

Addressing Disproportionality and Disparity: **Contra Costa County’s Fairness and Equity** **Cultural Competency Training**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The issue of disproportionality and disparity nationwide and in Bay Area counties has been a challenge that child welfare services agencies everywhere are taking steps to address. Children of all races are equally as likely to suffer from abuse and neglect, although a significantly greater proportion of African-American children enter and remain in foster care.

“This has been described as a chronic crisis. That is, the problem is long-standing, but it is of such urgency that no lasting improvements are possible in child welfare services unless these inequities are reduced and eventually eliminated.”*

Fairness and Equity Training

Contra Costa County is seen as a leader in cultural competency training and initiatives at the state and national levels. In Contra Costa County in 2000, African-American children represented only **11.4%** of the population, although they accounted for **49%** of all children in foster care. Through a variety of efforts, including self assessments, data gathering, staff and community partner training, community involvement, and committee development, Contra Costa County is taking an active role in addressing disproportionality and disparity.

Recommendations for San Mateo County

The data in San Mateo County show that African-Americans represent **2.4%** of the population, and account for **30.2%** of the children in foster care. As part of an ongoing quality improvement process, with a strong focus on providing excellent services to families, as well as through accreditation and strategic planning, San Mateo County’s Human Services Agency has made a commitment to address the issue of disproportionality. Based on lessons learned from Contra Costa County and literature in the field, including promising practices, recommendations for San Mateo County are:

- 1 Continue cultural competency training and cultural events;
- 2 Promote self assessment and improved data gathering;
- 3 Conduct advanced and targeted training;
- 4 Review practices, in particular at critical decision making points in child welfare;
- 5 Encourage community involvement and coordinated service delivery in working towards solutions and with at-risk families; and
- 6 Pursue funding opportunities.

*Robert B. Hill, “Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update.” Prepared for the Casey-Center for the Study of Social Policy Alliance for Racial Equity (May 2006).

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Introduction

The issue of disproportionality and disparity, nationwide and in Bay Area counties, has been a challenge that child welfare service agencies are actively taking steps to address. San Mateo County’s Human Services Agency is very committed to taking a proactive approach in dealing with this pervasive and ongoing problem. For this reason, San Mateo County chose to research Contra Costa County’s Fairness and Equity Cultural Competency Training Program. Contra Costa County is seen as a leader in fairness and equity initiatives at the state and national levels.

Equity implies the application and justice influenced by principles of ethics. Fairness implies the absence of bias. Disproportionality is overrepresentation of a particular group in any given area compared to their proportion in the population. Disparity is described as a comparison of one group, regarding disproportionality, services, and outcomes to another group. Research shows time and time again that all children, no matter what their race, are equally as likely to suffer from abuse and neglect. Nationwide, children of color are disproportionately represented throughout the child protective services process, starting from the onset of a hotline call to permanent out-of-home placement. Child welfare systems across the country are responsible for keeping children safe, and helping them live securely with families, preferably with their own biological families whenever possible.

Cultural Competency Training

Since 1998, Contra Costa County has been involved in the development of a cultural competency training curriculum. In looking at national data of children involved with child welfare supervised foster care in 2000,¹ the data showed that although African-American children represented **11.4%** of the population they accounted for **49%** of all children in foster care. By comparison statewide in California, African-American children represent 7% of the population and 33.4% of all children in foster care.²

In 2002, Contra Costa County transitioned to a “Family to Family” child welfare structure, and cultural competence was a key component of the reorganization plan. Contra Costa County collaborated with the Bay Area Academy to create the “Contra Costa County—Exploring Cultures, Communicating for Cultural Competence” Project. This multi-year project involved a self-assessment, an evaluation of the level of cultural competence exhibited in Contra Costa County’s delivery of services, and the creation of a series of trainings and workshops aimed at promoting cultural competence among Contra Costa County child welfare staff. (The assessment tool chosen was from the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA).) The committee then compiled relevant demographics of Contra Costa County,

¹Source: 2000 Census and 7/02 CWS/CMS statistics

²Source: CWS/CMS 7/02 statistics

including information and statistics on the families served and children in out-of-home placement.

