

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

A System of Care That Lacks Stability

SUMMARY

How well are foster care children served by Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services? The 2007-2008 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury investigated the foster care system to answer that question. As the inquiry proceeded, the Grand Jury refined its focus to two main topics: the absence of a consistent adult figure for foster children throughout their placement, and the preparation for emancipation for those who are required by law to leave the foster care system at the age of 18.

While Child Welfare Services (CWS) has a process to deal with the children at each stage in the system from initial contact, to court hearing, to permanent placement, to family reunification or to adoption, the continuity of a key social worker is missing. At each step there is a change in social workers, and the home placement may change as well. Initially the child is placed in a temporary shelter, pending placement with a foster family. During this very stressful time of being removed from the home, the child will be involved with several adults during the first year. Because of this discontinuity, many foster children have difficulty in forming trusting relationships with adults. This causes concern for the Grand Jury.

The emancipation process begins in foster care at the age of 15½ and normally ends when these youths reach the age of 18. At that age, they face the key problems of finding shelter and jobs. The Grand Jury wanted to know what preparation the youths received and how well they fared in the first couple of years. While there are programs in place to prepare these youths for independence, many still fall through the cracks. The most recent data in Santa Barbara County show that 38 youths were emancipated in the year ending June 30, 2007 and that within six months twelve of them, or 32%, were homeless.

The 2000-2001 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury expressed concern about the high turnover of social workers in Child Welfare Services. This apparently has not improved and has increased dramatically over the past five years.

INTRODUCTION

Child Welfare Services (CWS) is mandated to investigate all allegations of child abuse or neglect. If the allegations are found to be true, they must find placement for the child in either emergency or long-term foster care and must ensure the well-being of children placed in foster care. The number of substantiated cases of neglect or abuse in Santa Barbara County has increased significantly, and the number of children in foster care has increased from 322 on July 1, 2002 to 584 on July 1, 2007 (an 81% increase). According to information received by the Grand Jury, most of this increase can be attributed to the increase in methamphetamine abuse. The abuse of this drug can be so debilitating that parents using it are frequently unable to care for their children and tend to neglect them. Children are removed from those homes where the drug is being manufactured due to the

dangers this presents to them. The increase in caseload has not been matched by an equivalent increase in staffing.

When a child is determined to be at risk, CWS has several options depending on the severity and the immediacy of the risk. Except in an emergency, where temporary placement may be necessary, the options must be considered in the following order of priority according to State mandate:

1. Family Maintenance
2. Family Reunification
3. Permanent Placement, including placement with extended family
4. Adoption.

In the case of Family Maintenance the child is left in the home while CWS brings in the appropriate services to resolve the problem(s) leading to the child abuse or neglect. Problems such as substance abuse, lack of parenting skills, or lack of resources can be addressed. In Family Reunification the child is temporarily removed from the family (for up to 18 months) while CWS works with the family to help alleviate the problems. If the problems are not resolved in that time, the child is permanently removed from the family. The ultimate decision to remove a child from the home, except in an emergency, is left to the court. Even in an emergency, court approval must be obtained within 72 hours of the removal.

At each stage of the foster care process, a new social worker takes over the case and a new relationship must be built. In addition, changes in the foster care placement may result in more new adults in the child's world. Exacerbating this situation is the high turnover rate of social workers.

When these children reach the age of 18, they are considered adults and by law leave foster care. Raising children in the best of circumstances involves significant challenges. Even with the best parents, most children are not fully independent upon turning 18, and they still have a parental safety net and a family home to return to. Not so with foster children. What happens to them when they enter the world as adults without having a strong support system? How prepared are they for that day of emancipation?

Foster children, when emancipated, face the significant challenges of earning a living and managing their money. Additionally, they become responsible for providing their own housing, food, and education. The Grand Jury heard that all too frequently emancipated foster children leave their foster home or group home with just their personal belongings and begin "couch surfing" until they find a permanent home. On the other hand, some enroll in college with help from various scholarship programs.

