# BUILDING AN ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT STRUCTURE
### Judith L. Bushey*
### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The author selected an exploration of a Child Welfare administrative infrastructure in a California county because of the early development of such a management support operation in the author's own county.

Alameda County graciously and generously invited the author to meet with and interview members of its PIPER Team, an administrative support unit developed in early 1999 to bridge the gap between the Department's critical administrative functions. PIPER is an acronym for Planning, Information, Policy, Evaluation, and Research.

The PIPER Team was implemented out of recommendations by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) which resulted when CWLA conducted a review of Alameda County's child protection and foster care programs in the late 1990's. CWLA recommended that the Social Service Agency "augment the DCFS management structure to provide staffing for community relations, policies and procedures, foster care support, personnel functions, budgeting, management information systems, etc." (*Report of the Practice Improvement Project,* Page 3)

The PIPER Team is comprised of six Program Specialists, one Management Analyst, a Data Input Clerk and a Secretary, led by a Supervising Program Specialist. Most Team members hold Master's level credentials including Master's Degrees of Social Work, Public Health, and Public Administration.

Assignments of the PIPER Team include a broad scope of management support functions. Program planning, develop, and implementation within the department and agency, and through collaboration with other county agencies and community based organizations; data analysis and the publication of associated management reports; contract preparation, negotiation, execution, and monitoring; the tracking of caseloads and social worker attrition rates for budget projections; the monitoring of group home service providers and the development of group home standards and capacity; workspace planning, social worker recruitment, and motor-pool monitoring are highlights of typical tasks performed by the team.

The interviews with the PIPER Team surfaced interesting comments, suggestions and issues relative to the typical profile of administrative support staff, training, communication, crisis orientation vs planned response to assignments, supervision needs of staff, and the relevance of implied authority to getting the job done.

The author was able to derive recommendations for Santa Clara County's Child Welfare operation, which include the expansion of DFCS' administrative support unit in size and function.

The author is grateful to Alameda County for a useful and enjoyable experience and wishes to thank the PIPER Team for their time, knowledge and support.

*Judith L. Bushey is the Assistant to the Director and Manager of the Administrative Support Bureau in the Department of Family and Children's Services of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

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## INTRODUCTION

The BASSC project chosen by the author was the exploration of a Child Welfare administrative infrastructure of another California County. This would provide timely and relevant information, and perhaps direction, in the further development of Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) management support operation which was in it's infancy. Alameda County graciously offered the infrastructure of their Child Welfare department, the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) for this exploration.

## BACKGROUND

Late in the 1990's Alameda County recognized the need to evaluate their Child Welfare operation. A contract was established with the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) to conduct a major review of Alameda County's child protection and foster care programs. This review resulted in a number of recommendations.

In the *Report of the Practice Improvement Project, End of Year (1999) Report* published in January 2000, CWLA recommended that the Social Service Agency "augment the DCFS management structure to provide staffing for community relations, policies and procedures, foster care support, personnel functions, budgeting, management information systems, etc. Although some of these functions are currently staffed, the individuals are stretched to provide support for functions not staffed, leaving the system incapable of proactive planning and good community relations." (Page 3)

The augmentation of management would support the organizational structure which, following the implementation of another CWLA recommendation for reorganization, now consists of a DCFS director whose position title is Assistant Agency Director; the Supervising Program Specialist who manages and supervises Administrative and Management Services; three Division Directors whose scope of responsibilities encompass Community Services, Family Services, and Support Services, respectively; eight Program Managers, a Supervising Program Specialist and a Clerical Support Manager who report to the Division Directors; and Supervisors of a panoply of units which provide Child Welfare, Foster Care, Adoption, Licensing and community based and other services to round out Alameda County's comprehensive service delivery system for the children and families of that community.

Early in 1999, the Management Analyst who had been providing administrative support to the DCFS Director submitted a proposal for an expanded management support function. In his draft it was proposed that "the structure and supervision of the management support functions be…reorganized in order to enhance the Department's capacity to plan systematically; develop new programs; analyze and understand the effects of policies and programs; and improve the capacity to retrieve and use data for planning and program development from CWS/CMS." It was further proposed that "management support staff be restructured into the Planning, Information, Policy, Evaluation and Research work group." Thus the PIPER Team for management support came into being.