In 2002, the assessment tool was administered to all child welfare staff and approximately 154 of the service population. There were several specific training recommendations which emerged from the assessment. The recommendations were: case planning, which incorporates culturally specific material to increase the worker's ability to recognize significant cultural indicators at each of the critical points of the case; more culturally specific information on clients' populations; more information on child rearing practices and family functioning from the cultural perspective of the families served; more information on culturally specific parenting practices; and cross-cultural communication or professional development to examine employee's own cultures. Best practices indicate that training which stresses the use of empowerment strategies for client families can, at the same time, teach workers to recognize cultural strengths as a normal part of the casework process.

From these findings, the planning committee developed a training series' and workshops to communicate effectively with diverse service populations. The training series "Exploring Cultures, Communicating for Cultural Competence", began in May 2003 and continued through the 2004 fiscal year. The trainings and workshops focused on communicating with cultural competence and a variety of more specific topics. Community partners were invited to help support collaboration and improve integration of services.

As it was observed, many participants attended workshops on topics related to their own ethnicity and culture and therefore, it was recommended that in future trainings steps be taken to promote more cross-cultural learning among participants. From the evaluations, participants indicated that they gained useful knowledge and perspective from the training, particularly with respect to finding appropriate vocabulary and terminology to use in their practice, using more effective strategies and methods for working with diverse client groups, and learning

to respect and be sensitive towards others.. Some of the next steps identified for future training were to branch out to other cultures, demographic groups and social issues, including poverty, racism, and generational issues, as well as issues such as permanency in the African-American community. In 2003, Contra Costa County was awarded the Federal System of Care Grant, and implemented the child welfare redesign project, The combination of the family to family effort, and strong leadership by the director of the agency at that time, Dana Fabella, provided strong momentum for this project.

The "Parent Partner Program" was added to improve services at the initial detention hearing to families with children in placement. Parent partners are available to meet with parents and assist them through the process of self-advocacy and service involvement. Parent Partners are individuals who have been involved in the child welfare services system and who successfully changed their lives and had their children returned to them. They serve an incredibly important role, providing experiential feedback to social workers, as well as being liaisons and peers to the parents involved in the system. They also serve as the voice of our families, and as great role models for those who may be struggling.

Early on in the effort, the "Cultural Competency Oversight Committee" was developed. The committee was chaired by the child welfare director, a divisional manager, staff, and a diverse representation by all levels of the department. This body was essential for providing leadership, feedback, and guidance for the program. They helped to design and market the series of trainings.

Successful diversity initiatives depend upon collaboration at all levels of the agency. The initial round of trainings focused largely upon cultural awareness, and the culture of the client, which was designed as an essential first step towards educating staff on the cultural characteristics and practices of different cultures. A post-training survey indicated that the staff was aware of the cultural awareness training being offered, but it did not indicate that staff was incorporating this "awareness" into their practice.

Therefore, in 2005 Contra Costa County Children and Family Services Division launched a training series “Addressing Racial Disproportionality: One Social Worker, One Solution at a Time”. “This curriculum presumes there is a causal link between racism and racial disproportionality. The curriculum uses discussions of culture or poverty as explanations for disproportionality.”³ This three-part training series was designed to increase awareness of the disparate outcomes for African-American families and to provide trainings that offer the greatest potential to reduce bias in service delivery practices in Contra Costa County. Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding, along with Lisa Molinar, a staff developer with Contra Costa County, were asked to co-develop, a training series to assist Contra Costa County in moving to the next level in cultural competency training. Contra Costa County was one of the first counties to name “institutional racism” as an issue within the agency, and used the idea of bias as contributing to the field of child welfare.

No change is likely to occur if the racial biases that influence social work practice and decision-making are not addressed. By having difficult dialogues on race, participants learn to identify biases embedded in everyday behaviors, attitudes, and practices that can influence service delivery. Phase I of the training focused on how the individual bias of the worker, as well as institutional bias embedded in agency and societal practices, influence decision-making, which can result in disparate outcomes. Social work practices need to be replaced with behaviors that support principles of fairness and equity. The goals of the introductory training were: to discuss how societal factors, such as color blindness and institutional racism, operate in tandem; to discuss how personal and institutional biases and the consequences can function virtually undetected in a colorblind society; to utilize a learning tool which explores conditions, behaviors, and attitudes that can perpetuate bias; and to help participants recognize and ultimately modify conditions, behaviors, and attitudes that can pro-

mote diversity in their social work practice. This allows the participants the opportunity to discuss bias without commitment.