The difficulties foster youth face upon emancipation are a nationwide problem. The 1999 Foster Care Independence Act amended Part E of Title IV of the Social Security Act to provide states with more funding and greater flexibility in carrying out programs designed to help children make the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency. Santa Barbara County has some programs in place to aid in this. The Grand Jury wanted to

know how well Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services prepared these foster care children for adulthood.

Against this backdrop, the Grand Jury proceeded to investigate both the absence of a consistent adult figure in the lives of foster care children and how the teens were prepared for this transition to independence.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury began by looking at the function of CWS and how its services were provided. Members of the Grand Jury interviewed the Director of Social Services, the Deputy Director for Child Welfare Services, and numerous other Social Services staff at various administrative levels, as well as caseworkers. Administrators and volunteers of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) were also interviewed. Visits were made and interviews conducted at a group home and an emergency shelter for youth ages 10 to 17. Additionally, the 2000–2001 Grand Jury report and numerous other related documents and statistical information were reviewed.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

CONTINUITY OF CARE

Initial placement with CWS means that a child is placed in a shelter home, pending placement in a foster home. Sometimes a child might have more than one shelter home, even though social workers do their best to prevent this. It may well take more than one placement to find an appropriate foster home. A different social worker enters the child's life when the case goes to court to determine placement. Thus, within the first month, children could have had two or three adults enter and leave their lives. CWS is organized so that social workers specialize in particular areas such as investigation, preparation of court reports, or home placement. As a result, children will have a minimum of three different social workers by the time they are appropriately placed in a foster home. Grand Jury members were informed by a CWS administrator that trying to have the same worker follow the child throughout different placements does not work, because of the particular skills needed by social workers at different steps. However, these same social workers often transfer from one unit to another, such as moving from court to placement responsibilities. A number of the people interviewed by the Grand Jury expressed the belief that a single caseworker assigned to the child throughout his or her contacts with CWS would serve the child better than having a different worker at each juncture of the process.

Compounding the problem is that a large number (25%) of foster children are placed outside of Santa Barbara County. This necessitates that social workers travel long distances to spend time visiting the children. In order to reduce travel time, the department implemented a policy of having one worker visit all the Santa Barbara County foster children within one area even though the child may be assigned to another worker. To minimize the stress and burden of frequent long trips on social workers, the

duty of visiting children out of county is rotated. All of this adds discontinuity in the children's care.

Even subsequent to placement in a foster home, a child could have several different social workers. For example, some social workers are transferred to a different division, some take medical leave, some leave social work altogether, and some move to neighboring counties where salaries may be higher and the cost of living lower. The turnover rate of social workers in CWS has increased dramatically and alarmingly over the past five years, as shown below:

Year	Number of employees leaving	Turnover rate	Avg. time with Dept. of Social Services	Comments
2003	4	6.9%	3.44 years	50% retirement; 50% unknown
2004	5	8.6%	4.17 years	40% new job; 20% unknown; 20% family reasons; 20% return to school
2005	9	15.5%	6.63 years	44% retirement; 22% new job; 11% moved from area; 11% maternity/health; 11% unknown
2006	13	22.4%	2.52 years	30% new job; 15% transfer/promotion; 15% discharged/performance related; 15% maternity/health; 15% moved out of area; 7% unknown.
2007	18	31%	1.95 years	55% new job; 11% resigned; 11% family/personal reasons; 11% discharged/performance related; 5% maternity/health; 5% return to school

Source: Santa Barbara County Department of Human Resources

The average time a social worker stays with CWS is now less than two years. Since it takes three months of training before a social worker is assigned to a working unit, the system is highly inefficient.

In the course of its investigation the Grand Jury heard from several sources that social workers do not receive sufficient support from their supervisors or administrators. Although this allegation is impossible to quantify and difficult to substantiate, there were enough complaints to cause concern. The escalating rate of turnover and low retention of social workers adds further credence to this allegation. The 2000-2001 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury stated:

The Department of Social Services should provide more professional and supervisory support to line staff to help reduce the high turnover and short tenure of employment that currently exists in the Department.

