

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program: A Community Collaborative

MIGNON J. EVANS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In 1995, Marin County was one of six California counties to implement a Youth Pilot Project (YPP) via Assembly Bill 1741 (AB1741), which allowed counties to apply for a waiver to utilize state foster care funds for intensive services designed to: 1) allow children at imminent risk of placement to remain in their homes, and 2) move children already in placement to a lower level of care or back to their own homes. Marin has now successfully operated YPP for twelve years.

This case study focuses on YPP, because of its continued success in Marin County. It explores how such a program would fit in with Sonoma County's mission, initiatives, community collaborative, and System Improvement Plan (SIP) outcomes. Sonoma County is currently in the planning process to apply for a waiver for the flexible use of state foster care funds for 'wraparound' services (formerly Senate Bill (SB) 163) designed to allow dependent youth in residential care to 'step-down' to a lower level of care, or to return home. YPP's Family Network model seems ideal to study in order to assess how it might work in Sonoma County.

Recommendations

Sonoma County should plan for replicating and implementing a project similar to YPP. The project would incorporate both the fiscal and program elements of YPP in order to decrease the number of county children already in residential placement and to prevent future placements. To accomplish this, Sonoma County should apply for Wraparound (formerly SB163) and AB1741 waivers. Use of the waivers allows the flexible use of state foster care funding already available to maintain children in their homes and therefore represents no additional expenditures on the part of the county.

Sonoma County should also begin utilizing Family Team Meetings in all programs to prevent the new placement of children and to allow for step-downs or discharges from current placements. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2008-2009 Training Plan includes modules in facilitation of Family Group Conferencing and all staff should be encouraged to attend. This model builds on current county efforts to increase the use of community providers, family and extended support networks to tailor intensive services to families with at-risk and, and children in alternative placements.

**Mignon Evans, Section Manager,
Sonoma County Human Services Department**

Marin County's Youth Pilot Program: A Community Collaborative

MIGNON J. EVANS

Theresa is a single mom to five children ranging in age from 4–14. Theresa and her children currently reside in one room, which has five beds crammed into it, at a homeless shelter. Theresa and her family lost their home in a fire about a year ago. The family came to the attention of social services due to Theresa's inability to meet the children's basic needs and for excessive school absences. Theresa has no local family that she can call upon for help. The father of her two youngest children lives in another county, works two jobs, and has other children he must support. The father of Theresa's two middle children resides in another state. Theresa has been unemployed due to difficulties with health problems, transportation, and the current situation.

All five children are in need of health and dental care, clothes, school supplies, and other necessities. The oldest child has asthma and needs a cardiac assessment. One of the younger girls is in need of a psychological evaluation due to suspected learning disabilities, and all of the children are lonely for the friends they can neither make nor keep due to the family's ongoing homeless state.

Theresa gets by on general assistance and occasional payments from ex-husbands. It recently cost her \$70 and five hours to wash the family's clothes at a laundromat. After the clothes are washed and dried, there is no place to store them in the single room the 6 family members share. Shelter personnel complain that Theresa is not keeping the room 'clean'. Theresa owes large fines on several unpaid parking tickets and her vehicle lacks a sufficient number of seat belts to transport all the children safely. The children often do not get to school on time, and the morning routine for the family is chaotic. Several of the children appear to

be having additional academic and adjustment problems at school, and at least one teacher is patronizing and insulting towards Theresa when they talk.

Theresa needs to schedule a number of doctor, dentist, and counselor appointments for herself and for the children, but she is overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the tasks before her and the psychological weight of her attempts to bring her family back to a level of normalcy.

Program Background

The mission of the Marin County Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) is to promote the health, well-being, self-sufficiency and safety of all residents. To this end, the Marin County Youth Pilot Program (YPP), or AB 1741, serves the families of selected children who are currently in placement, or at imminent risk of being placed by Community Mental Health (CMH), Juvenile Probation (JP) or Social Services (Child and Family Services, CFS) systems. Intensive services are provided to these families to safely maintain children in their homes or in the least restrictive, viable level of care.

