

State and Local Implementation of Child Welfare Redesign: Accountability in Child Welfare Practice

MIDAY TOVAR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The profession of child welfare is a critical one as professionals in this field are entrusted to keep children safe. These professionals are faced with making multiple decisions in a collaborative environment with the goal of empowering the lives of the most vulnerable children in need of safety. These professionals seek to assure safety, permanency, and well-being for children and their families. Therefore, accountability, consistency, and transparency are paramount at all levels of the decision-making process with the ultimate goal that these children will not only survive, but thrive after exiting the system.

In 2001, California passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) with the vision that every child will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities (CDSS Statewide Assessment, 2007).

Background

Contra Costa County was one of 11 counties selected as early implementers of California's Child Welfare System Improvement efforts (a.k.a.: Child Welfare Redesign) that participated in preliminary evaluations of the California Child Welfare System Improvement Pilot Program, in an effort to improve outcomes for children in their county.

Implications and Recommendations

Contra Costa County and Santa Clara County are both diligently addressing their own System Improvement Plans (SIP) and self-evaluations to meet

state and federal standards to maintain services in place and meet their population's needs. While moving in the right direction, more work still needs to be done, particularly in regards to the over-representation of children of color in care for both counties.

My recommendation for Santa Clara County is to emphasize that professionals must consider that child welfare agencies cannot do this work alone. As the practice continues to meet the outcome measures for each individual SIP, agencies must continue to collaborate with the community, stakeholders, and engage with families. Children are the product of their communities and bridges must be extended with the community to achieve better outcomes. As families and communities are empowered and held accountable for keeping their children safe, child welfare agencies must also be accountable, transparent, and consistent in their overall practice.

Child welfare agencies must assure that the mission, vision, values, and the code of ethical standards of the National Association of Social Workers are reflected in daily practice. Accountability is essential when complying with the state and federal requirements and should permeate every aspect of child welfare practices. Ethics and compliance in a learning organization can promote and protect the integrity of the practice of an organization.

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Introduction

In 2000, California created a statewide child welfare stakeholders group to review the state's child welfare system. In 2001, California passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636). As a result, in 2002 the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) conducted an assessment focusing on outcomes for children and families receiving services and the review showed that county child welfare agencies were found to be out of compliance. Therefore, the Children and Family Services Division of the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has developed policies and programs with the vision that every child will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities.

While complying with the state and federal mandates, accountability is paramount at all levels when making decisions that affect children, youth, and families. Professionals are responsible for making multiple challenging decisions everyday with the ultimate goal of keeping children safe. They must assess the specific needs of each child by focusing on the strengths of the family and identifying and tailoring services to address the family's specific needs.

Accountability, transparency, and consistency must be in place at all levels to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being for every child. These core values must reflect the agency's mission, vision, values, and the code of ethical standard for social workers in their professional daily practice. The ultimate goal is that every child, youth, and family will receive services specifically designed to meet the strengths and needs of each child and family in the community with the ultimate goal being that they will never return to the system again.

Background

Contra Costa County is located across the San Francisco Bay and is the ninth most populous county in California. There are three regions in Contra Costa County: Western County, Central County, and Eastern County. Each of these areas has its own regional Children and Family Services district office in the cities of Richmond, serving Western County, Martinez, serving Central County, and Antioch, serving Eastern County. Contra Costa County has 268,698 children residing in the county. This number consists of 30,134 African-American children, 111,009 white children, 79,155 Latino children, and 31,380 Asian children. The percentage of children in Contra Costa County's child welfare system is composed of 49.6% African-American children, 32.9% white children, 14.1% Latino children, and 2.6% Asian children (Contra Costa County Disproportionality—Examples and Changes).

In 2001, California passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB636) to improve outcome measures for children in the child welfare system while holding state and county agencies accountable for the outcomes achieved. In response to federal and state mandates, the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department's Children and Family Service Bureau started a formal process to "redesign" its child welfare practice with the vision of improving outcomes for children (Contra Costa County Children and Family Services: County Self Assessment, April 2007). In 2003, California implemented the "Child Welfare Performance Outcomes and Accountability Act" specifying that each county in California must develop and implement its own Systems Improvement Plan (SIP) based on each county's identified areas of

needed improvement. In January 2004, AB636 went into effect, and, as a result, Contra Costa County has been providing quarterly data reports to the state monitoring efforts to improve results for children and youth in the child welfare system.

