

The Development of New Partnerships and Programs to Assist Foster Children

Issue

What are the new supplementary programs to assist foster children?

Reason for the Investigation

The Grand Jury decided to review new programs which the County has initiated with partnerships in the community; these programs have been designed to help children in Foster Care to improve the chances for reunification with their families and to help them prepare for a successful and independent adult life. The Grand Jury wanted to find out more about these programs, particularly from the perspective of the foster care community of providers.

Method of Investigation

The following reports and documents were reviewed:

- Sacramento County Independent Living Program brochure
- Sacramento County Early Start to Emancipation Preparation Program pamphlet
- Emancipate! Foster Youth Emancipation Guide
- Casey Great Start Young Adult Program information brochures
- Adolfo Housing Services for Former Foster Youth brochure
- Information pamphlet from Juvenile Dependency Drug Court
- CPS Citizens Academy Binder
- Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force, Children's Protective Services' brochure
- Parent Leadership Task Force 2003 Summary, Children's Protective Services' recruitment publication
- Shared Leadership Task Force Meeting Minutes, December 2004
- Making Memories brochure
- Wraparound Sacramento – Exceeding Expectations! by Maria Pagador and Jim Hunt
- Facts about EMQ Children and Family Services 'Wraparound' Program, publication by EMQ Children and Family Services
- Intensive Service Options, California, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Summary Report.

The following individuals were interviewed:

- Agency Administrator, Countywide Services Agency
- Deputy Director, Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services
- Child Protection Division Chief, Department of Health and Human Services
- Program Manager, Foster Home Licensing/Family Maintenance
- Social Worker, Foster Care/Group Home Placement
- Social Worker, Family Reunification
- Drug Court Coordinator, Alcohol and Drug Services Division.

The following sites were visited:

- Department of Health and Human Services Offices
- Sacramento County Drug Dependency Court
- The Specialized Treatment and Recovery Services (STARS) office
- Parent Leadership Program meeting site.

A written survey was sent to a random selection of area Group Homes; the addresses were provided by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Glossary of Terms:

CPS	Children's Protective Services
STARS	Specialized Treatment and Recovery Services
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DHA	Department of Human Assistance
ILP	Independent Living Program
ESTEP	Early Start to Emancipation Preparation Program
AOD	Alcohol and Other Drug

Background and Facts

The Grand Jury discussed with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) managers several new programs developed to help improve the outcomes for children in foster care. The Grand Jury believes a public review and recognition of these new programs would be informative for the Sacramento community. The programs reviewed include:

- Independent Living Program
- Drug Dependency Court
- Citizens Academy
- Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force
- Making Memories
- Wraparound Services.

The Child Protective Services system, which helps coordinate these services, was designed to protect children from unsafe home environments. Children can be legally removed from homes that have been deemed unsafe or unhealthy. After temporary placement, the child is put into the foster care system if the home is still not considered a viable living situation. Children are then placed in either individual foster care homes or are placed in group homes, depending on the circumstances of each case. The long history of the foster care system includes inadequate care for thousands of children and dismal outcomes for their success in life. This history has been extensively detailed in many reports and will not be discussed in detail here.

The foster care system has begun to emphasize the concept of healing the family from which the child is removed and to improve the rates of reunification with the families. The Grand Jury decided to summarize some of the programs that the DHHS is utilizing to attempt to promote better rates of success for foster children and their families.

Independent Living Program for Foster Youth

The Independent Living Program is a collaboration of services available to foster youth between the ages of 16 and 21; this group, particularly the youth over the age of 18, has a need for services to help them adjust to life beyond the foster care system. After the age of 18, young people are “aged out” of the system and have had serious problems learning to live independently. A large percentage of these children become victims of physical and sexual assault, have become homeless and many rely on public assistance. The Sacramento Emancipation Collaboration was formed in 1999 to help address the needs of these young people. Partners in the collaboration include several government agencies such as DHA and DHHS and many community based organizations in the community.¹

The goals include helping foster youth obtain the services they will need to transition to independence. Social workers, probation officers, foster families and school district Foster Youth Services social workers can refer eligible youth to the program. Those currently in foster placement and those who have emancipated from foster care can be referred to the program. The ILP receives federal funds, which are administered by the County.²

Services for the youth in this program include classes on independent living skills and personal growth; workshops on financial aid for college; services related to education and career planning; assistance in finding appropriate community services; activities such as graduation and award ceremonies, conferences, a speakers bureau and community service activities.³