## FORM AND STRUCTURE OF **PIPER** ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGEMENT SERVICES

The goal of PIPER is to "become the bridge between the department's critical functions of policy analysis, planning and program development, information management, research and outcome evaluations." The positions and functions of the PIPER Team are:

- A Supervising Program Specialist who holds a Master's Degree in Social Work (MSW). He has knowledge of the Department operations, policies, and procedures; skills in program planning, data analysis and supervision; and understanding of Child Welfare issues at the local, state and national level and the desire to systematically plan, implement and evaluate programs; and political savvy. He supervises the PIPER Team and has responsibility for producing a variety of short and long-term administrative work products, and plays a role in tandem with County Personnel in the recruitment of Child Welfare Social Workers.
- A Program Specialist/Contracts Liaison with a Bachelor's Degree in Accounting. She publishes Requests for Proposals; prepares and negotiates contracts and approves payments to contractors. She plays a key role in the Child Abuse Prevention Task Force in the development and monitoring of contracts with community based organizations. She also maintains the motor pool inventory that provides autos for Department staff, and monitors a hotline that receives complaints about the maintenance of the vehicles by the General Services Agency.
- A Management Analyst who holds Master's Degrees in Social Work and Public Health, whose primary responsibilities include collect-

ing and analyzing data which she uses in the preparation and publishing of executive level management reports. As a member of the Proposition 10 Steering/Implementation Committee and other collaborative programmatic projects she plans, facilitates and writes. She acts as a consultant to program managers, supervisors, and line staff, and is the Department Liaison to Research.
- A Program Specialist whose credentials include a Master's Degree in Public Health who has an active interface with Agency Personnel and Finance. She tracks caseloads and caseworker attrition rates to project and report staffing needs and prepares the Department's budget justifications. She monitors Department expenditures in order to cite trends and unusual spending practices. She is the Department's representative to Agency space planning.
- A Program Specialist with an MSW whose prior assignment was a Child Welfare Social Worker. She has an instrumental role in the monitoring of group home service providers and their services; is the Department's representative to the multi-disciplinary team that makes decisions on out-of-state group home placements; collaborates with the community and with Department staff in the development of group home standards and additional capacity; partners with other county agencies to plan, develop and implement alternative programs to group home placement; advocates for appropriate placements for developmentally delayed and medically fragile children; and pursues legislation that will mandate needed services for this population. She also visits area university campuses to recruit Child Welfare Social Workers from MSW programs.
- A Program Specialist with dual degrees: MSW and Master's Degree in Public Administration.

As an administrative lead she operationalizes the ideas and concepts of administrators and facilitates the direct service hierarchy in the planning, development and implementation of programs such as Family Conferencing, Extended Voluntary Placement, Wraparound, Kinship Support Services and KinGAP. She is the Department liaison to state and federal work groups.

- A Community Liaison Program Specialist with a Bachelor's Degree in Urban Regional Planning whose assignments focus on facilitating linkages with community partners, other county agencies, and other internal Agency departments. She is a key player in the Department's development of Family Conferencing, Kinship Support, Proposition 10 initiatives, Alternative Response System (a front-end diversion program), and Master Plan for Language Access; and she provides administrative support to multiple ethnically specific employee Advisory Boards.
- A Program Specialist, who holds an MSW, whose prior experience includes the directorship of the San Francisco Council on Poverty and Homelessness. He monitors fifteen contracts that the Department has established with ten community based organizations for the provision of services to children and families. He is charged with developing a systematic method for program monitoring and is exploring the inclusion of outcome measures upon which contracted service providers can be evaluated. He is also exploring with PIPER's supervisor the development of outcome measures by which the Team can assess their productivity and promote quality assurance.
- A Data Input Clerk who is the liaison between the Department and the Victims of Crime (VOC) Program. She reviews all initial petitions and court reports, police and medical reports for the possibility of eligibility for VOC funding (with a high percentage of children who are ultimately found eligible). She tracks and generates management reports on the hours of contract staff; uses CWS/CMS to respond to inquiries; prepares presentation materials; makes room reservations; photocopies; sends faxes; and performs other clerical support tasks as assigned.
- A Secretary who reports directly to the Department Director and supports both the Director and the PIPER Team. She manages the Director's calendar; routes mail, inquires, and requests for information to the proper person for response; receives and directs complaints to the appropriate Program Manager or Supervisor and notifies the complainant of the disposition of the complaint. She provides clerical support for the Child Abuse Prevention Task Force and its Coordinator, and for the Death Review Team; and performs various other kinds of critical administrative support tasks as required.

## DISCUSSION

The interviews led to a series of interesting observations, suggestions and issues relative to the agency, department and team. Ideas were freely shared with the author and considered for relevance to Santa Clara County's DFCS' administrative infrastructure.

### Profile of Administrative Support Staff

Administrative support staff must be intelligent; quick to learn; task and detail oriented; skilled writers; able to create a network of individuals outside of the Team who will give advice, suggestions and help; and able to establish credibility with line staff and management. Child Welfare knowledge

and experience is invaluable and serves to establish credibility with line staff.

## Training

No formal training is offered to the administrative support unit. Staff bring relevant experience, and learn by doing. Some cross training is a natural by-product of close proximity of workstations—seeing and hearing about projects each other is working on, and occasionally having to back-up one another. Through regular meetings, sitting together as a unit, observing each other's work processes and products, a synchronicity emerges. The team becomes greater than the sum of its parts—each person with an expertise plus generic knowledge and skills provides for a broader scope of achievement.