These quarterly outcomes and accountability reports provide the state with specific county detailed descriptions of each element that comprises the service delivery system. These reports focus on safety, stability, family, and well-being measures that are currently available (Improving the Lives of California's Children and Families: Child Welfare Services Chronology). Contra Costa County's SIP includes the safety outcomes: child abuse/neglect referrals with timely responses, immediate and 10-day responses, and timely social worker visits with child. The well-being outcomes include the number and rate of first entries to foster care. The permanency outcomes include multiple foster care placements. Contra Costa County has reported improvements in some of its SIP outcome measures.

Findings

The Center for Social Services Review (CSSR) at UC Berkeley conveyed the following statistical data, as of April 4, 2008, for Contra Costa County:

SAFETY OUTCOMES

During the 3rd Quarter, Contra Costa County is achieving 96.5% compliance for immediate response assignments. For the 10-day response time, they are achieving 97% compliance. In 2007, the county achieved safety outcome measures beyond the state standard of 95% or better. The county has a transparent system that utilizes safe measures at the managerial level as a check and balance to track compliance and accountability. Additionally, the county holds monthly Community District Partnership meetings led by division managers in the three regions to engage the community by giving updates and receiving feedback as part of transparency in the delivery of services. In addition, the county has developed a "Keeping Children Safe" survey where children, youth, family, and service providers give feedback on the

services provided. In terms of monthly visits, social workers were achieving 87.8% compliance, whereas the state standard is 95% or better. Therefore, Contra Costa County developed strategies to improve their outcomes by tracking compliance and accountability through safe measures to ensure children are visited in a timely manner. Staff received training on policy changes regarding face-to-face contacts and visitation waivers.

WELL-BEING OUTCOMES

In July 2003, 1,980 out of 258,413 children came into care. In July 2007, 1,498 out of 256,625 children had a first time entry into care, showing a decrease of 453 children with first entries in care. Contra Costa County continues to successfully implement strategies with the utilization of Differential Response and other culturally competent forms of engagement, such as using family-centered case plans and expanding the use of Team Decision-Making (TDM) meetings.

When comparing children of different ethnicities in Contra Costa County, African-American children have a higher likelihood of referrals. African-American and white children have referrals substantiated at about the same percentage, 20%, while Asian and Latino children have slightly higher rates of 24%. African-American children are more likely to be removed from their homes and enter child welfare supervised foster care, and African-American children are more likely to stay in care for longer periods than are children of other ethnicities (Self-Assessment Report 2006).

In April 2007, as part of the SIP, the county committed to reducing the over-representation of African-American children who were placed in out-of-home care by 5%. According to the 3rd quarter data for 2006, the removal rate reported was 6.6 per 1000 children with the improvement goal of reducing the incidence rate of first-time removals of African-American youth by 15% to 5.6 per 1000 children or less by 2009.

Examining the data in the child welfare system for Contra Costa County, it is evident that there is a disproportionate number of African-American

TABLE 1
Children with Entries to Foster Care,
Child Population (0-17) and Incidence Rates, 2006

Ethnic Group	Children with Entries	Total Child Population	Incidence per 1,000 Children
Black	220	23,729	9.3
White	187	113,941	1.6
Hispanic	159	76,718	2.1
Asian/P.I.	33	28,323	1.2

children initially entering foster care in comparison to white children (8.69 per 1000 for African-American children and 2.83 per 1000 for white children, although in 2004, the rate for African American children was 6.59 per 1000). In terms of reunification rates, in 2001, African American children were reunifying at less than 5%, Latino children were reunifying at about 5%, and white children were reunifying at about 8%. In 2005, Latino children reunification rates showed the largest increase, approximately 21%. The reunification rates for African-American and White children remain relatively unchanged.

Contra Costa County has implemented guidelines for all agency staff to lead discussions about disproportionality at all unit meetings and throughout the agency. This county established the Cultural Competency Oversight Committee (CCOC) that works to establish a culturally competent agency with an emphasis on training and practice integration. The CCOC came together to work on the design of specific trainings to address disproportionality within child welfare, and a plan was developed to focus on achieving the greatest amount of staff integration of the material presented. Prior to the development of this training series, child welfare staff had attended 33 training sessions on cultural competence. The Child Welfare League of America conducted a survey in 2004 that revealed, "Staff was aware of cultural competence but this knowledge did not translate into their practice."

Building on this knowledge of differentiating awareness from practice integration, the CCOC brought a trainer with expertise in this area, Rita

Cameron Wedding, Ph.D. to develop a training series to "move to the next level of cultural competency". Dr. Wedding's area of expertise is with the African-American community, the primary over-represented ethnicity in Contra Costa County. The Child Welfare Training Series: Addressing Racial Disproportionality: One Social Worker, One Solution at a Time, was presented to staff on a non-mandatory basis and was attended by 95% of the work force and was open to community stakeholders. The cornerstone of Contra Costa's efforts to address disproportionality is that a "successful diversity initiative depends upon collaboration from all levels of the bureau" (Contra Costa County Child Welfare Training Series). The primary goal of this training effort was to enhance knowledge and skills that could be translated into practice.

