

RESPONSE TO 2007-08 GRAND JURY REPORT

*CHILD WELFARE SERVICES:
A SYSTEM THAT LACKS STABILITY*

Department of Social Services
August 15, 2008

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

DSS Response: Partially Disagree - The complexity in the current dependency system works against the assignment of a single social worker.

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

DSS Response: This recommendation requires further analysis.

The department concurs in part with this Grand Jury finding. Creating stability in the life of those we serve is a goal sought by the agency. Placement stability and minimizing case transfer, including that as result of staff turnover, is desirable. However, there are two independent issues in the finding that warrant addressing individually. Staff turnover is addressed in a subsequent finding.

Minimizing case transfer or having a single social worker from intake to discharge is a system commonly referred to as "Vertical Case Management (VCM)". It is a system one could argue both for and against. Key in the argument is the role of the social worker as the service provider in VCM, rather than one charged with securing or brokering for the services. Required in implementing VCM is to significantly reduce caseload, which is accomplished through the hiring of more social workers. Thus, the first obstacle is insufficient state and federal funding. The current allocation is fully expended with the staffing pattern consistent with state guidelines. Second, and related, a VCM system requires an extensive and comprehensive skill set. Staff is required to be fully proficient in all components of CWS. It is well known that CWS has become more complex and that the training requirements have increased. Today, the CWS training program mandated by the State of California runs 25 days and is spread out over a two year period. An additional three months of CWS training is conducted by Santa Barbara County for all new CWS caseworkers. The VCM system would require all staff, irrespective of their experience, to possess and remain current in the full array of skills, which is an unrealistic expectation.

Important in the discussion of the Grand Jury's finding is to comment on the existing CWS program structure. Referrals of child abuse and neglect are received by the county wide Central Intake Unit located in Lompoc. The unit's function is to receive, process, and facilitate agency action. The responding social worker would be from one of the regional Assessment and Investigations Units. The responding staff would possess enhanced or refined skills in assessing abuse or neglect. Subsequent to assessment and depending on presenting need, the child/family may be referred to and followed by a social worker from the Family Preservation unit. The goal of this unit is to keep the child safe and promote the family remaining together through community based

services. Services provided, and requisite skills required, are specific to that end. If the provided services remediate the problem the case is closed. The only staff involved with the family would have been the investigating social worker and the family preservation worker. If the situation is more serious and a child needs to be taken into protective custody, the investigating social worker would refer the case to the Court Services unit. Given the complexity of the dependency system, a specialized skill set in working within the legal setting is required. Should the offered services be effective, the case may close following disposition; hence, only the investigating social worker and the court services worker would have been involved. Should sustained agency involvement be required, case management may be in the Ongoing unit. Finally, if permanency is ultimately ordered, staff with concentrated training in that area would be case managing. In all instances, the present system promotes efficiency, accountability and customer service.

As stated, the current practice allows staff to specialize in areas and become more proficient, leading to improved service delivery. We believe the current system lends itself to enhanced client services, and to greater compliance with court directives, the Welfare and Institutions Code parameters, and the Federal/State outcome measures promoting the safety, permanency, and well-being of those children served by Child Welfare. The specialization of services through Family Preservation and Adoptions has led to better outcomes for children by allowing them to safely remain in their families or by securing for children a family for life. The current system is also in place following a recommendation from the 2001 Grand Jury report which recommended caseload specialization to mitigate staff turnover. The 2007-2008 Grand Jury report seems in conflict with the 2001 report.

Although unaddressed in finding recommendations, the Grand Jury referenced what they described as a large number of foster children being placed out of county. Data from June 2008 indicates 75% of the children in placement are within Santa Barbara County. While there may be 25% of the children placed out of county, this figure is rather misleading. If a child needs to be taken into protective custody, the Welfare and Institutions Code is quite clear that placement preference is first given to family and then close friends of the family. Thus, an out-of-county placement in those instances is the appropriate placement as directed in law. Second, a placement in one of the contiguous counties may actually be closer to the child's home which is particularly important in Family Reunification cases. It is closer from Santa Maria to Nipomo than it is from Santa Maria to Santa Barbara. It is closer from Santa Barbara to Camarillo than it is from Santa Barbara to Santa Maria. Again, the agency by intent wants to keep the child as close to the family, school and support system as is possible. Thus, when adjusting for placements with relatives to include contiguous county placement, the dependency system placement rate is actually 96%.