Phase II was the advanced training for supervisors and managers, which focused on the leadership role in coaching and mentoring the staff, to help them incorporate into practice the goals and objectives addressed in the introductory training. The goals of the advanced training were to:

- Understand how unconscious or implicit bias can distort service decisions,
- Recognize institutional racism in agency policies and procedures
- Identify incremental and seemingly harmless actions that can produce and preserve bias along the continuum of the decision-making point,
- Understand the role of the supervisor/manager as a coach who can develop and implement strategies and tools for intervention, and
- Assess the agency infrastructure for cultural competency.

The training allowed time for participants to take the Harvard implicit bias test online which look specifically at the various decision-making points where bias can occur. This training was meant to help participants take the next step and begin the discussion of how bias can persist at specific decision-making points. It was recognized that staff will enter the discussion about bias from many different starting points regardless of where they are along the continuum of awareness. They will need good coaching and mentoring to become culturally competent.

Phase III of the training involved retreats by building or region to discuss and develop plans for making their site culturally competent.

In 2006, a follow-up training by Dr. Wedding, “Difficult Dialogues” was conducted by utilizing a number of non-threatening vignettes, to practice difficult conversations. Diversity certificates were awarded to all staff who participated in three or more trainings. Pre- and post-tests were given at all the trainings, which showed that participants had a significant increase in knowledge. All throughout the series of trainings, the Cultural Competency

³Contra Costa County Child Welfare Training Series, report by Rita Cameron Wedding, Ph.D.

Oversight Committee continued to meet monthly to provide feedback on the curriculum, and to discuss the results of the training sessions. The committee members played a pivotal role in the successful outcome of the training series.

The data as of July 2006, show that the specific indicator of disproportionality of African-American youth in child welfare did not significantly decrease in Contra Costa County, although, it showed a modest improvement in many areas which indicate some progress is being made. They found that when focusing on a specific population with a specific goal, much improvement was made. In 2006, Richmond (targeted area) decreased the number of African American children under the age of five (targeted population), removed from their homes from 21 to 3 since the agency began its cultural competency training. This was largely accomplished by an agency policy that required mandatory Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings for children under the age 5. First entries for African American children within this targeted population group decreased. All ethnicities showed a decrease in time in placement, although African American youths still have longer lengths of stay in care. Over the past five years, the county has steadily increased the use of TDM's to engage youth and adults in the case planning process. In 2007, the Cultural Competence Oversight Committee decided to ask one of the Parent Partners to join the committee, which continued to improve the dialogue, and help maintain focus on a culturally competent workforce, and continual improvement.

Contra Costa County's Current Efforts

As Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding states "Reducing racial disproportionality is a huge undertaking for any major social institution and takes time and effort. It is evident that the agency is committed to continuing its ongoing diversity initiatives". These efforts include surveys, trainings, lunchtime discussions, newsletters, speakers, and continued work on building plans. The recommendations made by Dr. Wedding are to clearly delineate best practices for diminishing the effects of institutional racism, but

realizes it is constrained by internal and external forces. Biases are embedded in everyday operating procedures, both formal and informal, and attitudes of unwitting individuals in the policies and procedures to which they must comply. The next steps are to develop culturally competent strategies, to establish best practices for handling cases (which sets the stage for all subsequent decisions and actions), to establish a model for how cultural competency could be achieved within a bureaucratic setting, to develop new procedures for how cases are handled, to provide baseline data to show if there was an improvement in outcomes, and to increase collaboration and problem solving with external agencies and community partners.

