back to the case-carrying social worker.

Sonoma County FY&C's Division has experienced low turnover in its staffing over the past several years, resulting in highly experienced staff at all levels, including managers, supervisors, and case-carrying workers. The agency is currently experiencing major transitions at the upper management levels, including within the FY&C Division. Yet, there is still a sense of seamlessness through this transition, and an evaluation indicates that management turnover has not seriously impacted the day-to-day operations of the agency.

Sonoma County also utilizes a children's shelter, Valley of the Moon Children's Home, to assist in receiving and assessing children's needs, prior to finding a more permanent, appropriate placement for children. There is an aggressive effort to find and place with relatives, and approximately 40% of the children in care are placed with relatives.

Efforts have been made to keep caseloads low within family reunification units. Workers in these units typically have caseloads of 15-18 children. There are two units of family reunification (FR) workers with seven workers and one supervisor in each. These are cases in which the court has ordered family reunification services. The FR worker provides services to the family through successful reunification to family maintenance (FM), when a child returns home, and then continues to work with the family until the case is dismissed. If a family does not reunify, the case is then transferred to another worker in the Permanency Planning unit within the agency.

In addition, throughout the FY&C workforce, there is a philosophy of taking time in reunification of children with their parents. A quick return of children to parents of less than six months may indicate that the removal of the children was a premature decision. There has been a concerted effort on the part of the FY&C Division, law enforcement, and juvenile dependency court to try to keep children at home and avoid a removal. This conservative philosophy of intervention can be seen at the initial stage of removal, as well as at the detention hearing, where all parties challenge one another on the necessity of the initial removal of children.

As a result of the low rates of removal, interventions within the existing family reunification cases tend to be more intensive and prolonged, with multiple concerns and issues a family must work to address. In addition, Sonoma County typically continues services, such as counseling, to a family for as long as needed, avoiding timelines for stopping services.

Further, there has historically been a policy of extended trial home visits that would often extend past the eighteen-month court review hearing. This idea was supported both through the court system and through the agency. There is now a concerted effort to ensure that all trial home visits are completed prior to the eighteen-month hearing as part of Sonoma County's SIP.

Sonoma County FY&C Division is also known for its collaboration with community partners and community-based organizations. There are a multitude of informal team meetings in an effort to ensure everyone is working together and to staff and learn from challenging cases.

Findings

California Child Welfare Services Outcome & Accountability County Data Report, dated January 2007, revealed the following statistical data.

Rate of Foster Care Re-Entry. This measures the number of children who re-enter foster care following reunification or guardianship within 12 months. Current statistics indicated the following:

- Federal 7/1/04 to 6/30/05: 10.1%
- State 7/1/04 to 6/30/05: 12.7%

An evaluation of Sonoma County's AB636 outcome measures demonstrates a continual decrease over time regarding their rate of foster care re-entry. Current statistics indicated the following:

- Federal measure April, 2004 to present: 4.5%
- State measure April, 2004 to present: 3.3%

In comparison, Sonoma County has been challenged to focus its attention on "timely reunification" for families, or length of time children spend in care.

As of 3/31/06, Sonoma County's rate is 39.7% a dramatic decrease from 57.2%. The state measure is

68.2%. This is the outcome measure of children who entered care for the first time and were reunified within 12 months.

Interviews with staff reiterated the philosophy for Sonoma County of “not removing children easily” and trying to ensure that when a child goes home they stay there. Descriptions of cases and other discussions clearly demonstrated the county’s culture of taking “removals” and “returns home” very seriously.

An evaluation of rates of re-entry for Santa Clara County from 2000 to 2005 has revealed fairly static outcomes. There appear to be no identifiable patterns or triggers to Santa Clara County’s higher rate of foster care re-entry. Santa Clara County’s state measure rate as of June 2005 is 13.0%.

In regards to Santa Clara County’s measures on the length of time in foster care, the current state measure rate is at 40.9% for July 2004 to June 2005 which down from 45.2% the previous reporting period of April 2004 to March 2005.

Detailed interviews were conducted and evaluations of written documentation examined to try to better understand how Sonoma County works in order to accomplish one of the biggest goals within child welfare, reducing the likelihood that families and children will re-enter the child welfare system.

Review of Sonoma County’s Self Assessment and System Improvement Plan, as well as interviews with staff at management, supervisory, and worker levels, all appear to note the intensity of the family reunification services and the importance of support over time. Nick Honey, Director of the FY&C Division, in referring to how family reunification services are provided, stated: “we take time to get it right.”

An evaluation of the two family reunification units revealed regular weekly supervision of all unit members, as well as weekly unit meetings and a joint unit meeting once per month in order to problem solve systemic issues within FR services and to hold individual case staffings. Supervisors from both units confirmed average caseloads of 17-22 children, but stated that efforts were always made to ensure that if a caseload was over 20 children, it was only for a short period of time. Current statistics for case-

loads within FR revealed averages of 18-22 children per caseload. Most cases were a mix of both FR and FM cases.

Skilled & Committed front line supervisors provide excellent support to their staff. Their staff firmly believe that their successes with the families they served are partially due to the support and quality of supervision they receive.

