

FINDING SOLUTIONS IN CONTINUOUS CARE REFORM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

They say that the more things change, the more they stay the same. This has never been more true for those that work in child welfare. Child welfare agencies in California have long struggled with providing quality care to youth who require a higher level of service. There is a strong consensus that change is needed. In order to make change happen, people who work in the system will have to think differently, think more creatively and, overall, think globally.

There have been major systematic and programmatic changes in recent years to ensure stability, permanency and positive outcomes for youth; however, much more is needed. Beginning in 2017, California's counties will begin implementation of Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), which will redesign our placement system and further promote permanency and well-being. This case study explores one possible option in Congregate Care Reform.

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Introduction

In 2015, Assembly Bill 403 produced Congregate Care Reform (CCR) which is expected to be implemented statewide January 2017. CCR consists of major policy changes for child welfare, including placement resources and rate structures for youth who are involved with the child welfare system and are placed by the court outside of their homes. Counties are currently in the exploration stage in addressing what a change of this magnitude will mean for agencies, families and in particular youth. CCR will change the way in which counties currently operate. Not only will CCR reduce the length of stay and initial placements in a congregate care setting, but CCR will also change the rate structures of foster care funding as well as many policies and business practices. This is a huge undertaking across all the stages, from development to implementation. We know that group homes do not serve or benefit youth and communities to produce the best possible outcomes. So, what is the solution? One possible solution is maintaining a county-run Foster Family Agency (FFA), following a similar model that San Mateo County utilizes.

Background

Child welfare agencies only have selective placement options for youth that require a higher level of care, and sometimes older teenage youth for which they are unable to find a placement. The primary option is congregate care (group homes). Many youth in foster care have experienced trauma and have some serious mental health issues, requiring a high level of care for their needs to be met. One aspect of the beneficial approach of utilizing a foster care setting in a

FFA is its similarity to a family-like setting, as opposed to a congregate care setting (group home). Foster Family Agencies have a service component of Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) for those who need more care, and yet, many counties do not currently have the capacity to provide appropriate care for youth in an ITFC home. Group homes have long been the answer to those youth who are difficult to place. San Mateo County is currently the only Child Protective Services Agency that runs its own FFA ITFC for youth. Its model has been fairly successful and provided positive outcomes for youth in care. Positive outcomes for youth include stable placements and helping youth meet and achieve their educational goals. On average, youth in San Mateo County have remained in their current FFA ITFC placement for three years, and prior to this, experienced an average length of stay of only five months in a non FFA ITFC home.

Key Definitions

In the state of California, child welfare has its own language. Below are some key definitions:

- CCR-Continuum of Care Reform

A result of legislation, Assembly Bill 403, to reduce the length of time in congregate care (group homes) and provide appropriate services for youth in family-like settings.

- FFA-Foster Family Agency

An FFA is a third party agency that Child Welfare Agencies partner with to place youth in family-like settings.

- ITFC-Intensive Treatment Foster Care

A home trained and licensed by an FFA that provides services to youth who need a higher level of care in a family-like setting. Foster parents are specially trained.

- COA-Council of Accreditation

The national organization that provides accreditation to operate the FFA ITFC.

San Mateo County FFA Model

San Mateo County has maintained its own county-run FFA ITFC since 2008. It currently has a team

of three social work staff and one supervisor who oversee seven ITFC homes. It takes one county team to provide support to the seven ITFC homes. These homes currently serve a total of 11 youth, of which, seven are ITFC level III and the remaining four are considered at a regular foster care placement level. The county FFA team provides all mandatory trainings on a monthly basis in order for foster parents to maintain compliance with eight minimal specialized trainings annually. San Mateo County FFA utilizes only county licensed foster homes and collaborates with the county licensing unit. The county licensing unit is responsible for initial home approvals and annual home renewals. It also investigates any license violations and complaints. The county FFA is responsible for additional monitoring and provides the county licensing unit with information on any known violations or complaints. FFA ITFC homes are identified for the exclusive use of the county FFA and designate only youth who require a higher level of service be placed in these homes. There is an MOU between the county and the county FFA that governs this practice as is standard for all FFAs in California.

For San Mateo County, the benefits of maintaining its own FFA have been numerous, including well-supported foster homes, positive outcomes for youth, greater support and stability for youth, support for staff, flexibility, and experienced foster homes that are invested in their kids. An

important aspect to having a county run FFA is that mental health coordination is well supported. Some challenges that San Mateo has experienced include recruiting foster parents for adolescents and stepping youth down. According to COA guidelines, the plan for a youth must be reviewed quarterly in order to assess the level of care and services provided, which can affect the rate a foster parent receives and can be problematic when stepping a youth down. San Mateo County has experienced many of the same issues as other counties that partner in the community with foster parents. San Mateo County's foster homes rely heavily on the county ITFC team and are resistant to change, which can be difficult. San Mateo also noted that it can be a challenge to comply with the COA mandates of personnel records. Although the ITFC county teams are county employees, they are also considered FFA employees. Personnel records are kept in both the county Human Resource Department and onsite at the county's FFA office as mandated by the COA. The benefit of oversight that San Mateo County has experienced, including the fact that foster parents are well-trained, committed, and participate in a foster parent support group each month, has outweighed any negatives in the program. The foster parent support group is facilitated by a county staff that is not a part of the ITFC team. This allows the foster parents to discuss items freely and for an objective ear to listen to their concerns.

The incredibly time-consuming efforts it takes to prepare for licensing is also to be considered. San Mateo begins preparing for the certification renewal one year in advance. Every four years it must go through the recertification process at a cost of \$50,000 to continue operating ITFC homes. San Mateo County, operating as an FFA, must meet the Council on Accreditation standards that all foster family agencies must meet. During the preparation for a September site visit, San Mateo County must outline how it provides services and show evidence of positive

outcomes. The lengthy report that documents this is then submitted to the COA and then the county will be given a pass or a fail and recommendations based on COA findings. San Mateo County has found that operating its own FFA ITFC is the best practice for the agency and the youth.

