

PRESERVING FAMILY PRESERVATION IN SONOMA COUNTY

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INTRODUCTION

As my internship for the BASK Executive Development Program, I selected Sonoma as my county to visit. Sonoma County is highly noted for filing on the dependency of minors taken into protective custody at a ratio of 3 times less than the state average. Based on this statistic I think it is a fair assumption that a far greater number of cases that might go into dependency in other counties enter the Family Maintenance Program in Sonoma County. This impressive statistic is a direct result of this county's philosophy in child abuse cases that all efforts to help keep the family intact must be exhausted before embarking toward dependency.

Those of us in the field of child welfare are quite cognizant of the costs involved in dependency cases as well as the follow-up costs of the court proceedings, not to mention the expenses of out of home placements. But the basic premise of Sonoma County for not filing for dependency unless it is truly necessary, is the belief that a child should not be subject to any unnecessary trauma. The emotional trauma experience by the children being removed from their parents unnecessarily is a very high price for the child to pay. If the department can keep the child in the home while maintaining the safety of that child, then the best interests of the child is truly being observed. Numerous studies have clearly documented the negative long-term effects of unnecessary removal; in other studies placing kids in foster homes or with relatives did not fare out any better or worse than keeping the children with the parents (i.e. abuse in foster homes. foster kids ending up homeless after reaching the age of 18).

BRIEF HISTORY

Sonoma County incorporated this unique philosophy of providing services into their department long before the arrival of family preservation. In my discussion with Nick Valenchesky, Bureau manager of Family and Children's Services, the push for this approach began back in the early seventies when he came to Sonoma County to promote the concept of putting the money up front for supportive services while the child remained in the home. Initially this took some concerted effort on the part of the department. By establishing a close working relationship with Juvenile Court and making services readily available to families in a collaborative effort with community agencies, the approach became widely accepted by the local community.

Over the years this approach became so well known and accepted that other counties throughout the state would come to visit in order to explore the program for possible use in their own county. It also became a selling point for many workers who were interested in the concept and at the same time seeking employment. Even today some workers in this department state that it was this very approach of working with families that brought them into this county. Nick Valenchesky adds to this point by stressing that over the years the department developed a reputation for having a low turn over rate of employees as well as maintaining a highly competent pool of social workers.

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Because of the strong relationship and clear understanding between the Juvenile Court and the department, it was clear that if a social worker was considering filing dependency on a case, that they needed to document and present to the court that true reasonable efforts had indeed been provided to the family. If for some reason this could not be established then the petition was denied and the case was returned to the department with the stipulation that the department either provide services or connect the family for service. One social worker stated that if a parent went into court and stated that services previously provided had been ineffectual or inadequately provided by whatever agency, then the court would lean in the direction of the parent and return the case back to the department so that services could be provided. Over the years it became quite clear to the social work staff what cases could be presented in Juvenile Court and those that could not.

FAMILY MAINTENANCE, VOLUNTARILY

The Family Maintenance Program in Sonoma County consist mainly of cases where parents have voluntarily sought services from the department due to crises or problems in the family. In other cases the department has encouraged and or has strongly recommend to the family that they obtain services due to incidents of child abuse. In a small percentage (approximately 10%) of the cases, the parents have been court ordered to receive services as the child remains in the home and the family completes a service plan.

Thus 90% of the cases that receive Family Maintenance Services come primarily from four areas.

First there are self-referrals, referrals made by parents who are in a crisis and under a stressful situation. They are fearful that they may abuse their kids and therefore seek out services to help reduce the stress, hoping to eliminate or diminish the risk of child abuse. Some of these self-referrals involve families that have received services from the department before and are quite aware that the department will accept them for service if the social worker assesses that the child is at risk for abuse.

Secondly emergency response social workers, after having assessed an incident of child abuse, refer the family for services, feeling that the family could best be helped in this manner rather than pushing the case through the court. The case is then monitored by the assigned social worker who continually assesses the home for risk of further abuse as well as working with the family and helping them complete the service plan.

Thirdly in cases where the incident of abuse is more serious, the family is offered an opportunity to receive services with the clear understanding that if the parents do not follow through on services as stipulated in the service plan, then the county will file a petition. The parents sign a form with a clear understanding of this stipulation as well assigning a contract of services they are to complete.

The last group comes from those cases that have been in the court system but are now ready to move to the Family Maintenance Program while receiving services on a voluntary basis. The home situation will be monitored for some time prior to closing the case completely.