In 1993, California legislation was signed to allow for the flexible use of blended funds previously only available for categorical expenditure. Marin County began serving selected families through YPP in 1996. In 2002, the state granted Marin County a waiver to allow for the flexible use of dollars previously only available for out-of-home placements. This allowed Marin to expand the number of families served by YPP and enhanced the pool of flexible funding to assist families in keeping their children at home or in the least restrictive setting.

Common goals of Marin County's YPP project include:

- Ensuring the most effective use of state and local child welfare funding
- Facilitating integrated services through Family Network Team meetings in which efforts are coordinated by team members to keep children at home or in the least restrictive environment; and
- Utilizing family strengths and community resources to offer intensive support services to families with children at risk

YPP's primary goal is keeping families intact and children out of placement. Marin County's program has proved highly successful and in the last two fiscal years has kept 150 children at home and saved \$2,669,683. Marin County's YPP also allows the county to contract with local service providers who arrange, facilitate, and schedule meetings, thereby allowing the staff of county agencies who serve families directly, to utilize their time more efficiently.

Key Elements

PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy behind the YPP project is that families, in concert with their personal and professional support systems, are in the best position to plan and implement strategies for protecting their children and meeting their needs. YPP will help determine if:

- 1 children at imminent risk of placement can instead remain at home with collaborative planning and provision of services, or
- 2 children already in placement can be moved to a lower level of care or returned home sooner, with collaborative planning and provision of intensive in-home services.

Marin County's YPP employs the use of family team meetings to plan, strategize, and arrange for intensive services for the family. Some professional services or goods, which may enhance the team's ability to meet its goals, may be purchased through flexible funding authorized by the YPP Coordinator.

Theresa and her family were referred to YPP by their Children and Family Services caseworker. At the first team meeting-organized, scheduled, and facilitated by the Center for Restorative Practice (CFRS) in San Rafael, Theresa describes all the individuals that she would like to have on her team. Theresa's caseworker, who has been designated coordinator at the first meeting, contacts the individuals to invite them to participate. Theresa's team consists of her caseworker, her therapist, her family advocate from a local non-profit, her shelter director, her homeless liaison, and her ex-husband, Donald.

Theresa's team helps her develop a service plan for her family. The family's needs are prioritized and incremental steps for achieving resolution are designed. Instead of letting Theresa remain overwhelmed by the daunting tasks before her, the team helps her concentrate on achieving and celebrating small steps toward her family goals. The team also helps Theresa enlist others who might be able to help. For example, her ex-husband may be able to take his two children on a more consistent weekly basis, affording Theresa some respite from the 24 hour responsibility of all 5 children. Theresa's family advocate accompanies Theresa to various appointments at the bank, the DMV office, the children's schools, and other appointments.. The idea is not to do things for Theresa, but to give her the intensive support she needs to bring her life back into balance.

REFERRALS

Referrals to YPP come through practitioners of the county agencies that place children in out-of-home care, such as: The Department of Health and Human Services, Community Mental Health, and Juvenile Probation. Family participation is voluntary and is at the discretion of the YPP Coordinator. The general criteria for eligibility in the program are as follows:

- 1 A family must have a child in placement or in imminent need of placement.
- 2 A parent must be available and want to have the child at home; **OR** if there is no parent available and willing, there must be relatives within the immediate geo-

graphic area who are available and want the child in their home; **OR**

If no parent or relative is available and willing, there must be an appropriate foster family within the immediate geographic area who could provide care for the child as an alternative to group home or residential care.

- 3 The child could be safe at home or in an alternative placement if intensive services were made available to both child and caregiver.

Public agency social workers, deputy probation officers, case managers, and mental health practitioners who wish to refer a family to YPP must obtain approval from their supervisor. The county social worker referring a family must obtain the approval of the YPP coordinator.

FAMILY NETWORK TEAM MEETINGS

YPP utilizes a family group conferencing model to facilitate the planning and implementation of services to reduce the need for out-of-home placement and reduce risk to children. Each family team regularly evaluates its progress toward reducing the risk that might require children to be placed out-of-home.