Applying the Model to San Francisco

Initially, it was thought that this model could also serve to be valuable to San Francisco County and contribute to more positive outcomes for its youth. However, after exploring all factors at this initial stage, this has proven to not be true. Important resource factors that were taken into account include: financial, space, staff, and the availability of quality foster family homes.

Another critical factor that must be taken into consideration is the implementation of CCR, which is where San Francisco will need to concentrate most of its efforts at this time. First, the cost for San Francisco County to run an FFA, including that of having three social workers with a Bachelor's degree and one supervisor to monitor the team, would not be considered cost-effective. In considering staff costs, one must take into account salary, benefits, supplies, and workspace. The overall cost to do business with one team serving and supporting seven FFA ITFC homes would be approximately \$575,000. The recoupment the county would receive through placement costs would be \$162,540. This is cost prohibitive for the county, and it would end up operating at a deficit of over \$400,000 annually. This analysis does not take into account any additional federal participation draw down (San Francisco is a Title IV-E waiver county), but the amount of the gap in deficit would still not allow this to be feasible.

Secondly, San Francisco County historically has some barriers to recruiting foster parents for its

programs, one being the difficulty of having enough reliable, stable, loving homes. It is recommended that the county concentrate its efforts where youth, as well as members of our community, are living. Former BASSC participant and City and County of San Francisco Protective Services Teen Unit Supervisor, Brian Reems, recommended implementing a new outreach approach to recruit foster parents through religious entities and the faith community. Another suggestion could be to partner with school districts and including informational pamphlets on how to become a foster parent in student registration packets. In the past, the county has partnered with school districts with a focus on school staff personnel, but communicating directly with parents who have children in school might be more than willing to offer help and care for another child. The county should provide the opportunity to do so. If issues related to recruitment and retention of foster homes for our children can be solved, it is possible to also successfully implement a county-run FFA and provide for the individual needs of each child in foster care. However, this is unlikely to be resolved in the near future, and, therefore, although the model works well for San Mateo County, it would not be recommend that San Francisco County implement a county-run FFA at this time. The quality of service, support and oversight, as well as the benefits from providing quality training and care associated with a county-run FFA, could benefit San Francisco as a county and improve the quality of services to our youth and community. However, a financial cost analysis does not support this decision and another very important factor—the recruitment and retention of foster homes—would be a huge barrier to success. As a county, San Francisco would not have enough adequate homes to implement its own county-run FFA, nor does it have the time to invest as the county gears up to focus its efforts on the implementation of CCR.

Data

San Francisco County has just under one thousand children in foster care placements, and of those, slightly fewer than 10% of youth are placed in a group home (excluding probation youth). Fewer than 4% of youth are placed in an ITFC FFA. The majority of ITFC placements in San Francisco (81%) tend to be youth age eleven and older. In consideration of CCR, the task of transitioning youth from congregate care to a family-like setting would be an enormous task for San Francisco, one it would be challenged to implement at this time. Upon reflecting on San Francisco County's own program history, one solution may be to create special foster parent recruitments for teen youth, a specialized population in foster care that has its own set of needs. It takes an entirely different skill set to have a home that serves teens than it does to serve other populations such as infants or toddlers. Teenagers are one of the most difficult and challenging groups to place, and combined with the trauma foster youth have often experienced, many foster parents may be hesitant to take teens into their homes. If the county had targeted, specific and supportive recruitment for teen foster homes, it may help to solve the lack of homes for the teen population. If the county can look to its own youth as a resource and guide to meet their needs, it will be much better suited to offer appropriate services. It will take an openness and willingness from all parties to achieve this.

Age	Number of Children	Average Length of Stay in Last Service Level (Month)	Average length of Stay in ITFC (Month)	Average Time in Care (Month)	Time in ITFC per FC Episode
0 - 5	3	6	7	25	26%
6 -10	4	11	13	33	40%

11 - 15	13	26	34	83	41%
16+	18	16	36	87	41%

Assessment and Recommendation

In conclusion, the cost factors that were considered in this case study indicate that to implement this project in San Francisco County would be too costly. The county lacks the available resources and will likely not have the expertise or time to invest in the initial set-up or maintenance for a county-run FFA. While gathering information and data and researching the San Mateo County model of a county-run FFA, it became clear that this is a great model, but, at this time, not recommended for San Francisco County to implement. This is definitely something that could be considered in the future as more available resources become available.

There are other viable options to consider in terms of reform. Respect and credence must be given where it is deserved, and this can be found in the most unexpected places at the most inopportune times. The county must be mindful and remain aware of innovative solutions and ways to improve services. Only then will it be possible to truly effect change. If those who work in child welfare can think globally and coordinate efforts as a village not as individual agencies much more can be accomplished to truly serve youth in this community. One way to begin is by more closely partnering with other state and federal agencies, local police agencies, daycare programs, school districts, prisons, housing agencies, nonprofit agencies, the broader community, foster parents and, most importantly, the youth themselves. Outcomes can be improved by increasing and allocating appropriate resources, and coordinating, not duplicating, our efforts. Agencies must truly partner in different ways than they have before, to create permanent connections for youth as well as more spaces that are nurturing, accepting, patient and understanding. As a government agency, the San Francisco Human Services Agency must be

more conscious of mirroring the population and communities it serves, culturally and ethically, for all kids it represents who do not have anyone else to represent them. We are their voice; we are their wings until they are able to enable their own.

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