It appears that the problem has gotten worse.

By the time foster children are in their teens, the ability to build trusting relationships may be seriously compromised because of this constant turnover. Although adult parenting figures are present in foster homes, the quality, consistency, and motivation of these adults varies from home to home. Additionally, the child may be placed in several different foster or group homes during CWS custody.

The first priority of CWS (by State mandate) is family preservation or reunification. In about 10-15% of the cases there is a recurrence of abuse or neglect, and the child is removed from the home again. Placements in foster homes may be temporary for other reasons as well. If the child has behavior or emotional problems that cannot be managed in a foster home, the child is transferred to a group home that has 24-hour staffing and programming designed to address the particular behavioral problems. After a time, if the problems are reduced, the child will be transferred back to a foster home, not necessarily the same one as before. Statistics for the last fiscal year (July 1, 2006 – June 30, 2007) show that of 232 children in care for 24 months, 159 (68%) have had more than two placements.

In addition to finding a lack of consistency in the lives of the children in foster care, the Grand Jury heard complaints from some providers and volunteers about the lack of communication with the social workers. Social workers did not return calls in a timely manner; also, complaints about a group home were not shared with the home's administrator.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

There is a volunteer group of adults called Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) who serve as advocates for children in foster care, and they provide judges with information about court dependent children. The judge uses this information to help make appropriate decisions for these children. CASA's role, however, goes far beyond providing information to the court. They become mentors and frequently are the most consistent adult influence in the lives of these youngsters. They donate much of their time and frequently give financial help to the children assigned to them. As the result of a lack of volunteers, only about 50% of children in foster care are fortunate enough to have been assigned a CASA volunteer. Although these volunteers care deeply about the children, they may only be able to serve for a few years. Nonetheless, an overwhelming number of people from social workers, to foster home administrators, to group home staff have the highest praise for their work.

EMANCIPATION

As foster care children reach age 15½, their social workers are required to develop an emancipation plan in collaboration with them. The teen's participation in the plan is

voluntary, but the social workers encourage the child's involvement. These emancipation plans usually include developing skills in fields such as cooking, money management, and resume preparation. These programs are designed in such a way that the emancipated teen is expected to leave with key survival skills. Nevertheless, the emancipated teens often have no savings, no job, and nowhere to live. In the most recent year ending June 2007, 12 out of 38 emancipated foster children in Santa Barbara County became homeless within the first six months. Moreover, emancipated youth often lack social skills. They tend to isolate themselves, having learned to survive the system by "making themselves invisible." Some do not even have a next of kin to name on a job application.

Independent Living Program

Congress and state legislators have recognized the problems for emancipated youth and have passed legislation to aid in preparing them for adulthood. In 1986 the federal government created the Independent Living Program (ILP) which offers the following training opportunities to foster and probation youth up to 21 years of age.

- Career and employment development
- Vocational training
- Job placement and retention
- Daily living skills
- Substance abuse prevention
- Preventive health and safety activities (including smoking avoidance, nutrition education, and pregnancy prevention)
- Housing and household management
- Consumer education
- Interpersonal/social and self-development skills
- Computer/internet skills

The John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 increased funding and flexibility for ILP, expanding eligibility to 20-year-olds and allowing up to 30 percent of the ILP funds to be used for room and board for emancipated foster/probation youth up to age 21.

CWS contracts with the Community Action Commission, a private agency, which manages the ILP to help prepare foster youth for emancipation and prevent homelessness, providing the opportunity and resources for the completion of their education. Youths who agree to participate are given training and resources to teach them to take care of themselves. However, the success of these programs depends on client participation.