An orientation process for each family begins with a meeting for the family, the referring person, and the team coordinator (selected by the family and team). The referring person may help the family select team members, who might include, but are not limited to:

- Parents, stepparents, guardians, etc
- Family friends, neighbors, extended family, other personal support persons
- Children, depending on age and other considerations, and
- Other service providers identified by the family

As a group, the team designs a plan that includes setting goals for the family, determining action steps to meet those goals, and establishing the desired outcomes. The team also identifies professional services that are needed and, if these cannot be procured otherwise, may be funded through YPP purchase authorization. Throughout the process, the team monitors progress towards the goals, checks in for signs of success, and adjusts the plan as needed.

Family Meetings are structured around a few key principles:

- The team should benefit from the collective energy, support, and ideas of its individual members
- Everyone is a viable participant and should be encouraged to work through differences of opinion together to reach consensus
- All points of view should be heard
- An atmosphere of respect should be cultivated
- Solutions that are reflective of all team members' thinking and needs should be supported

The team coordinator should be a member who can play a leadership role and can apprise the team of court orders, mandates, or other information with relevance to achieving the team's goals. The team coordinator keeps in regular contact with the family and the other team members. The team coordinator is also responsible for the paperwork involved with purchased services. The team coordinator is usually a representative of the referring agency, but any member can be designated as the team coordinator.

Services Provided

Goods and services which are identified as key to the success of a family, and after careful review of the family's financial situation it is determined the family cannot meet certain needs, these needs, can be purchased through YPP, with the authorization of the coordinator. The services must be recommended in the family's service plan, and payment is negotiated and billed for by the coordinator. Funding for YPP is flexible, but is not an entitlement and must support family stabilization.

AB 1741 funding is used to fill gaps in services and can be utilized in any unique way that best serves the family's needs and supports efforts to maintain children at home or in the least restrictive placement. Typical YPP services include, but are not limited to:

- One-time emergency expenses such as rent, utilities, or food
- Transportation costs such as car repairs, mileage reimbursement, or bus tickets
- Home health or In-home Support Services

- Day care (if other resources are unavailable), and respite care
- Mentoring/tutoring services
- Counseling, therapy, or psychological evaluations
- Parent training
- Outpatient substance abuse treatment

During subsequent team meetings, members help Theresa prioritize her family's 'wish list', which consists of goods or services that Theresa and her family could use in order to get back on track. YPP is able to authorize individual and family counseling, respite care for Theresa, the purchase of clothes, shoes, school supplies, the payment of fines, and even a stay in a motel for Donald so that he can get the children to school on time on the morning that Theresa has a court appearance. All of these services and goods are paid for through YPP flexible funding.

Theresa also gets help doing her taxes, straightening out some fraudulent charges on a credit card, scheduling various doctor, dentist, and therapist appointments for the children, and a number of other activities that she has been unable to complete. The team is there to support Theresa in every way to help her develop the skills necessary to manage and navigate all the different systems she must cope with in her daily life. At each team meeting, Theresa's plan is reviewed for continued appropriateness. New steps may be added and completed tasks deleted. Every team member, including the children, has input, and consensus on each decision is reached before moving on.

Recommendations

Sonoma County is currently in the planning process of applying for a waiver for the flexible use of state foster care dollars, through Wraparound (formerly SB163), which would allow the county to serve families of Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 602 or WIC 300 youth in residential treatment or, if already in alternative care, at risk for residential placement. Wraparound would allow for the provision of intensive services, paid for with the same dollars that would have paid for out-of-home placement.

