

Supporting Kinship Caregivers: **Lessons Learned From Monterey County**

JULIE LENHARDT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1997, the State of California, through the Kinship Support Services Program (KSSP), began funding eleven counties in an effort to provide support and assistance to relatives providing kinship care. The goal of KSSP is to support relatives and non-related extended family members (NREFM), and to prevent the need for these children to enter the foster care system. After more than a decade of success, the state is expanding the program by allowing additional counties the opportunity to bring this resource to their residents. Thus, the County of Marin has begun the process of building its own KSSP system for the 2008-2009 fiscal year. This study comes at a critical time for Marin County in that it enables the county to carefully examine the strategies of Monterey County, a county with nearly eleven years of experience in successfully serving its kinship community, in order to build what is hoped will be a valuable program for Marin County's own kinship caregivers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Within the current budget climate, it becomes even more critical to maximize resources and find creative ways in which to support families. For Marin County, the Kinship Support Services Program provides a unique opportunity to support those kinship

families already providing foster care for relatives, and to reach a community which, thus far, the county has been unable to thoroughly assist, while maximizing available fiscal resources. As Marin County looks to the future, it has much to learn from Monterey County's decade of success. As Marin County searches for community agencies to respond to this need, I offer the following recommendations:

- Collaborate with the faith-based community. Not only do faith-based organizations offer a level of support that government organizations have never been able to offer, they can provide inroads to communities that have been historically resistant to outside agencies.
- Search for low or no cost ways to maximize support for families. Monterey County has been successful in doing this by using the Area on Aging Senior Aid Program to provide extra staff and to train relative caregivers, while the Federal Emergency Management Agency's food match grant program is used to match funds when providing food to families and support groups. They cost very little to run, yet provide peer support and social interaction on a regular basis.
- Choose a provider whose mission and services are compatible with the mission and service needs of the program.

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Background

The State of California's Kinship Support Services Program (KSSP) exists to aid relatives in raising children who are at risk of dependency or delinquency. The program has established the ultimate goal of assisting families with children who are placed with relatives through the formal child welfare system, as well as those whose placements have been arranged within the family, or through friends in order to prevent the need for those children to enter non-relative foster care.

Data from the State of California indicates that, as of January 2001, 43% of the children in foster care are placed with a relative and most of these children are placed with grandparents (specifically grandmothers). In fact, nearly 30% of the grandparents caring for foster children are over the age of 60, are living on a fixed income, and will need some type of financial assistance in order to care for a child or children. Much of this is good news in the sense that evidence suggests children placed with relatives or non-relative extended family members (known as NREFMs in the child welfare community) fare much better, experience fewer disrupted placements, perform better in school, and feel more connected to their family and culture. Also, siblings are more likely to be placed together in a relative home.

KSSP is set up as a grants-in-aid program to provide startup and expansion funding for already existing kinship support programs and other community-based family support programs. The funding, although from the state, is administered by the

various counties with KSSP contracts, and then allocated via grants to local agencies that provide the services. The services may include: mentoring, support groups, respite care, information and referral services, recreation, legal assistance, and concrete services, such as food, clothing, or furniture.

KSSP was established in 1997 using state general fund dollars leveraging private community funds in order to set up public/private partnerships. Initially, eleven counties were chosen to participate in the program. The counties participating in the program are: Alameda, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Monterey, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus. Each of these counties has successfully developed a public/private partnership that has resulted in a program that is extremely cost effective, beneficial for children and families, and has a positive impact on the community.

A Successful Model

As one of the pilot KSSP counties, Monterey County embarked on its journey to build a KSSP program in 1997, and named it Family Ties. The initial monies funded two locations, both geographically situated to serve their wide-spread population, at \$75,000 per site and \$150,000 total. These two sites successfully served Monterey County communities for ten years until a third site was added in 2007. The three sites now include Salinas (the headquarters), Seaside, and Greenfield. Family Service Agency (FSA), a local organization in Monterey, was the first to receive the

funding. FSA held the grant until 2002, when the Kinship Center, headquartered in Salinas, took it over. The Kinship Center has maintained the grant for the past seven years.