Looking over the intake log over the last year and a half, I was able to determine that close to 60% of the cases in the Family Maintenance Program (excluding those that have been to court-ordered) were self-referrals, parents calling the department asking to receive services. Over 30% of the latter group stated they were over stressed and or needed to improve their parenting skills. About 18 % indicated to the intake worker that there was an issue of physical abuse (might or have hit my child) in the home. It could not be determined exactly how many but some of these parents calling for voluntary service were previous clients. having received FM Services before.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

Over recent years the FM program has lost a number of social workers to various other programs located outside the main office. There was a time when there almost as twice as many workers in this FM program as now. Some social workers see this reduction as a decline of the FM Program as they have known it and that the reduction is just a sign of the times, with family preservation no longer as popular as it once was. Along with this thinking is the belief that the department is being pressured to conform to the national cry that child protective services place more emphasis on rights of children to a "good home" and less emphasis on parental rights.

Because of the decline of the work pool of the FM Program, social workers and supervisors are of the opinion that strain has been placed on the workers to the extent that it is effecting their abilities to perform their job appropriately and in a professional manner. Added to this is the belief that the cases coming to FM now appear to be more severe and demanding, especially in self-referrals. An increase in population, changes in ethnic composition, urban sprawl, gang activity and increased poverty are just some of the factors that can add explanation to this belief.

Workers also question whether the administration is really committed to maintaining the FM Program as it always has, especially because of the loss of workers over the years. Administration counters, stating that it continues to fully support the approach of providing services at the forefront as it has for so many years and adds that it will continue to push to regain those positions. Now whether administration will be able to do this is another question, considering the decline in resources and as well as other obvious political realities. Administration adds that there has been a demand in the community for these other positions, such as social workers in the schools, and that there is just less money in the department's budget. Lastly FM services are not mandated and therefore are the first to go when the budget needs to be trimmed.

Some social workers and supervisors were critical of the intake process in that families were at times too easily accepted for services by some social workers even though the child was not at risk for abuse. Yes the family was experiencing a crisis or problem but child abuse was not at issue. A better criteria of what determines an appropriate referral for FM services needed to be developed so that all workers could apply the same criteria.

Also social workers felt that some of the parents calling to request service knew the "correct words" to use to be accepted for services (along with some coaching from local agencies), rather

than intake social workers using a more elaborate approach in assessing the need for service. What the family was seeking was free access to some community service such as respite or child care rather than child abuse being at issue. The issue for the workers was that there needed to be more consistency among the workers in terms of screening some these referrals.

CONCLUSION

I believe there are three components of the Sonoma County Family Maintenance Program that could be incorporated into the Santa Clara County Child Welfare Services. Aside from cases of severe maltreatment and cases where there is no assurance of safety for the child, families need to be given the opportunity to rectify problems of child abuse before the case ends up in Juvenile Court. Reasonable efforts means that there is a clear trail of services that have been provided to the family in efforts to stop any further abuse. Sonoma County is a firm believer in this concept and the key to their success is the department's concerted effort to work closely with the Juvenile Court and the community agencies providing services to these families.

Secondly some intake workers in Sonoma County do screen out certain calls alleging child abuse. By making further inquiry into the allegations and making collateral contacts via the telephone, the intake worker is able to divert the low risk cases to an outside agency. The child abuse report is taken and documented for possible future reference. But the family is referred for service to address the issues at hand without a social worker having to make a home visit. Again the close and firm working relationship with community agencies as well as the understanding that the agency can call the department should issues of child abuse become of serious concerns is the key to this collaborative effort.

I did a random sample of 178 cases taken into protective custody during a 14 month period (96' & 97"). In sixty-three percent (63%) of these cases, the children were released to the parent or parents, to a relative via the parent or finally to a relative. Clearly this indicates that every effort is being made by the department to divert cases away from the Juvenile Court and allowing the children to be placed with their parents or a familiar caretaker as the issues of abuse are being addressed. Again this is an impressive statistic.

I think it is worthy to note that Santa Clara County has currently placed social workers at the children's shelter in an effort to divert children away from dependency and attempt reduce the unnecessary trauma of being away from their parents. It has also introduced Family Conference Model by training over 40 social workers to use this method with families to again avert unnecessary agony for the children and their parents. Briefly the Family Conference Model is a process that brings the family, extended family relatives, close friends, community supporters and anyone able to help the family into one setting in order to come with a plan to deal with the issues that have brought this family to the attention of the Department of Family & Children's Services.