Services in the Early Start to Emancipation Preparation (ESTEP) program include one-on-one tutoring, daily living skills, social and interpersonal skills, survival and youth life skills education. An evaluation of participants in Los Angeles County showed an average

¹ Sacramento Emancipation Collaboration information pamphlet

² Sacramento County Independent Living Program brochure

³ Sacramento County Independent Living Program brochure

improvement of two grade levels in reading skills and an improvement in attitudes toward school and learning.⁴

Adequate housing for emancipated youth is another difficult issue for youth who are leaving foster care and for those who are homeless. As part of the Sacramento Emancipation Collaboration, Adolfo Housing Services helps find housing options for former foster youth. In addition to a variety of support services such as those noted in the above programs, this program focuses on transitional housing for up to 24 months and on permanent housing through subsidized assistance. There is also a Housing Choice Voucher program.⁵

The Casey Great Start Young Adult Program publishes a comprehensive guide to services for current and former foster youth, ages 12-24. The guide has over 50 pages of information on subjects ranging from employment, housing, education, health care, childcare, and legal resources to recreation and transportation. Each subject area includes specific information and a list of community resources where the young person can obtain services and assistance.⁶

The ILP also produces a regular newsletter, which highlights events and provides updates on various aspects of the programs.

Independent Living Programs strive to help young people develop productive lives as independent adults.

Drug Dependency Court

The mission of the Sacramento County Juvenile Dependency Court is “to support the Child Welfare Dependency System by encouraging and enforcing compliance with the alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment and AOD testing orders of the Juvenile Dependency Court”. The vision is “to support the safe and timely reunification or permanent placement of abused and neglected children by causing parents to immediately address any AOD involvement.” The services are optional for parents whose children have been removed from the home due to alcohol or drug abuse issues.

Among the program goals are to help parents receive treatment for AOD and to maintain a sober lifestyle so that they can reunify with their children. There are eligibility criteria for the program and once the parent(s) is determined to be eligible, a CPS Early Intervention Specialist Social Worker will make an assessment. The parent who volunteers receives the following services:

- AOD assessment and treatment authorization/referral
- Assignment to a STARS recovery specialist

⁴ ESTEP brochure

⁵ Adolfo Housing Services for Former Foster Youth brochure

⁶ Emancipate! Foster Youth Emancipation Guide by Casey Great Start Program

- Supportive Services Plan including drug testing, meetings with a STARS recovery specialist and requirements for participation in an assigned AOD treatment program.⁷

The STARS program is the agency contracted by the County to provide the case management. The STARS worker is often a person who has been through recovery and therefore has great empathy with the clients. Some of the services include treatment, home visits, randomly observed drug testing and progress reports to the Court, social worker, attorneys and court coordinator.

Drug Court hearings monitor the parent's compliance with the program and non-compliance results in sanctions, which may even include jail time. The program features many incentives, and tracks the client's progress through three levels until they reach graduation from the program. The social workers interviewed indicated the STARS program has had many successes. The treatment specialist functions as the gatekeeper for the family.

The County is keeping statistics on outcomes for this program and to date, the outcomes are very positive, not only in numbers of clients completing the program, but also in the positive effects on family reunification.⁸

The program's goal of breaking the cycle of substance abuse is a vital part of the creation of strong families for children.

Citizens Academy

The Citizens Academy is a seven-week community participation forum, which is open to anyone who has an interest in Child Protective Services. Applicants must be a minimum of 18 years of age, live or work in the City and/or County of Sacramento and must commit to attending all seven weeks of the session. The goal of the academy is to provide an overview of the Child Protective Services System, including the role of the Board of Supervisors, State Department of Social Services, Judiciary and Child Protective Services System.⁹

Week One is an introduction to the Citizens Academy and an overview of the Child Welfare System, focusing on Emergency Response. Week Two covers Voluntary Services and Court Services; Week Three discusses the Judicial system; Week Four explains Family Reunification through adoption; Week Five explores the Community Partnership; Week Six features Foster Care City and the seventh week includes sharing by parents and foster youth and graduation. In a column by Anita Creamer in *The Sacramento Bee*, the Academy volunteers in the Foster Care City exercise discussed their

⁷ Pamphlet, Introduction to Juvenile Dependency Drug Court, Sacramento County Dept. of Health and Human Services, Alcohol and Drug Services Division

⁸ Refer to fact sheet, Dependency Drug Court, Facts and Information, July 2004

⁹ CPS application form for the Child Protective Services Citizens Academy

experience role-playing the various participants in the CPS system, from children to staff to parents.¹⁰

The goal of the Citizens Academy is to create a community understanding of the complex issues in the CPS process.

Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force

The Parent Leadership Task Force was developed in 2003 with the goal of bringing together parents who had been through the CPS system with CPS workers to improve the delivery of Child Welfare Services in Sacramento County. The principle of shared leadership by including parent representatives is key to the goal of strengthening the Child Welfare Services delivery system and improving outcomes for children and families. Subsequent goals were recruiting parents and getting them involved in CPS committees, and developing a parent support group and a parent hotline. The original parent leaders participated in many aspects of the CPS decision-making process: The State Child Welfare Services Redesign Forum; shared personal experiences with the child welfare system; recruitment potential parent representatives for committee participation; made recommendations for improvements in the CPS parent orientation class; reviewed and helped develop written materials for parents; participated in the Citizens Academy and joined the CPS team conducting the Sacramento County Child Welfare Services Self-Assessment.¹¹

Current Task Force activities include recruiting new members, contacting and supporting parents in the CPS system, developing information for these parents, sharing their own experiences and helping CPS staff to improve services.¹²

Making Memories program

Making Memories is a collaborative effort between Sacramento Court Appoint Special Advocates (CASA), a non-profit organization, and Sacramento County Child Protective Services. The program was developed to enhance opportunities available to foster youth placed in Sacramento County foster homes or with relatives. Donations from the community are used to fund enrichment activities. Some of the activities noted are summer camp, field-trips, after-school sports programs, senior prom, music lessons and school pictures.¹³ In Grand Jury interviews with County staff, workers indicated that this program was a very important community collaboration that helps foster youth experience a richer childhood.

¹⁰ *The Sacramento Bee*, November 14, 2004, Anita Creamer column

¹¹ Parent Leadership Task Force 2003 Summary, CPS informational publication

¹² Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force, CPS recruitment brochure

¹³ Making Memories brochure

Wraparound Services

This new emphasis for services to children in foster care “is strengths-based, family-centered, and needs driven. The program works with children, and the families of those children, in the highest levels of group care. The ultimate goal is to wrap services and supports around the children and families, enabling the children to return to a family home setting, no longer requiring the higher level foster care placements, nor the intervention of government in the family’s life.”¹⁴ Workers attempt to identify an acute situation and stabilize it to prevent a further escalation of the child’s problems. Family histories include substance abuse and physical and sexual abuse. Children act out with behaviors that include “fighting, stealing, vandalism, running away, self-mutilation, cruelty to animals and fire-setting.”¹⁵

The treatment teams typically utilize family, extended family, individuals involved with the family and professional staff working together to improve family functioning. Statistics are showing better outcomes for children and families in this program; for example, the placement disruption rate was nearly 60 percent lower than for children in the control group of one study. The other benefit of this program for the county is expected to be lower costs.¹⁶

Group Home Survey Results

It is difficult to determine how well known these services are. As one measure, the Grand Jury sent a survey to 81 Group Homes requesting evaluation of the programs outlined above. The list of addresses was provided by the Department of Health and Human Services. Surveys were first sent to the many individual foster care homes in the community. The survey asked if the provider was aware of these programs, if any of their children were served by any of these programs and asked for their evaluation of each program.

The Grand Jury received 28 completed surveys and 10 surveys were returned by the post office as undeliverable. The results of this small sample were as follows:

The Independent Living Program

Positive	Negative	No Opinion	Unaware of Program
23		4	1

Drug Dependency Court

Positive	Negative	No Opinion	Unaware of Program
1		9	18

¹⁴ Wraparound Sacramento – Exceeding expectations! By Maria Pagador and Him Hunt

¹⁵ Facts about EMQ Children and Family Services “Wraparound” Program, publication by EMQ Children and Family Services

¹⁶ Intensive Service Options, California, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services summary report

Citizens Academy

Positive	Negative	No Opinion	Unaware of Program 28
-----------------	-----------------	-------------------	---------------------------------

Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force

Positive	Negative	No Opinion	Unaware of Program 28
-----------------	-----------------	-------------------	---------------------------------

Making Memories

Positive	Negative	No Opinion 1	Unaware of Program 27
-----------------	-----------------	------------------------	---------------------------------

Wraparound Services

Positive 14	Negative 6	No Opinion 5	Unaware of Program 3
-----------------------	----------------------	------------------------	--------------------------------

Foster Youth Permanency Projects

Foster care is designed to be a temporary safe haven for children whose families are unable to care for them. Too often, children languish in the system, waiting years for permanent homes that never materialize. In response to that challenge, Sacramento County is partnering with several community-based agencies to achieve better permanency outcomes for older foster youth. Information received by the Grand Jury is as follows:

