

The Search for Permanency Within the Family System: Santa Clara County's Approach

ABBY WEXLER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

History

Initially, Child Welfare Redesign helped counties to make a paradigm shift from focusing on compliance to looking at what actual outcomes social work creates for children. Though this shift caused agencies to consider social work practice through the eyes of the child, outcome data often led to more questions than answers regarding practice. In the sea of data originally procured from CWS/CMS during the first round of county self-assessments, priority was given to safety outcomes in an effort to focus counties in on the central purpose of child welfare.

To that effect, much of Santa Cruz County's first System Improvement Plan centered on improving indicators pertaining to safety. Though safety continues to remain the primary area of improvement in Santa Cruz, the county's second assessment has helped to sharpen the agency's focus on the broader concepts of permanency and well being.

One fundamental indicator regarding both of these outcome goals is how many initial relative placements the agency makes for children. Though Santa Cruz has improved in this area since 2005, there is a great deal more the agency should do to continue this improving trend. The county cannot be satisfied with outcomes that are "good enough" with respect to a child's experience in foster care.

Findings

As a result, I sought practice solutions by interning in Santa Clara and learning how that county facilitates relative placements that also provide a concurrent plan for the child. I learned that Santa Clara focuses attention on assessing the child's physical and mental health needs during the initial stages of pre-placement and placement. Santa Clara social workers also have a mechanism for initiating the relative approval process prior to obtaining protective custody. Further, Santa Clara supports case-carrying social workers by providing some assistance for relative placement through the Placement Bureau. Additionally, through the structure and funding provided to the county by the Family to Family Initiative, social workers include extended family in the decision-making process with respect to placement and concurrency. Finally, Santa Clara offers these families on going support services through the Relative Support Team.

Abby Wexler is a Social Work Supervisor with Family & Children's Services of the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency.

Recommendations

Santa Cruz County has recently begun to make significant changes in the way relatives are assessed and approved for placement, in order to facilitate initial placement with kin more often. However, relative placements in Santa Cruz could be further supported to maintain placements by conducting better assessments of children prior to placement. Further, the agency should provide childcare or respite care so that relatives are able to participate in foster parent training more easily.

Additionally, these placements would benefit from a Relative Support Team or Kinship Center to assist with community-building and support. Finally, Santa Cruz County should seriously consider implementing the Family to Family Initiative to provide additional structure and funding regarding placement decisions and family-focused care for the child.

The Search for Permanency Within the Family System: Santa Clara County's Approach

ABBY WEXLER

Background

Historically in Santa Cruz County, case-carrying social workers shoulder the primary burden of finding and completing placements for foster youth with very little institutionalized support. Emergency Response social workers have to make initial placement decisions quickly and, at times, this decision-making is dictated by which placement will keep the child safe while taking the least amount of time to facilitate. Traditionally, this quick pace has resulted in few initial relative placements due to the fact that approving relative homes creates an even larger burden on the social worker's time at a point in the process when the worker has little time to spare.

Though social workers in Santa Cruz County receive more placement support than ever before, often times the help offered focuses on assessing the potential placement's physical space and completing paperwork. It is still the case-carrying social worker's responsibility to assess whether a particular relative caregiver can meet the needs of a particular child. Often times, during the initial placement, the social worker does not know enough about the child, the potential relative caregiver, and the family system as a whole in order to make a determination as to whether or not the relative is the *best* kinship care option for the child. This inability to facilitate the best placement option at the outset of the dependency places the child's permanency and well-being at risk.

According to the April 2007 California Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability County Data Report, from October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006, social workers in Santa Cruz County placed children in relative care as the initial placement 20.3% of the time (as compared to 15.5% the year

prior). 41.1% of foster children in Santa Cruz County experienced relative care as their primary placement for that same timeframe (as compared to 36.3% the year prior).¹ Though these figures demonstrate an improving trend in relative placements, the percentages still fall far short of Santa Cruz County's goals with respect to achieving relative placement and the concurrency that results from those placements.

In order to address this issue, my Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development Program Internship focused on assessing how Santa Clara County social workers balance the demands of placing children in relative care as quickly as possible and with the best outcomes possible for permanency. I chose Santa Clara because that county participates in the Family to Family Initiative and has resources already in place to bring relatives together and include them in the process of long-term planning for children.

Why Should Kinship Care Be the Goal?

Research on kinship care indicates that children placed with relatives are less likely to experience multiple placements, are more likely to be able to live with their siblings, have a greater chance of remaining in their school of origin, and are less likely to re-enter foster care after returning to their parents' care.² In addition, children in kinship care more frequently indicate that they like who they live with, want their current placement to be their permanent home, and "always felt loved", as compared to children placed in

¹California Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability County Data Report, Santa Cruz, April 2007

²"Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?" Conway and Hutson, 2007

non-relative care.³ Clearly, their data indicates that a way to significantly minimize the impact of removing children from their home is by placing them with extended family.

Why Should Concurrent Planning Be the Goal?