The support described by supervisors detailed examples of coaching and advocacy at both a system level, as well as supporting the work done at the client level. Supervisor’s stressed the importance of weekly supervision and staying “in tune” with each worker for emotional support, promoting self-care and worker well-being, and preventing burn-out. Supervisors described the support they provide as paralleling the work each worker does for the families served.

Supervisors also discussed the importance of translating agency regulations and policies into meaningful terms, and taking the time, both individually and in unit meetings to further discuss and clarify how policies relate to good case work. There was an effort to help workers “buy into the changes and policy implementations.” There were descriptions of “field trips” to actively support the worker by helping with some of the tasks at hand on a particular case, and to apply principles learned in training.

All supervisors interviewed described agency practice in providing the following supports to workers:

- Weekly individual supervision;
- Weekly, or every other week, unit meetings for training and case consultation; and
- Monthly joint FR meetings.

In addition to these meetings, the utilization of other team meetings within the agency is common practice. Staff detailed descriptions of building teams of professionals in order to facilitate better communication hold everyone accountable, and better meet the needs of a family. This practice is aimed also at modeling collaborative work with the family. Some of these meetings are regular monthly meetings, and other meetings are created as need arises.

Supervisors and managers described regular staffing on cases with section managers as a means for support and direction. Supervisors noted the support of management in advocating for case-carrying workers. Twice per month there is a case management council, which is a meeting with FY&C Division supervisors in family reunification along with other community partners, such as Juvenile Probation, Mental Health, Public Health, and representatives from the local school districts.

At the mid-level, managers from the FY&C Division meet with community partners once a month, in order to further troubleshoot cases and ensure common goals. Then there is a quarterly Commissioner and Director's meeting in order to discuss obstacles and how all parties can work together for the benefit of the families served.

FR workers described the demanding level of work within FR services. Casework was described as rigorous and intense. Support from the supervisor and manager was described as a major force in being successful. Realization of the impact that this challenging work can have on an individual worker was also stressed as an important consideration.

Supervisors and managers were described as knowledgeable and workers felt valued and part of a team. Team discussions were held to better understand policies and SIP goals and to ask questions. Respect for workers from supervisors and management was noted as being critical in order to demonstrate respect for the families being served.

It is clear that Sonoma County staff, from the management level to the individual case worker, share common visions, goals, and understandings as to the work that is being completed and the work that needs to be done in child welfare, as it relates to their SIP. There is consistency in the messages contained within Sonoma County's SIP, and in the descriptions and discussions at all levels within the agency. Everyone, including stakeholders and community partners, express issues of concern and areas of strength.

There is recognition that Sonoma County may do well with low rates of foster care re-entry in part

due to their historically low rate of removal. There is an understanding that workers in Sonoma County have traditionally been slow to return children home to the parents in order to access as many resources as possible. There is also an indication that low case-loads, which enable workers to do intensive work with families and children, help to lower rates of foster care re-entry.

Sonoma County's moderate size and great use of meetings and collaborative communication across all divisions within the agency is a great help in accomplishing their goals. In addition, the constant message of support to the individual worker, small group forums for discussion of cases, training, and regular supervision, both at an individual and unit level, are all impressive. Staff is experienced and strength-based in terms of their approach.

In addition, there was support and regular meetings between supervisors and managers. The result appears to be consistent messages and goals being worked on at the worker, supervisor, and manager levels.

Implications and Recommendations for Santa Clara County

In moving toward recommendations and possible lessons learned to apply in Santa Clara County, I have to proceed with extreme caution. Every county has its own unique demographics and characteristics of populations served, staff, and structure within the agency. It is for this reason that the outcome-based measures for California specifically challenges each county to have its own System Improvement Plan (SIP) and Self Evaluation. It is a challenge for counties to try to learn from one another without fully comparing their performances.

There were multiple observations and potential insights from Sonoma County that could further implications for Santa Clara County. For instance, low rates of removal, lower caseload rates, and longer lengths of time receiving family reunification services seem to impact the low rates of foster care re-entry for Sonoma County. And one could challenge the philosophical idea that children staying out

of the home for longer lengths of time may lead to lower rates of return to care. However, in the end, I chose to focus on staff support and the consistency of the goals the entire agency appeared to be working toward; and the possible effect of this support and shared goals may have on individual case work.

As stated earlier, a consistent goal for Santa Clara County, and one in which it continues to struggle without notable gains, is the rate at which children re-enter the foster care system after reunification or guardianship. Santa Clara County could benefit from a consistency in messages that emanate throughout the department at all levels as well as shared knowledge at every level about the SIP and the goals towards which the department is working.

I was challenged to take a look at whether Santa Clara County could do a better job at creating this support and whether this could impact work at the case level, and more specifically, reduce the rate of foster care re-entry.