Destination Family Youth Permanency Project

Destination Family is a multi-county public/private collaboration, involving Child Protective Services (Sacramento and Nevada Counties), Sierra Adoption Services, Family Alliance Foster Family Agency, and California Department of Social Services. Destination Family makes every effort to connect or re-connect referred foster youth, aged 11-18, to a significant adult relationship, such as a mentor, relative or foster parent, using best practices to actively involve youth in the permanency process and placement decisions. The project is funded through an Adoptions Opportunity Grant for five years to work with other agencies to identify and recruit parents, to prepare the family for the rewards and challenges of adopting a teen, and to provide support and after-care services to make the adoption work. As of March 2005, 73 youths were referred to Destination Family (56 in Sacramento County and 17 in Nevada County): 36 youths have been placed or have found a permanent family connection; one-third of the placed youths (12) were adopted. In addition, two youths entered into Guardianship, seven youths received lifetime commitments from adult(s) in their lives, connections were made for nine youths, and three youths are now connected with mentoring foster families.

Intensive Relative Search Project

The Intensive Relative Search Project is a family-finding initiative sponsored by CPS in cooperation with EMQ Children and Family Services, River Oak Center for Children, Stanford Home, and the Sacramento Children's Home. This intensive family-finding model, which combines high-tech search tools with old-fashioned collaboration, was pioneered by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington. The process involves a private-public partnership between CPS and partner agencies looking for extended family or friends of the family who may be willing to connect with the child. The Long-Term Placement Program has identified 62 youths who have been in care anywhere from 7-17 years to receive these relative search services. The goal is to find at least one safe and caring adult willing to make a connection with a child and, ultimately, to become a guardian or adoptive parent before the child ages out of care.¹⁷

Summary and Conclusions

Sacramento County, through the Department of Health and Human Services, is making attempts to improve the outcomes for children in the foster care system. It has been acknowledged in many reports from many sources that the entire system has serious flaws that have a long-term effect on children's lives.

In an effort to improve the outcomes for many of these children, the County has facilitated the development of several programs designed to aid children and families in the system. In conjunction with non-profit entities, the County supports The Independent Living Program For Foster Youth, Drug Dependency Court, The Citizens Academy, The Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force, Making Memories, Wraparound Services, Destination Family Youth Permanency Project and the Intensive Relative Search Project.

In visiting these programs, the Grand Jury was impressed with the level of dedication and commitment to improving children's lives that we saw in these programs. In particular, the Drug Dependency Court and the STARS workers were exceptionally committed to breaking the cycle of drug abuse that affects so many families and their children. The citizens of Sacramento County need to know about and support these efforts, as they will ultimately benefit the entire community.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1. While the Grand Jury did not evaluate the effectiveness of these programs, we believe Sacramento County and the Department of Health and Human Services are making a good effort to design and support supplementary programs to improve outcomes for children in foster care. County statistics and anecdotal evidence indicate positive effects from many of these new efforts.

¹⁷ Program information provided by Sacramento County DHHS, Child Protective Services

Recommendation 1. The County should continue to encourage and support these new programs.

Finding 2. It appears that many Group Home providers lack knowledge of and are even unaware of the existence of some of these programs. Most respondents to the survey were completely unaware of the Making Memories program, The Parent and Staff Shared Leadership Task Force and the Citizens Academy. Over half were unaware of the Drug Dependency Court.

Recommendation 2. The County and the Department of Health and Human Services need to improve awareness of these programs with their providers of care and with the community in general. The County must develop a method of disseminating information on these programs to all of its providers. Providers may be better able to utilize services for their children if they are more knowledgeable about the options available. Community support for programs that have successes is essential.

Finding 3. The Department does not maintain a current mailing list of its Group Home providers; the returned mail indicates an inattention to updating addresses for providers.

Recommendation 3. The Department of Health and Human Services needs to maintain an up-to-date list of providers. The Department must verify that all Group Homes on its list are valid entities and are at the addresses listed on the county's official mailing list.

Response Requirements

Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05 require that specific responses to both the findings and recommendations contained in this report be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Sacramento Superior Court by September 30, 2005, from:

- **Agency Administrator, Countywide Services Agency, Findings 1 – 3 and Recommendations 1 - 3.**

(It should be noted that Grand Juror Melissa Kubiak recused herself from any participation in the investigation, discussion, preparation, editing, or approval of this report.)