Sonoma County also should explore a waiver for the flexible use of foster care funding through AB

Marin County's Success to Date

Fiscal Year 2006-2007	Fiscal Year 2005-2006
62 families, 123 children	60 families, 121 children
86 "focus" children (at risk of placement or residential care)	84 "focus" children
21 referred by Community Mental Health (CMH)	17 referred by CMH
24 referred by Children and Family Services (CFS)	25 referred by CFS
17 referred by Juvenile Probation (JP)	18 referred by JP
8 (number of children actually placed)	12 (number of children actually placed)
\$1,843,357 (placement costs for 86 focus children)	\$1,578,000 (placement costs for 84 children)
\$333,668 (YPP costs)	\$424,000 (YPP costs)
\$1,509,689 (total program savings)	\$1,154,000 (program savings)
Total children remaining at home: 150	
Total cost savings 2 fiscal years: \$2,663,689	

1741, in order to develop its own Youth Pilot Program, which would serve families of children at risk for out-of-home placement. YPP would provide intensive support services to these families so that the children could remain safely at home. YPP services (and wraparound services) would also allow youth in high levels of residential placement (Residential Care Levels 12-14) to 'step-down' to a lower level of care or allow children in lower levels of care (RCL 10-11) to return home. YPP dollars could be used for the purchase of goods and intensive services to keep children at home instead of in placement.

As it explores the waiver process, Sonoma County should review its use of Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) funding which currently is contracted out to four community agencies. During the next Request For Proposal (RFP) process, efforts should be made to explore the use of this funding to contract with these or other community agencies in order to provide the family team meeting services for the county. Planning, scheduling, and facilitating family team meetings, is costly and inefficient in terms of county agency staff time and expertise.

Employing a neutral, local, non-profit organization for these activities allows county employees to spend their time providing direct services to families.

Sonoma County currently partners with a number of community agencies to provide services to Child Protective Services (CPS), Mental Health, or Juvenile Probation children and families. Wrap-around and YPP would allow these county, public, and private agencies to integrate services to families. Marin County saved almost \$2,700,000 over two years, keeping 150 children home, who otherwise would have been placed out of home. With appropriate county match, these dollars would then be available for use in other programs serving the county's children. Sonoma County has a much larger group home population than Marin County, and one of the county's objectives is the reduction of this number. Wrap-around and YPP would be able to serve these families while the children remain home, at no additional expense.

After Theresa's team has met 5 or 6 times, the family is working toward resolving some of the issues that brought them to the attention of social services. The family has identified much strength for itself but, the main one is the resiliency and determination of Theresa and the children. Theresa has done a fine job, under extremely trying circumstances, in keeping her family together. The children are bright, attractive, personable, and Theresa has demonstrated great love and affection for them.

To date, YPP funding has purchased respite care, paid for overdue fines for Theresa, a child care bill for Donald, and for the installation of additional seat belts in Theresa's van. YPP funding also has provided gift cards for each child to purchase clothes. Theresa has a series of doctors' appointments and a psychological evaluation scheduled for the children. Theresa's family advocate and homeless liaison are both walking Theresa through the steps she needs to take to find a job, a home, and to reestablish her financial well-being. Theresa's therapist is helping her identify ways she can cope with her circumstances, and her parent helper

is guiding her through healthy interactions with the children. Although life is still very stressful, Theresa knows that she is no longer in danger of her children being removed from her care and she views her CFS caseworker as an ally.

Within the last week, Theresa has secured full-time employment. Although this is what she has been working toward, being employed now compromises Theresa's ability to transport the children to their many scheduled appointments, so a new plan must now be put into place. Fortunately, Theresa's team is there to support her and will help her negotiate time off with her new employer. The team will also help Theresa budget her new income so that she can pay her bills, reestablish her bank accounts, and put aside money for housing.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Heather Ravani, Program Manager, Marin County Adult and Children's Services, for her willingness to share her time and for 'cheering on' the 2008 BASSC participants as she described her own BASSC experience.

Special thanks to Alva Ackley, YPP Program Coordinator, for her knowledge, wisdom, and conviction, which helped me immeasurably in many ways.

Thank you to Tony Milani, social worker with CFS, for sharing his experiences on both sides of the aisle and for sharing a family team meeting with me and helping me understand the context of that family's situation.

Thank you to Ryan Pickrell, CFRP program coordinator, for allowing me to observe facilitation of a family meeting and for his perspective on the YPP program.

Thank you to Nick Honey, Sonoma County Child Welfare Director, for his encouragement and support and allowing me the time to complete my project.

Thank you to Jo Weber, Sonoma County Human Services Director, for the opportunity to participate in BASSC Executive Development Program.