Transitional Housing

The California Department of Social Services administers the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) that allows carefully supervised 16- to 18-year-old youths to live on their own while attending high school. To further assist these young people the Emancipated Foster Youth program allocates money to counties to meet emergency needs. This money can be spent on such diversified areas as transportation, housing

assistance, utility deposits, employment-related costs, and uninsured medical expenses. Assembly Bill 427 (Chapter 125, Statutes of 2001) created the Supportive Transitional Emancipation Program (STEP), allowing participating counties to provide support to eligible youth up to age 21 who are pursuing a career and who have set educational goals. The bill further expands housing opportunities by establishing a county-certified transitional housing program for emancipated youth.

In Santa Barbara County, Family Care Network, a private agency, runs the THP- which provides independent apartment living under adult supervision for youths between the ages of 16 and 18. The goal of this program is to prepare them for emancipation at age 18, when they leave the program. There are currently eight youths in this program in North County, and there are plans to expand the program to South County.

La Morada, an eight-bed shelter for youth emancipating from foster care, operated by Family Care Network, opened in Santa Barbara in November 2007. The goal of this facility is to provide safe housing and supportive services to help the residents in their transition to self-sufficiency. This new program is designed to decrease the number of emancipating foster youths becoming homeless. However, the La Morada and THPP programs serve only 16 young people, leaving the rest to fend for themselves.

Casa Esperanza, an independent homeless shelter in Santa Barbara, offers a day program with in-house social services to help individuals with housing, financial management, job placement, mental health, and substance abuse problems. They make referrals to Job Corps, California Conservation Corps, and others. They have three full-time outreach workers.

The Grand Jury commends Child Welfare Services for its efforts in preparing foster care and probation youth for emancipation in Santa Barbara. Despite these efforts, the Jury finds that too many youths fall through the cracks, and too many become homeless. The Jury believes more can and should be done.

CONCLUSION

The 2007-2008 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury determined that there is lack of continuity of care for foster children by Child Welfare Services. There are several reasons for this: changes in foster homes, different social workers being responsible for the child in various phases of the system, placement of children in distant locations, and an extremely high turnover rate of social workers (31% in 2007). While some of these factors may be beyond the control of the Department of Social Services, others must be addressed in order to provide more consistent caseworker care in the lives of these foster children. The policy of assigning different workers to children as they move through various phases of the system needs to be re-examined by the Department, and reasons for the high turnover rate of workers must be examined and corrected by a collaborative effort of the Department of Social Services and Santa Barbara County Human Resources Department.

The Grand Jury learned that several programs have been developed to help foster youth prepare for emancipation and independence. However, a number of foster youth still become homeless upon, or shortly following, emancipation.

The Grand Jury was very favorably impressed with the work of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), a volunteer organization whose main task is to advocate for foster children in the court system. CASA volunteers go far beyond this task and frequently provide the only consistent adult relationship for the child.

Caring for these vulnerable young people is a special obligation.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

There is a lack of consistency and continuity of individuals responsible for children in foster care.

Recommendation 1

Social Services should devise a system whereby the change in the number of social workers responsible for any particular child is minimized.

Finding 2

Many youths emancipating from the foster care system at age 18 are ill prepared to take care of themselves.

Recommendation 2

Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services needs to continue to expand programs to prepare youth for emancipation.

Finding 3

There is an increasingly high turnover of social workers in Child Welfare Services. This finding was reported by the 2000-2001 Grand Jury. This situation still exists and is getting worse.

Recommendation 3

The Departments of Social Services and Human Resources should immediately investigate and address the problem of the high turnover rate of social workers.

Finding 4

Santa Barbara Child Welfare Services does not always communicate well with group homes, foster parents, and other child welfare providers.

Recommendation 4

Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services should be more responsive to the needs of group homes, foster homes and other providers. There should be regularly scheduled meetings to address these needs.

Finding 5

Over the past several years, due to the increase in methamphetamine abuse, there has been a significant increase in substantiated cases of child neglect and abuse, resulting in more children being placed in foster care.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with Section 933(c) of the California Penal Code, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each:

Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services – 60 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4

Santa Barbara County Human Resources Department – 60 days

Findings 3, 5

Recommendations 3

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4