

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES REFORM: MONTEREY COUNTY'S BLUEPRINT FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

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"In our work, we have to think about what's best for the child, not what's best for the system. "

INTRODUCTION

The last three years has brought significant policy changes in child welfare services through the passage of sweeping legislation at the federal and state level. Through the Adoptions and Safe Families Act at the federal level and the Governor's Adoption Initiative at the state level, a renewed focus has been placed on achieving timely permanence for children in foster care. Concurrent planning represents a major philosophical shift in working with families. Other initiatives such as SB 933 Group Homes Reform Bill, SB 163 Wrap Around Services, System of Care, Child Welfare Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Projects, Kinship Support Services and Kin-Gap Legislation also promote systems reform for child welfare services. Much of the recent legislation emphasizes strength-based approaches to working with families, community collaborations, and interagency partnerships as key elements. A strong emphasis on child and family outcomes, quality assurance for service delivery, and program evaluation are all standard requirements when applying for funds at the state level.

During this period, child welfare services in California has been severely impacted by the implementation of CWS/CMS, the mandated statewide database. In addition, the increased demand for child welfare staff has left counties with significant vacancies and turnover rates of up to 15% per year. The combination of all these factors has created new challenges and new opportunities for child welfare agencies.

IMPETUS FOR CHANGE IN TWO COUNTIES

Organizational change is a difficult process and it is most often a result of outside forces putting pressure on public agencies to change. This pressure can come in the form of changes in legislation, funding streams, leadership, or community complaints about existing services. The major impetus for child welfare reform in Alameda and Monterey Counties came as a result of performance audits requested by the Board of Supervisors in those respective counties. In 1996, Monterey County was subject to a performance audit by the County Auditors Controller's Office in response to issues concerning the financing of foster parent recruitment and training. The scope of the audit was expanded after a preliminary review identified problems related to management, organization, operational procedures, and policies within the division. The Audit resulted in several key recommendations and the Department spent the next year responding and implementing many of the recommendations which was documented in their Corrective Action Plan.

In 1997, Alameda County's foster care system was also subject to a review based on concerns expressed by the community and foster home providers about several issues: the relative lack of early intervention and prevention services, perceptions of poor communication among social workers, foster parents, and others who provide services to children and families, and questions

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about the responsiveness to the needs of minority children and their families. As a result, the Board of Supervisors contracted with the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) to assess the current child welfare system and develop a plan for strengthening its effectiveness.

Alameda County is now in the early stages of implementing the recommendations outlined in the CWLA report. For my BASSC report, I wanted to study and analyze how Monterey County has been able to implement changes in their service delivery system and apply their lessons learned to Alameda County.

Seven Ingredients for Successful Child Welfare Reform Efforts in Monterey County

Through interviews with various Senior Managers, Supervisors, and staff from Monterey County, I was able to gather information on the key ingredients that were essential for their child welfare reform efforts:

1. Set priorities for change and allocate appropriate resources to support those priorities. Monterey County realized that any efforts towards organizational change will require significant staff resources. Using the Performance Audit and the Corrective Action Plan to identify Department priorities, some staff were reassigned on a temporary basis to implement some of the recommendations. In addition, a strong message was communicated to all staff about the importance of the priority areas identified and management's expectations for staff to adhere to them.
2. Ensure that line staff and supervisors' input are solicited and included in planning for child welfare reform, on an ongoing basis. The Performance Audit uncovered a significant amount of unrest and disgruntlement among employees due to poor communication and lack of involvement in the decision making process. In response, Monterey County implemented a series of forums to insure that management and staff would have ongoing discussions about services. UC Davis consultants convened mandatory team building sessions with Senior Managers, Supervisors, and staff. Currently, management staff routinely attend Unit Meetings, conduct interviews with line staff and supervisors, and provide regular updates to staff about new policies and programs. In addition, the Director and Assistant Director of Social Services instituted regularly scheduled "Fireside Chats" to engage staff in an informal way about issues for the Department. A Policy Development Committee was established which includes Supervisors and Line staff to develop policies and procedures.
3. Provide training and support to staff around organizational and systems change processes. As a way to prepare staff for their changing roles within the context of welfare reform and organizational change, all staff were mandated to attend an Impact Training class. The training used consultants from UC Riverside to facilitate a dialogue with staff about their changing work environment and prepare and support staff through any barriers to change. Senior managers from the Department were trained in the curriculum and, in turn, trained other staff on the model.
4. Develop a shared vision for child welfare services which includes line staff and supervisory input. As Monterey County was considering how to respond to changes in legislation and

recommendations from the Performance Audit, it became clear that line staff and management often had different goals and priorities. The Policy Development Workgroup recommended that the staff have a one-day Visioning Retreat to outline the shared mission and vision for the Department. With assistance from a consultant from CalState Monterey Bay, over one-third of the Department staff with representation from all the programs, participated in the retreat and developed the guiding principles for their work. The primary question addressed was, "What is the purpose of the child welfare system?" The group identified the main purposes for the Department: child protection, preserving families, and permanence for the child. They also identified important practice issues which included greater community collaboration, promoting cross-unit coordination across programs, and building on family strengths.