In “Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows”, published by Child Welfare Information Gateway, a review of research regarding concurrent planning indicates that effective programs typically made “aggressive” searches for extended family members and placed children in “foster/adoptive or kinship placements” towards the beginning of the dependency process.⁴ Additionally, one study revealed “each *additional* placement a child experienced reduced the odds of attaining permanency within a year by 32 percent.”⁵ Finally, the research review leads one to conclude that “early and aggressive efforts should be made to identify all reasonable permanency options for children entering foster care” in order to facilitate successful concurrency outcomes.⁶

With these benefits in mind, having clear expectations for social workers regarding making deliberate, informed permanent placement decisions becomes paramount to the success of the child while in foster care.

History of Placement Practice in Santa Clara County

According to Doug Southard, Director of the Children’s Shelter for the County of Santa Clara, Emergency Response social workers in that county are not likely to facilitate relative placements as an initial placement due to time constraints in practice.⁷ This assertion is confirmed by Santa Clara County’s Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability County Data Report, April 2007, which indicates that from October 2005 to September 2006

only 9.7% of foster children were initially placed with relatives.⁸

According to Mr. Southard, historically, a newly removed child was placed in the Santa Clara County Children’s Shelter while Shelter staff assessed his or her needs and the child awaited a placement that could most appropriately provide for those needs. However, in order to immediately establish a more home-like placement setting for the majority of children possible, the trend in Santa Clara County has been to move away from shelter care.

Mr. Southard remarked that this is still a struggle. This challenge is highlighted by the most recent County Outcome data which indicate that from September 2005 to October 2006, 62.6% of Santa Clara County foster children were initially placed into shelter care.⁹ According to Mr. Southard, changing this trend is a primary focus for the agency. He expressed that relative placement with concurrent planning is important. However, in practice, these goals tend not to be the social worker’s primary focus during the initial placement process. Most frequently a child is placed in an emergency foster placement while he or she awaits the outcome of a Team Decision-Making meeting. While the child awaits the outcome of the Team Decision making meeting, his or her physical and mental health needs are typically assessed in an effort to ascertain what further services the child may need.

Key Elements, Successes and Outcomes of Relative Placement and Concurrent Planning in Santa Clara County

EMERGENCY RESPONSE PHASE

According to Stanley Lee, Program Manager for the Placement Support Bureau, though Emergency Response workers are not typically in a position to complete the relative placement process, if there is an opportunity during the protective custody, they do

³Ibid.

⁴“Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows”, Child Welfare Information Gateway, April 2005

⁵Ibid

⁶Ibid

⁷Doug Southard, Children’s Shelter Director

⁸California Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability County Data Report, Santa Clara, April 2007

⁹Ibid.

gather initial information about relatives from parents and children.¹⁰

Daniel Vo, Dependency Investigations Supervisor for Santa Clara County, confirmed that the agency is attempting to move in the direction of facilitating initial relative placements by convening an “out of custody” staffing whenever possible. This approach allows the social worker to discuss the possible relative placement options prior to placing the child into protective custody, thereby expediting the approval process without the hindrance of the custody “clock” ticking.¹¹ If a social worker is able to immediately identify a relative, workers from the Placement Bureau can assist with background checks on family members as well as offer other placement support. However, according to Mr. Vo, actual relative assessment assistance from the Placement Bureau has been limited recently, so it falls to the case carrying social worker to complete the relative approval process. This, of course, is time-consuming and difficult to facilitate when the social worker is faced with new investigations requiring his or her immediate attention. As a result, social workers most often place children in non-relative placements, though they do make the attempt to ensure these non-relative caregivers are willing to provide a concurrent plan for the child.

DEPENDENCY INVESTIGATIONS PHASE

As the family moves into the juvenile court process, the Dependency Investigations worker makes a concerted effort to gather information about relatives and convene a Team Decision-Making meeting with the family. At times, a staff member from the Relative Finding Team will also attend the meeting in an effort to help elicit more information from known relatives about unknown relatives. According to Maggie Magnano, Social Work Coordinator for Santa Clara County, this relative finder can assist the family with identifying available and appropriate family members, using techniques such as genogram diagramming.¹²

The child's first Team Decision-Making meeting typically takes place approximately one week after the child was taken into protective custody. Team Decision-Making is part of a larger Family To Family protocol established by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1992, which is designed to assist foster children by helping child welfare agencies focus on bringing a child's family, extended family and community together to care for the child.¹³ The details of the Family To Family Initiative are beyond the scope of this paper, but, in general, the fundamentals of the Initiative provide structure and financial support toward the goal of involving extended family and community in the child's life. Team Decision-Making meetings are convened any time a child needs a change in placement.

At the initial Team Decision-Making meeting, the family identifies relatives or extended family members who would like to be assessed for placement. It is at this meeting that concurrent planning is addressed in earnest as a necessary goal of placement. Relatives who indicate a willingness to adopt the child if need be are prioritized for assessment. Though the Dependency Investigations social worker uses an assessment tool to establish the level of risk and safety to the child in a given relative's care, the Team Decision-Making process is, in and of itself, a way for the agency to assess a given family member's commitment to concurrency.