The Grand Jury is correct regarding out of county group home placements. Of the 57 children placed in group homes, only 13 (or 23%) are placed in Santa Barbara County, largely because there are few group homes in the county. Again, prevailing law has influence on the data along with county real estate costs. Existing code requires placement in the least restrictive setting, which is a family or foster home, and it is a principle strongly held by the agency. That said, group homes with specialized services are yet required and serve as the placement of choice for children having special needs. Regional real estate costs certainly have an influence on the ability of group homes to open in the county.

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

DSS Response: Agree.

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

DSS Response: This recommendation will continue to be implemented based on the availability of funding.

It is true that foster youth often do not have the familial support available to the youth at large who turn 18; as a consequence, they have a greater need for agency and community support. The Department of Social Services (DSS) is committed to make every effort to support these youth and is actively partnering with other agencies and community supports to develop and implement sustainable services to the emancipated youth of Santa Barbara County. Improving the well-being for youth while in care and as they transition to self-sufficiency remains a high priority for DSS, as indicated in the March 2007 Child Welfare System Improvement Plan (SIP). Key outcome goals in the SIP were directly related to developing programs that enhance preparation for living independently and after care support for this population of youth. The following are some of the innovative programs implemented.

- In 2007, DSS submitted a plan to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to provide a Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) and a Transitional Housing Placement –Plus (THP-Plus) program to current and emancipated foster youth in Santa Barbara County. CDSS approved and funded our plan to provide these services in June 2007. The THPP program provides placement for 15 eligible foster youth in an apartment setting with the assistance of a resident, as a means of providing a supported living environment for these youth as they prepare for independent living. The participants in THPP remain dependents/wards of the juvenile court while in placement. The THP-Plus program provides housing for 10 youth who have emancipated from foster care, while they continue to receive supportive services to assist them in becoming self-sufficient young adults. Within 4 months of receiving approval from CDSS, the THP-Plus program at the La Morada facility opened for residency through the contracted services of Family Care Network. This is far short of the need for housing for emancipated youth at any given time. DSS is dependent on funding from the California Department of Social Services and the state legislature for all increases in funding and housing slots. Every year, DSS through its state association requests additional housing subsidies for emancipating youth.
- Contracted with The Arbor Job Prep Program to assist emancipating youth

in building self-awareness skills and confidence as they prepare for and seek employment. This summer, DSS hosted two sessions of the program. Six participants had obtained employment by the end of the two-week training session.

- Developed a single point of contact for assistance at local community colleges to assist in admissions, course selection and financial aid application.
- Developed a collaboration between the Workforce Investment Act program and the Independent Living Program youth.
- Provided Microsoft based Computer Competency Courses to enhance youth skills as they prepare to enter the job market.
- Doubled the number of Emancipation Conferences, which are forums to prepare youth for adulthood
- Provided Financial Literacy Courses to enhance youth skills related to money management.
- Sponsored a Health Care Fair including information on how to access health care.
- Expanded the ILP website as a resource tool for current and emancipated foster youth. The website includes information on aftercare support and contact information for assistance.
- Trained Child Welfare and Probation staff on the ILP program and assessment requirements.
- Redesigned the entire Independent Living Program based upon the outcome of the 2005 Peer Quality Case Review, which included expansion of case management services through a contract with Community Action Commission. Program services and supports continue to be refined based on the needs of the youth. The contractor has hired a former ILP participant as a summer youth intern to continue advising/supporting changes to the ILP program.

In addition the department and its association, the County Welfare Director's Association (CWDA) have advocated for increased support to these children.

CWDA's top priority is to "Increase financial support for programs that assist foster youth in the transition to self-sufficiency, including post-emancipation assistance such as secondary education, job training, and access to health care." To this end CWDA has supported over ten pieces of legislation over the past years to improve services to foster youth. This Legislative cycle alone, CWDA has supported four bills directly aimed at expanding services to emancipating youth.

As outlined above, DSS in partnership with other agencies and community supports have initiated many positive programs to assist the young adults emancipating from foster care, but a more comprehensive community aftercare support system is still needed.