5. Include other public agencies serving children and families in the shared vision and planning process for systemic change. Other partners include Health Care, Mental Health, Probation, and Special Education. In 1997, the Department's of Social Services, Probation, and Health conducted a study session on out-ofhome care with the Board of Supervisors. The Departments spoke about their programs and strategies to address placement issues. The primary concerns were related to the rising costs of foster care placements, low federal reimbursement rates, and the need for greater prevention services. A primary recommendation was the increased collaboration to integrate services form social services, health care, probation, and mental health.

As a result of this effort. Department heads from these agencies are now meeting on a weekly basis to discuss planning for their programs. This increased communication and collaboration has resulted in the following initiatives:

- a Co-location of other agency staff within Social Services. Currently, a full-time Public Health Nurse and Mental Health Worker have offices within the Department of Family and Children Services. In addition, these staff are available for all case staffing and placement committee meetings
 - b Mental Health has reorganized its staff to be agency specific teams. Currently, new space in the Social Services building has been allocated to house a team of Mental Health Workers whose cases are all comprised of children in foster care.
 - c Behavioral Health Care Services has assigned a full-time staff person on-site to be the referral source and gatekeeper for all substance abuse services for child welfare clients.
 - d Discussions have included plans for shared funding across different agencies.
6. Documenting and tracking progress made towards achieving goals anal outcomes. At every phase during the implementation of the Corrective Action Plan, Monterey County prepared quarterly reports which documented their progress. An Out-of-Home Care report was also prepared to document the discussion and recommendations agreed upon by the Department's of Social Services, Health, and Probation. Social Services staff analysts routinely provide data and reports about the status of various programs.

7. Aggressively apply for additional grant funds to support innovative new programs. Monterey County has made concerted efforts to apply for foundation and other money to promote their goals of systems change. Monterey County was recently awarded \$180,000 from the California Department of Social Services for their Kinship Support Services Program, an amount which was double their original request. The county also received funds from the Packard Foundation to conduct planning for systemic change in their child welfare services.

SYSTEMS CHANGE EXAMPLE: CONCURRENT PLANNING

Monterey County is one of the few counties at the forefront around the implementation of Concurrent Planning and the Adoption's Initiative. It is important to note that Monterey County also had a strong Foster-Adopt Program for the past ten years. After the Performance Audit, Senior Managers identified concurrent planning as one of the Department's priorities and issued a policy statement reinforcing this for all staff. Senior Managers communicated that this would be challenging for staff, but that it was the new way of doing business and staff were expected to adhere to it.

A Concurrent Planning Policy Workgroup, comprised of staff and supervisors, participated in the development of policy and procedures for the program. From its onset, the major theme was the need for more teamwork across staff from the different programs of Intake, Family Reunification, Permanent Placement and Adoptions. Policy and procedures reflected all the guiding principles that were developed during the original Visioning Retreat for the Department.

As a result, Concurrent Planning has been thoroughly integrated into all the Department's programs. Some of the highlights of their program include:

- Concurrent Planning Review and Review, Assessment, and Planning (CP-RAP) Meetings are convened for every child brought into custody. This meeting includes representation of staff from all the programs. In addition, a Public Health Nurse and the Mental Health Worker also provide consultation on the case. The purpose of the initial meeting is to assign staff to the team who will work with the primary case manager to develop the concurrent plan and make placement recommendations. The CP-RAP team will work together to identify tasks and assignments, develop the case plan and visitation schedules, find the appropriate concurrent planning home, and be involved in all aspects of case planning.
- At 4-months and 10-months, the CP-RAP team convenes a "Family Decision Making" type meeting with the family, foster parents, and all other services providers involved to review progress on the case and make joint decisions. Additional case staffing can be convened by the case manager as they see appropriate.
- At every level, progress is documented and a tracking system has been set up to insure that the CP-RAP meetings and the 4-month and 10 month meetings are held. Supervisors work closely with their staff to insure that all problems are addressed in timely manner. The assistance of the Public Health Nurse and the Mental Health Worker has been helpful

in insuring that support services are available to the family. This new system has been well received by the family and other services providers since it allows for better and ongoing mode of communication among all members of the team.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

With the implementation phase of the CWLA recommendation's underway, Alameda County has much to learn from Monterey County's efforts at systems change. The following are some recommendations for Alameda County:

- 1 Clearly communicate the vision and program priorities for all staff and set clear expectations for management and line staff regarding their role in implementing the changes.
- 2 Facilitate regular and ongoing exchanges among Senior Managers, Supervisory Staff, and Line staff to solicit input and feedback on initiatives. Insure that an ongoing feedback loop is established so staff are aware of progress made towards program goals.
- 3 Implement cross-program and cross departmental case planning for families invoked with the child welfare system.
- 4 Continue and expand work with other public agencies serving children through CWLA and the Interagency Children's Policy Council efforts. Work with other agencies to develop a shared vision for Alameda County's children. Convene regular forums to design interagency policy, program planning, and cross agency revenue maximization.
- 5 Develop and support initiatives to co-locate agency staff from health and mental health with child welfare staff and social services staff.
- 6 Insure that adequate and appropriate management information systems are developed to track progress and changes.

CONCLUSION

A strong foundation must be laid for any organizational change effort to be successful. Using the seven key ingredients borrowed from Monterey County, Alameda County can build upon change efforts already underway. A strong vision, ongoing communication, and partnerships with staff, other agencies, the community, and families served are the key elements to realize systems change in child welfare. We must continually think about the best interests of the children -- and create the service delivery system that will meet those needs.