PERMANENCY OUTCOMES

During the 3rd quarter, 66.7% of children in care between 12 and 24 months had one or two placements. The state standard goal was 65.4% showing an improvement of 4.4%. Currently, 33.5% of children in care for at least 24 months had one or two placements. The state standard goal is 41.8%. The county continues its efforts to meet permanency outcomes, and has developed an assessment tool to identify children who may be at risk of multiple placements. With the use of TDM's, specifically for children and youth who have experienced multiple placements to evaluate current placement preservation resources, including mental health services, there has been an incorporation of kinship programs to coordinate placement and resources in the community.

Implications and Recommendations for Santa Clara County

When examining the individual SIP for both counties, there are four similar indicators. In comparing these indicators, the two counties are making efforts to meet their outcome measures. While moving in the right direction, more work needs to be done, especially in one key area, namely the over-represen-

tation of children of color in care. In Contra Costa County, disproportionality impacts African-American children, while in Santa Clara County, it is Latino children who are over-represented in the system. Both counties have a very strong commitment and continue to strive to reduce the rates of disproportionality and improve outcomes for all children.

According to the CSSR Child Welfare Outcomes System Summary, dated April 4, 2008, Santa Clara County continues in its efforts to comply with its SIP. The similar SIP priority area indicators are as follows: safety outcome measure and timely response, with immediate response and with 10-day response. During the 3rd Quarter of 2007, the immediate response rate was 94.4%, and the 10-day response rate was 89.8%. For timely social worker visits with child, Santa Clara County was achieving 76.1% compliance, while the state standard is 95% or better for safety outcomes.

Well-being outcome measures include all first time entries to foster care. During the baseline period of 2002, the rate was 4.2%. During the period of 2006, the rate was 3.4%, a decrease of 0.8%. The permanency outcome measures include placement stability. During the 3rd quarter of 2007, children who were in care between 12 and 24 months were stable in their placements at the rate 45.1%. During this same time period, children who were in care for at least 24 months with one and two placements were at 21.2%. The state standard for this outcome measure is 65.4% and 41.8%, respectively.

Santa Clara County is making strides towards meeting its outcome measures including the reduction of disproportionality. First time entry into care for Latino children was 56%, 10.7% for African-American children, 6.9% for Asian Pacific Islanders, and 25.4% for white children. The ethnic breakdown of the total child population for Santa Clara County in 2006 was 33.4% Latino, 2.4% African-American, 26.0% Asian Pacific Islander and 33.8% white children in 2006.

Santa Clara County has been addressing disproportionality during monthly meetings at the Unified Children of Color Committee. Before entering the

child welfare system, families are being diverted to services through Differential Response (Path I) and Informal Supervision and Voluntary Family Maintenance Services (Path II). The county has engaged an independent contractor to address mandated reporters in the community. The agency continues to design a system of monthly data reporting to capture data in six areas that may assist in decreasing the rates of disproportionality (Santa Clara County Disproportionality in Child Welfare: 2008 Plan).

My recommendation for Santa Clara County is to emphasize that professionals must consider that child welfare agencies cannot do this work alone. As the practice continues to meet the outcome measures for each individual SIP, agencies must continue to collaborate with both community and stakeholders as well as and engage with families. Children are the product of their communities and bridges must be extended to the community to achieve better outcomes. As families and communities are empowered and held accountable for keeping their children safe, child welfare agencies must also be accountable, transparent, and consistent in their overall practice.

Child welfare agencies must assure that the mission, vision, values, and the code of ethical standards of the National Association of Social Workers are reflected in the daily practice. Accountability is essential when complying and reporting to the state and federal requirements and should permeate every aspect of child welfare practice. Ethics and compliance in a learning organization can promote and protect the overall integrity of practice in an organization.

Next Steps

Santa Clara County utilizes lists when social workers are out of compliance. These lists are an important tool as they serve to remind workers of what needs to be completed. Nevertheless, the basis behind the lists needs to be transparent so that staff feels empowered by understanding the nature of what is being asked of them.