According to Wendy Kinnear-Rausch, Program Manager for the Placement Support Bureau, the relative's commitment to concurrency is, at times, difficult to ascertain because a person may say he or she is willing to adopt a child during the initial Team Decision-Making meeting, but the commitment to this level of concurrency may change as the case progresses through the dependency process.¹⁴ At times, relatives may change their minds about adoption. Some reasons why they may change their minds are as follows: 1) the relative's relationship with the parent, 2) their hope that the parent may eventually

¹⁰Stanley Lee, Program Manager for the Placement Support Bureau, Santa Clara County

¹¹Daniel Vo, Dependency Investigations Supervisor, Santa Clara County

¹²Maggie Magnano, Social Work Coordinator, Santa Clara County

¹³www.aecf.org

¹⁴Wendy Kinnear-Rausch, Program Manager for the Placement Support Bureau, Santa Clara County

make the necessary changes to parent appropriately, 3) cultural variations regarding adoption and how adoption impacts roles within a family, and, finally, 4) newly identified needs of the child that may prove too difficult for the relative to meet on a long-term basis. According to both Ms. Kinnear-Rausch and Mr. Lee, the agency is successful in establishing relative placements for the child prior to disposition about 50% of the time. Mr. Vo confirms this estimate.

MAINTAINING RELATIVE PLACEMENTS

According to Ms. Kinnear-Rausch and Mr. Lee, if an identified relative caregiver wishes to adopt the child, that person must participate in foster parent training. If the family member is merely interested in legal guardianship, he or she *may* participate in foster parent training, but the agency does not mandate that he or she does so. Additional training is available to relative caregivers through a local community college if the child has a specialized need for which the relative caregiver could use support. In order to facilitate participation in training, relative caregivers have the opportunity to utilize respite care and childcare at the expense of the agency.

Another service available to relative caregivers is the Relative Support Team. This team offers support to relative placements that care for children with behavioral issues. Additionally, the team helps the caregiver access resources in the community to support the placement.

With respect to a relative caregiver's inclusion in the dependency process, both Ms. Kinnear-Rausch and Mr. Lee indicate that policy and procedure dictate that the relative be notified of court hearings and encouraged to participate. However, there is a concern that relatives rarely attend court hearings. It is unknown whether or not social workers are actively encouraging relative caregivers to attend these hearings. As to whether or not the relative caregiver is an active participant in the case planning process, both managers stated that relatives are informed of what they are ordered to do for the child by the court, but that they are not typically included in creating the case plan for the child.

Implications and Recommendations for Santa Cruz County

During this assessment of Santa Clara County's relative placement and concurrent planning process, Santa Cruz County took significant steps toward changing its own agency practice with respect to these goals. In May 2007, Santa Cruz County will launch a relative home-finding protocol that significantly changes the responsibilities of the relative search and placement process. Specifically, the Homefinding worker will take primary responsibility for the child at the point of Protective Custody, allowing the Emergency Response social worker to focus on the investigation. The Homefinding worker will engage the Search worker in immediately locating family members so they can be assessed for initial placement. After initial relative placement, with the support of extended family and the parents, the agency will convene a Family Meeting to establish which relative is the best option for concurrent placement for the child.

Further, Santa Cruz is creating a Concurrent Planning Policy and Procedure that can be woven into the Relative Homefinding Policy and Procedure. Linking these two policies is a significant step towards establishing practices that specifically focus on permanency and well-being for children in Santa Cruz County.

However, Santa Cruz County would benefit from additional resources utilized by Santa Clara County. Specifically, use of an assessment center prior to placement would likely assist in maintaining concurrent relative placements because the family member would make an informed choice about whether or not he or she can commit to the child for the long term. Additionally relative caregivers in Santa Cruz could benefit from the added support of receiving free childcare so they can attend needed training. Furthermore, implementation of a Relative Support Team, or Kinship Center, would provide these caregivers a means to access community resources and establish support networks. In fiscal year 2007-2008 Santa Cruz County will, in fact, utilize Kinship Support Services Program planning funds

to assess needs and plan for development of a Kinship Support Center.

Finally, Santa Cruz County would greatly benefit from becoming part of the Family To Family Initiative because this initiative provides the structure and funding to take a holistic approach to care by involving the family and the community at deeper levels. The techniques outlined in the Family To Family Initiative would focus the agency's efforts on facilitating the least disruptive, most permanent plan for the child. Santa Cruz County does intend to initiate a planning process for Family To Family early in fiscal year 2007-2008.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Doug Southard, Stanley Lee, Wendy Kinnear-Rausch, Maggie Magnano and Daniel Vo for taking time out of their very busy schedules to help me understand how Santa Clara County implements best practices designed to create permanence and well-being for children in Santa Clara county.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Santa Cruz County administration, specifically to Cecilia Espinola, Ellen Timberlake and Judy Yokel, for allowing me the opportunity to further my professional development by participating in the BASSC Executive Development Program.