## Communication

Communication surfaced as an important issue for several reasons. The ability to communicate both verbally and in written form, and the opportunity to communicate are critical to getting the job done. Frequent and open communication helps staff to stay current on Agency and Department operations, policies and procedures—knowledge that is vital to the productivity of the team. It is the means by which ideas of PIPER staff on program planning and development reach administrators and the way that job requirements are made known. Talking among unit members facilitates collaboration when overlaps in assignments are noted. Working in the immediate vicinity of agency and department administrators makes it easy to have frequent interaction; however, the close proximity sometimes supports the tendency of administrators to micromanage.

Being located a few blocks from line staff hinders the development of supportive working relationships and the opportunity to network. While PIPER Team members have become more cohesive since the move to their new building because of the natural progression toward interdependence, they also feel isolated from previous associates and activities and are not as accessible to line staff.

Staff also pointed out the need for administrators to find a balance between being present and available to agency and department staff and the requirement to communicate with and respond to external entities.

## Crisis Orientation vs Planned Response

While the PIPER Team is making definite inroads into a systematic approach to administrative support, the department continues to operate too frequently in crisis mode. It is difficult to implement recommendations that result from strategic planning and research when the focus is on the immediate burning issue, which subsequently fades with the next burning issue. There needs to be more clarity regarding who should take the lead in implementing recommendations—the PIPER Team raises awareness, identifies gaps and needs, but doesn't have the clout to follow through. Program managers have their own priorities and workload issues. Thus, there is little time for them to stop to plan and implement new programs, processes and procedures. Things remain status quo unless someone champions a particular cause, particularly someone in administration who says, "This is what I want you to work on."

It was noted during a PIPER Team unit meeting that policies and procedures for practice are increasingly outdated. The responsibility for updating manuals and placing them on-line was assigned

outside the team. However, the assigned individual has had too little time to devote to the assignment. The department is currently looking for staff with the skill set to take on this project, one that appears to be appropriate for PIPER staff. Team resources are felt to be spread too thinly already, however.

## Supervision

There must be parity between leadership and guidance and the autonomy that should be afforded the bright, competent, skilled self-starters who hold the positions within the team. It can be a paradox for the supervisor of such a unit because the tendency may be to hold back, believing that staff prefer self-direction, when in fact sometimes the staff actually feel abandoned from such a hands-off approach to supervision.

Further, it is imperative that at least one individual be granted the status of second-in-command, even if only implied, to cover those occasions when the supervisor is not available. Every ship needs a rudder, so to speak, no matter how sophisticated the design, or it may drift.

## Authority

PIPER Team members, whose most common position code is that of Program Specialist, regularly interact with managers, both inside and outside the organization. They often must take a leadership role in internal program planning and development, and while representing the department among external government entities and community based organizations. The authority implied by unit membership and assignment is generally perceived as adequate to get the job done. However, the opinion held by some is that team members lack the clout to pull together collaborations and could be more effective and taken more seriously in some situations if they held higher positions of authority.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY

The author gathered a great deal of material that may be considered for usefulness in Santa Clara County at some future point. Listed are proposals for immediate consideration.

1. DFCS' Administrative Support Bureau should increase the level of staffing in order:
   • to provide more support and assume additional responsibilities, particularly in the facilitation of program planning, development, and implementation, and
   • to allow for a more methodical and systematic approach to assignments rather than crisis to crisis response.

2. DFCS' Administrative Support Bureau staff should receive training in the development of outcome measures in order to provide support in the performance based budget process and to include them in the evaluating/monitoring of service agreements and contracts.

3. DFCS needs to be cognizant of communication issues that surround administrative support staff who interface with management, line staff, and external entities to ensure that it is meeting the needs of all concerned.

4. DFCS' Administrative Support Bureau staff should have a key role in pursuing and assuring the implementation of recommendations that result from the DFCS' Strategic Plan.

5. DFCS should routinely assess all children in the Dependency system for eligibility for Victim Witness funding.

## CONCLUSION

Alameda County's Department of Children and Family Services has made significant advances in the past year in the effort to meet the department's administrative needs through the development and growth of the PIPER Team. The knowledge and skills of the team members are impressive and lend themselves to a wide variety of assignments. One can only assume that as this team's purpose and contribution become more institutionalized the department's capacity to plan systematically, develop new programs, and analyze and understand the effects of policies and programs will continue to improve.

I am grateful to the PIPER Team, particularly to its leader, for allowing me to enter into their work environment. They were gracious hosts; and freely and generously gave of their time, their knowledge, and their work products. To each of them, I say thank you.