Child welfare practice must be more than just taking steps to deliver; staff needs to understand the implications and the need for compliance with the

requirements of AB636. The agency mission, vision, and values need to be clear for all staff, as these core values can promote the integrity of practice of the organization and become evident in the direct practice when empowering the children and families who need to be strengthened. I recommend the following for Santa Clara County:

- 1 There needs to be accountability of practice at all levels to set a clear vision of the expectations and the philosophy of practice throughout the agency.
 - The agency mission vision and value statements must emphasize safety, well-being, and permanency with a focus on family-centered practice that reflects the diversity of the population served.
 - A copy of the mission and vision statements must be displayed on every floor to remind staff and families of the agency's philosophy of practice.
 - When quarterly SIP reports are compiled and submitted to the state, there should be a meeting open to all staff as a way to disseminate information to assist in developing and understanding compliance.
- 2 In order to have transparency in the delivery of services, there is a need to build bridges within the department and partnerships with the community. This might include:
 - Setting up small forums including workers from different bureaus in the agency to discuss cultural practice and disproportionality.
 - Establishing conversations/bridges with the community by having managerial staff give and receive feedback and educate the community on child welfare practices.
 - Developing an exiting tool for families, caregivers, children, and community service providers to give feedback as to how well services are being provided;
 - Providing positive reinforcement for staff, such as having a standardized tool at the end of the year to provide feedback; and
 - Whenever work groups or committees are put together, including participants from every

bureau so that a team effort is established and the information can be disseminated throughout the agency.

- 3 There is a need for consistency in practice that is modeled throughout the agency at the different levels.
 - Supervisors need to be provided with trainings on evidence-based practice, managing results, fiscal essentials, policies and procedures, and knowledge management, as they need to model and support their staff in the delivery of services.
 - Supervisors need to have a standardized practice throughout the agency. There should be a standardized tool designed for supervisors to utilize during supervision.
 - It is imperative that an accredited professional who reflects the same background of the over-represented population provides ongoing trainings/discussions on disproportionality to address the over-representation of Latino and African American children.
 - Social workers need to be provided with trainings and discussions that address: agency mission, vision, agency values, AB636, disproportionality, clinical assessment skills, trauma, losses, conflict resolution, dual diagnosis, compassion, and engagement. These trainings need to be provided by professional practitioners in child welfare.

Conclusion

This writer began this mission with the hope of sharing the learning experience with Santa Clara County. This writer concludes with much respect for the shared conviction and dedication demonstrated by Contra Costa County Children and Family Services in addressing the needs of its population. Most importantly, this writer takes great pride in the work that Santa Clara County is conducting. In addition, as a court continuing supervisor, I have had the privilege of witnessing the direct services that are being provided by the frontline social workers in continuing services.

Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services excels in its delivery of services with its rich multicultural work force and bilingual staff. There has been a reduction of the number of children in social worker's caseload. The implementation of TDM's is one of the most successful forms of family-centered practice. Within differential response, families are being diverted to Path I and Path II to prevent them from entering the court system. Parents are being empowered by their participation in parent orientation classes. Parent advocates are providing support to parents to access resources in the community. Most recently, in the past five years, the level of accountability has increased in the department, which could also benefit from a more consistent, transparent, combined learning practice. This will promote inclusive, open communication, collaboration in all areas of practice in the department and better engagement with families and the community.

Child welfare professionals are faced with multiple challenges every day as they seek to assure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and their families. As these professionals make these life-altering decisions for children and their families, they must be made with a multidimensional team focus. The responsibility of child welfare professionals goes beyond complying with federal, state, and county mandates. It is a modeling process where conditioning is taking place for future leaders of the child welfare system. Therefore, these leaders must model a philosophy of practice that reflects the integrity of

the agency where the mission, vision, values, and the code of ethical standards for social workers promote accountability, transparency, and consistency that is reflected in their daily practice. It is imperative that child welfare professionals practice with the ultimate goal in mind that these children and their families will not only survive while in care but also thrive after exiting the system.

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Resources

- Berkeley Child Welfare Services Outcomes System Data Summary dated April 4, 2008
- Berkeley CWS Outcomes Systems Summary Report 4/04/2008.
- Building Organizational Support for Evidence-Inform Practice: The Bay Area Social Services Consortium by Michael J. Austin, Ph.D.
- CDSS Statewide Assessment 12/11/2007.
- Contra Costa County Children and Family Services System Improvement Plan April 2007
- Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group and Redesign
- Contra Costa County Self Assessment 2006 (Children and Family Services Research and Evaluation)
- Contra Costa County Children and Family Services: County Self Assessment April 2007
- Contra Costa County Child Welfare Training Series: One Social Worker, One Solution at a Time
- Contra Costa County Disproportionality—Examples and Changes
- Ethical Decision Making in a County Government—III; Marvin T. Brown, Ph.D.
- Improving the Lives of California's Children and Families: Child Welfare Services Chronology
- Santa Clara County Disproportionality Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability Quarterly Data Report dated August 2007
- Santa Clara County Disproportionality in Child Welfare: 2008 Plan
- U.S. Census—State & County Quick Facts