Over the past seven years, the Kinship Center's Family Ties Program has served an average of 250 families and between 475-500 children monthly. Referrals from Monterey County Social Services, the Court, the sheriff's office, Public Health Nurses, local hospitals, senior centers, and the community create a steady stream of participants for the program. A large majority (85-90%) of the children involved with Family Ties, are not dependents of the court.

The program offers case management to those who need it, which may include assistance with legal guardianship and counseling services, food, clothing, furniture, emergency services (such as paying for utilities, auto repair, bus tickets, etc.) respite or child care, and other services. For those families who do not require case management but may still appreciate support, each center offers a variety of support groups (usually accompanied by a potluck meal), recreational outings for children and families, and annual picnics and holiday parties.

Any family member or NREFM residing in Monterey County, and caring for a relative's child is eligible for services through Family Ties as long as the child's birth parents are not residing in the same home. The only exception to this rule that can be made is when the birth parent is either physically or mentally handicapped and is unable to serve as the primary caregiver for the child. Caregivers are given an initial assessment as part of their entry into the program in order to determine their needs, and, based on the outcome of that assessment, the breadth and length of support are determined. On average, family members receive intensive case management services for the first six months. However, Family Ties may provide longer case management if those services are indicated.

The Family Ties Program has successfully established and maintained collaborative working relationships with key organizations in the Monterey County community, and this has been crucial in

the success of their program. With great foresight, the program ensured that the initial grant included a provision for hiring qualified relative caregivers. They also hire seasoned workers through the local Area on Aging which supplements the pay of a person age 55 or older working 20-30 hours per week to allow the individual to receive training and support from the host agency with the goal of becoming a permanent employee. Family Ties also works collaboratively with local legal counsel, the food bank, and faith based organizations. In fact, both satellite locations (Seaside and Greenfield) are co-located in local churches, and those churches take an active role in the program's activities.

Currently, Family Ties employs five case managers, three of whom are bilingual (English/Spanish), seven support and recreational staff, and one director. Their current annual operating budget is approximately \$500,000, but they anticipate a significant reduction in funding for the upcoming 2008-09 fiscal year due primarily to state budget cuts. The current budget is a blend of state and county funds as well as private donations and grants.

As part of the original KSSP cohort group, data gathered in the Family Ties program is ultimately directed to the San Francisco based program, Edge-wood Center, which gathers cumulative data on the success of the California KSSP pilot counties and reports the outcomes back to the state. However, Monterey County conducted an individual evaluation of the program's data between its inception date (1998) and 2006, and determined that the program had saved the county at least \$1.8 million by working with these children and families instead of having the children enter foster care. Overall, the data strongly indicate that KSSP is not only a healthy fiscal investment, but it is also in line with the state's overall mission of providing safety, permanence, and well being for children both within and outside of the foster care system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Within the current budget climate it becomes even more critical to maximize resources and find cre-

ative ways in which to support families. For Marin County, the Kinship Support Services Program provides a unique opportunity to support those kinship families already providing foster care for relatives and to reach a community of providers which has not been previously served, while maximizing available fiscal resources. As Marin County looks to the future, it has much to learn from Monterey County's decade of success. As Marin County searches for community agencies to respond to this need, I offer the following recommendations:

- Collaborate with the faith-based community. Not only do faith-based organizations offer a level of support that government organizations have never been able to offer, they can provide inroads to communities that have been historically resistant to outside agencies.
- Search for low or no cost ways to maximize support for families. Monterey County has been successful in doing this by using the Area on Aging's Senior Aid Program to provide extra staff and train relative caregivers. Also, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's food match grant program is used to match funds when providing food to families and support groups which cost very little to run yet provide peer support and social interaction on a regular basis.
- Choose a provider whose mission and services are compatible with the mission and service needs of the program. Family Ties' success can be largely attributed to the compatibility with its host agency, the Kinship Center. Not only are their missions compatible, the Kinship Center is able to offer many of the services needed by Family Ties families. This both supports the Family Ties program, and ensures the sustainability of the host agency.

Acknowledgements

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Resources

California Department of Social Services website:

www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cfsweb/PG1351.htm

Bass, K. Assemblymember. 2008. "Assembly Bill 2649: Kinship Support Services Program."

Website: democrats.assembly.ca.gov/members/a47/pdf/AB2649.pdf