As Contra Costa County continues its commitment to improve in this area, it has embarked on a new training called "Words Mean Things". This innovative training looks at the words that are used on a day-to-day basis in the child welfare system and the impact that they have on service delivery and families. There was an additional emphasis placed on the written documentation in particular case reports, case files, and improved court reports. The training was collaboratively conducted by child welfare supervisors and staff development, with an emphasis on strength-based, and first person language. In regards to cultural competency, it was highlighted that language is used differently in some cultures and the importance of appreciating and understanding the different cultures is critical. "Language can be the window into someone's culture, and a window into someone's reality, and how they experience it."⁴ The training emphasizes the choice that exists in the way that people, with whom child welfare works, are approached either as deficit-based or strength-based. If they are seen as representing a degree of competence and skill, and the focus is looking at safety for children, there will be fewer contexts for demonizing the parent. There was an honest realization made that both the court system and the paperwork within our systems are deficit-driven. In addition, much of

⁴"Words Mean Things" training, Contra Costa County, 2007

the language that we've learned and utilize are words that are very much institutionalized. The training objective was definitely met, as it was evident by the open dialog of the staff that there was a level of understanding, education, and acceptance that had taken place over the last few years. One decision that came out of the trainings was to follow up with the state to see if the language in CWS/CMS could be changed to be more strength-based.

Contra Costa County is now involved in a national campaign to reframe the national debate over health and what society can and should do to reduce our alarming health disparities. Beginning in February 2008, members of the Cultural Competency Oversight Committee partnered with the health department in community discussions on "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick"? It is a campaign which utilizes a seven part documentary series as a tool for initiating community dialogue and interventions around these issues. There are also talks of follow-up discussions on the role of class differences.

Funding Sources

The majority of the trainings were funded through the Bay Area Academy regional training contract utilizing advanced training days in capacity-building hours allocated to Contra Costa County, using Title IV-E funds for child welfare staff only. In addition, funding was obtained from the Federal System of Care Grant, redesign funds, Casey Foundation Family to Family Grants, and a collaboration with the community colleges, which allowed incorporation of foster parents and community partners.

Lessons Learned From Contra Costa County

- It is critical that all staff is trained from directors to support staff. Also, acknowledge that the staff are at all different levels of understanding or knowledge regarding cultural competency and the idea of institutional racism, therefore, providing a sufficient amount of time for training and to process the information learned.

- It is important to set up objectives of training to test the objectives prior to and after each training session.
- Leadership plays an extremely critical role to ensure that continual efforts and attention is paid in addressing disproportionate representation in disparate outcomes for African-American children.
- A larger role for team decision-making has been identified as a key to improving essential services, by including the voice of the client.
- It is entirely possible to keep the safety of the children as the primary goal of child welfare while working with the parents to improve situations so that families can be strengthened and/or reunited.
- African-American families are not receiving the essential services they need, which leads to a longer stay in foster care.
- Data is needed to focus on outcomes and informed practice.

County of San Mateo

The data in San Mateo County show that African-Americans represent **2.4%** of the population although they are 10.6% of the referrals made, 13.2% of substantiation, 20.2% of first entries into the child welfare system, and inevitably represent **30.2%** of the children in foster care. The Human Services Agency of San Mateo County has made a commitment to address the issue of disproportionality and disparate outcomes and have included this as a major goal in the strategic plan. In February 2007, social workers attended training on disproportionality, which was followed up by training on Latino families and African-American families. They then formed a group to look into the issue of disproportionality. The agency is also making an effort to raise awareness and celebrate the staff's cultural diversity, while they continue to promote the recruiting and training of diverse foster parents. The agency has engaged county stakeholders in developing a five-year strategic plan to ensure more equitable outcomes for children of color in San Mateo County.

As part of an ongoing quality improvement process, with a strong focus on providing excellent services to families, while undergoing an Accreditation and Strategic Planning process, San Mateo County's Human Services Agency has made a commitment to address the issue of disproportionality. Based on lessons learned from Contra Costa County, including promising practices, recommendations for San Mateo County are:

Ongoing Efforts:

- Continue Cultural Competency Training and Cultural Events;

Within next 6 months:

- Encourage community involvement in working towards solutions and with at-risk families
- Pursue funding opportunities.
- Collect data and continue self assessments;

Next 6 months to one Year and ongoing:

- Advanced and targeted training;
- Review practices, in particular at critical decision making points in child welfare.

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