Finding Three: There is an increasingly high turnover of social workers in Child Welfare Services. This finding was reported by the 2001-02 Grand Jury. This situation still exists and is getting worse.

DSS Response: Partially disagree - Department of Social Services agrees that turnover rates are higher than desired. Turnover rates, however, include many reasonable explanations for leaving a job – retirement, pregnancy, promotion, returning to school to pursue a higher degree. The issue to be focused on, and not segregated in this report, are those employees who leave Child Welfare Services because they found the work demands to be greater or different than they expected. We believe that to be a fairly small proportion of the total turnover rate. We also note that other counties around the State have similar CWS turnover rates – Monterey County reports 26% and Ventura County reports 24%. The chart has been revised to reflect updated information. The previous chart included temporary workers.

CWS Turnover Rates By Calendar Year 2003 – 2007 Revised 7/25/08				
Job Classes Included:				
SSS II		10		
SSW/SSP full time		47		
SSW/SSP part time		3 (2 are unfunded)		
Total :		60		
Year	No. of separations	Turnover Rate	Avg. time w/ DSS	Comments
2003	3	5.0%	145.3 months	33% retire; 67% unknown
2004	7	11.7%	141.9 months	29% retire; 29% new job; 14% return to school; 14% family reasons; 14% separated by department
2005	11	18.3%	113.1 months	36% new job; 28% retire; 18% moved from area; 18% family reasons
2006	14	23.3%	44.7 months	28% new job; 28% moved from area; 28% resigned health/family; 16% separated by department
2007	17	28.3%	17.5 months	59% new job; 12% return to school; 12% health; 12% separated by department; 5% resigned/unknown

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

DSS Response: This recommendation has been and continues to be implemented.

The Department of Social Services closely monitors staff turnover. The department is fully cognizant of the impact staff turnover has on services provided, costs and working conditions. All efforts are being made to reduce turnover and increase retention. We recognize training and caseload are contributing factors. The department recognizes the ascending caseload, the impact of methamphetamine and increasing case load requirements established by the state and the juvenile court. Appreciating the workload complexity, a number of initiatives have been implemented to mitigate the many tasks.

A joint DSS/Labor/Human Resources work group was established in April 2008 to discuss retention and other relevant issues. Currently, the focus is on developing improvements for new CWS staff including:

- Exploring the feasibility of a CWS Training Unit.
- Defining the roles of the Trainer, the Unit Supervisor, Mentors and experienced staff.
- Developing a transition plan for the new staff graduating from the Training Unit to the Operational unit. This includes formal mentoring and clarifying appropriate transitional caseload size.
- Reviewing the current curriculum.

The workgroup is also researching best practices in the areas of recruitment and retention from around the nation.

The department also recognizes the important role of the supervisor. Existing caseload activity has necessitated that supervisors occasionally manage a caseload. Unfortunately, this practice contributes to their being unavailable to the staff they supervise. To provide optimum support for case management staff, the supervisors must be freed of this task.

From the training perspective, the department is actively working to enhance the program. Current initiatives include:

Active encouragement and support for staff participation in the California Social Worker Education program (Title IV-E) which pays for tuition and other expenses for accepted staff to earn their Master's Degree in Social Work while still employed. This program has been in place since 2002 with Cal State Long Beach distance learning program at Cal State Channel Islands. With support of the Human Resources Department, we are seeking to identify an institution more easily accessible for staff located in the North County. Further, staff development is also exploring approved on-line human services education programs.

From the operational perspective, a number of initiatives were implemented over the last two years to both increase service efficacy as well as relieving tasks

hitherto completed or coordinated by the caseworker. Grant funded initiatives include:

- Home Connection Finders
- Placement Search Assistants
- Expanded Differential Response program
- Parent Mentor Program
- Supervised visitation Program
- Contracted Team Decision Making (TDM) Services.

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

DSS Response: Partially Disagree - The Department has a robust internal communication system, but acknowledges room for improvement with external partners.

Recommendation Four: 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.

DSS Response: This recommendation will be implemented.

The Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services recognizes that communication between Child Welfare Services and those that provide care for CWS children (foster homes, group homes, relative care providers) is vital for the best outcomes for children. Communication between care providers and CWS is essential to assure that the team providing services to the child (care provider, social worker, service providers) is aware of the status of the child, the parent's situation as it relates to the child, and services being provided. Sharing information allows the social worker to paint an accurate picture for the Court of the child's situation, necessary for the Court to be able to make proper orders for the care of the child.

Over the past several years, the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services has implemented several changes to encourage enhanced communication. In the 2001 Grand Jury Response the Department of Social Services recommended establishing a specific position to serve as liaison between the department and foster care providers. The Foster Parent Liaison was established and is charged with the recruitment, training, and support of foster parents. This position assists our care providers in better understanding the CWS system and how to better navigate the CWS system to meet the needs of the children served. Education on the laws and regulations that govern the work of CWS, particularly the area of confidentiality, is an important discussion for the providers to have while in training, with their social worker, with other care providers, and/or with the CWS staff person engaged in foster parent recruitment/training/support.

In 2003 a Foster Parent Code of Conduct was developed and implemented to further emphasize the importance of communication between care providers and CWS staff. This code of conduct was developed by CWS social workers and has been distributed to all CWS staff and care providers. Communication and the code of conduct are addressed in the Child Welfare Services Induction training. Communication between social workers and providers is also one of the topics in

a newly introduced “Nuts and Bolts” class that is offered to foster parents and relative caregivers. The “Nuts and Bolts” class was developed at the request of the Department of Social Services and has been implemented with funding from our Department for the past two years.

The Department of Social Services has worked with Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Health Services and local service providers to develop the position of a HOPE therapist. This position has now been in existence for the last three years and serves several functions. One of those functions is to facilitate communication between the foster or relative placement and the assigned social worker, while another is to provide the care provider with additional services in supporting the placement of the child in the care provider’s home. CWS social workers provide care providers with a written summary of recommendations at the different review hearings to help keep them aware of recommendations for the care of and services for the children of CWS. Additionally, care providers are given information in the placement packet received at the time of placement on how to provide the Juvenile Court with information on the child in their care.

Another tool utilized by Child Welfare Services to increase collaboration and communication between families, care providers, service providers, and CWS is that of Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. TDMs focus on open disclosure of information related to children in care. TDMs are an evidence-based, nationally recognized practice for CWS. Recognizing that the facilitation of TDMs is a distinct skill and that facilitation of TDMs requires a time commitment, the Department of Social Services has contracted with providers to provide us with that facilitated format for discussion and communication. A stated goal of the contract which is now in place is to increase the use of TDMs, thus increasing the opportunity for closer communication between the social workers and providers.

Some of the scheduled meetings which have been used to encourage increased communication from CWS to providers are the following:

- Attendance by CWS staff at the Foster Parent Association meetings
- Attendance by foster family agencies at the CWS meetings held in each of the 3 regions on a regular basis
- Attendance by CWS staff at foster parent trainings
- Attendance by CWS staff at foster parent support training groups
- Plan for increased attendance by care providers at TDMs held by CWS
- Inclusion of a care provider in the CWS Induction training of new CWS employees to educate on the role, needs, and responsibilities of our caregivers

Finding Five: 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.

DSS Response: Agree

Methamphetamine abuse has been rampant and has been an escalating problem both in Santa Barbara, other California counties and the nation. Locally, most meth users are young adults, many who are parents, between the ages of 21-40. Many youth under age 18 are now choosing meth over other drugs – in 2005, 78% of drug-related bookings at the Juvenile Hall were for meth. In the past two years, the Department of Social Services has had to increase Alcohol and Drug treatment funding almost 300%. Commensurately, the Department has seen foster care placement growth expand from 329 children in 2004 to 542 in 2008, an increase of approximately 65%.

The Department was very active in the “Methamphetamine Summit” of 2006, an initiative that drew together the community and multiple agencies to both analyze and respond to the increase in meth use. A Methamphetamine Prevention Network has been formed to bring together community leaders to find local solutions to the meth epidemic. The Social Services Director is the County Executive Sponsor of this effort. While methamphetamine is a significant problem, the prevalence of substance abuse in general remains the primary reason for child welfare referrals.

Recommendations: None