My recommendations for Santa Clara County aimed at increasing the internal structure of individualized support and training in an effort to ensure staff at all levels have the information and support they need to do the difficult work with families. These recommendations are aimed to help provide the following:

- Ensuring a clear understanding throughout Santa Clara County Department of Family & Children's Services (DFCS) of the SIP goals and how individualized case work contributes or works against these goals.
- Helping staff be more aware of how their individual efforts contribute to agency goals and desired outcomes. Line workers need to be able to see the bigger picture. Case-carrying staff need to see how policies relate to them and how they can effect change;
- Providing consistency in how staff are provided on-going support and training at each of the different levels within the agency; and
- Supporting staff at all levels, both as workers and as individuals, for the challenging work that they do on a daily basis.

Next Steps

Santa Clara currently utilizes monthly mandatory training for all staff through the staff development department. There are concerns that specific questions from line staff cannot be answered in the training and that staff need to wait for written answers to the questions asked. In addition, these large mandatory staff trainings include so many staff that it is not realistic to be able to spark discussion or share case examples, nor for there to be feedback from staff regarding their views and insights.

Further, there is a concern that there is inconsistency throughout Santa Clara County regarding the frequency and substance of both individual and unit supervision. In addition, there is not a regular forum for discussion between program managers and supervisors for evaluation and feedback of systemic issues.

The following steps and changes are recommended to address these concerns. These changes need to stem from the management and training divisions within DFCS. They include:

- 1 Efforts to allow for more in-depth follow up to the mandatory training in small group settings to allow for further discussion and deeper understanding. There needs to be further discussion as to the best course of action to address this need.
- It is recommended that this additional training to support policies and procedures needs to occur in a small group format in order to address specific questions and to give detailed examples. This would allow supervisors to assess line workers understanding of the information and provide additional clarity if needed.
- In addition, specific training would ensure that staff in particular positions receive the needed training in a forum that allows for case specific examples and questions that apply directly to a particular job function.
- 2 Greater exposure for workers to Santa Clara County's SIP and how it works to accomplish these goals.
- Ensure that SIP goals are more specifically tied to training and that staff are given specific exam-

ples how their work will directly impact the bigger picture. It is important that workers see how critical their work is and how they are working toward common goals.

- It is also important that supervisors and managers receive feedback from line workers.

Steps to achieve these outcomes would need to include:

- Guidelines by management for individual supervision, unit meetings, and support to line workers.
- Supervisory training for all supervisors, who have not received any renewed supervisory training in the past three years.
- Support for supervisors and workers and acknowledgment for those doing an exemplary job of support to their staff and on cases.
- Regular, weekly individual supervision and weekly group supervision identified and supported as a means to further support and train workers.
- Utilization of case staffing at all levels as a learning tool and to receive support. These case staffings should emphasize team building and learning from one another.

The purpose of these changes would be to work to create additional support for workers and a means by which the entire agency could start “speaking the same language.” If the entire agency is consistent in its goals and efforts, this consistency can be harnessed in order to have further discussions or concentrated efforts to work on more specific goals and changes for child welfare.

It is also important that line workers and supervisors understand the decisions being made by management to work towards best practice models and evidenced-based practice. This information needs to be translated in order for workers to understand how it relates to them and their individual work with families and children.

Opinions are important from the worker, supervisor, and manager levels. There is value in the entire child welfare team. Each plays critical roles in the success of children and families, and each needs to be

able to see the bigger picture and evaluate the work they are doing at both the case level, and on a larger scale, to achieve better outcomes.

Conclusion

I entered this journey of exploration within Sonoma County, not knowing what I would find. I leave with a greater understanding and appreciation for the workers within Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children’s Services and excitement around ideas of change for Santa Clara Department of Family and Children’s Services.

Santa Clara County has a strong foundation and workforce and is known for innovative programs and “cutting edge work” with children and families. In addition, Santa Clara County is known for the creative use of meetings and collaborative communication with community partners. Perhaps, a closer look at its communication and support internally, within all divisions of the agency, as well as a look at more individualized training and case staffing could help it improve its work with children and families.

As a society, we acknowledge that it takes a village to raise a child, and I contend that it takes work at all levels within child welfare to support parents and children in their path to change.

In closing, I hold tremendous respect for those that give back of themselves within this work and continue to be impressed with the creativity and commitment of those in child welfare. Collectively, we support children’s well being and decrease the number of families and children re-entering the child welfare system. It is hoped that a better forum can be created to work toward improved practice goals and identify the barriers to achieving those organizational goals.

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Resources

- AB636 Measures 4/1/05-3/31/06 for Sonoma County.
- California's Child and Family Services Review Peer Quality Case Review. Sonoma County, 2006.
- California Child Welfare Services Outcome & Accountability County Data Report. California, January 2007.
- California Child Welfare Services Outcome & Accountability County Date Report (Child Welfare Supervised Caseload). Sonoma, October 2006.
- Family, Youth and Children's Services. Performance Levels Reference Sheet, April 2006 for Sonoma County.
- Santa Clara County Child Welfare Services AB636 Quarterly Data Report, January 2007.
- Sonoma County Child Welfare Self Assessment, June 2004.
- Sonoma County System Improvement Plan, Updated 2006.
- Summary of CWS Stakeholders Conceptual Framework, February 2003.

