

Is There A Home for Every Foster Child?

SUMMARY

In Sacramento County, there are approximately 2100 children in out-of-home care, served by child welfare agencies. The foster care system is a complex and multi-faceted operation that requires the active cooperation and collaboration of numerous county entities. Although funding has significantly increased over the years, readily available placement opportunities for all levels of youth in need remains a critical issue for Sacramento County.

BACKGROUND

The San Francisco Chronicle published several articles in 2017, reporting that the Sacramento County Children's Protective Service's (CPS), Centralized Placement Support Unit (CPSU) had kept children for extended periods of stay. The Chronicle stated that "abused and neglected children are poorly supervised, sleep on the floor and are often preyed upon by human traffickers".

CPSU is an intake center and not licensed to house children for more than a 24-hour period. The California Department of Social Services cited the CPSU for "operating as an unlicensed shelter due to the extended stays of youth" and ordered them to stop housing children by September 30, 2017.

The grand jury conducted a targeted investigation of the foster care system in Sacramento, focusing first on the CPSU and the mandated changes resulting from the issued citation and corresponding September 30, 2017 deadline. The grand jury also looked into the entities that work with the CPSU as part of the overall foster care youth intake process.

The CPSU leases space on the campus of the Children's Receiving Home (CRH) shelter at 3555 Auburn Road, Sacramento, California. Youth that have been removed from parental or caretaker custody or youth that have run away and are in need of out of home care, are all processed through CPSU.

The situation with extended stays has decreased significantly since Oct 1, 2017. The Community Care Licensing Division continues to perform unannounced periodic audits at CPSU.

METHODOLOGY

The 2017-2018 Grand Jury:

- Toured the Children's Receiving Home (CRH) and the Centralized Placement Services Unit (CPSU)
- Reviewed:
 - California's Child Welfare Continuum of Care Reform legislative mandate document of January 2015
 - State of California Health and Human Services Agency Facility Evaluation Report (January 19, 2016)
 - Senate Bill 855: Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (enacted 2014)
 - Assembly Bill 403: *Continuum of Care Reform* (CCR)
 - CPS financial records and organizational charts pertaining to CRH and CPSU
 - Relevant county communications and incident reports
- Interviewed:
 - Children's advocate attorney from the Children's Law Center of Sacramento
 - Administrative staff from Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
 - Administration, management and social workers at CRH
 - Social workers at CPSU
 - Administrator from a foster family agency in Sacramento County
 - Social workers and an executive from Sacramento County
- Researched numerous media sources:
 - San Francisco Chronicle (8/13/17; *State Orders Sacramento Foster Care Office to Close, 9/17/17 Foster Shelter Violates Rights*)
 - Sacramento Bee (8/15/17; *Sacramento County Foster Care Agency Must Close Illegal Shelter, State Says*)
 - CBS local.com (7/10/17 *Sacramento County CPS Office Used to House Children*)
 - CLCCAL.org (1/20/16 *Sexually Exploited Girls in Need of Services*)
 - www.governing.com/topics/health-human-services/gov (10/10/2017 *Nowhere Else to Go, Why Kids are Sleeping in Child Welfare Offices*)
- Examined CRH area crime analysis reports from the Sacramento Police Department

DISCUSSION

The Centralized Placement Support Unit (CPSU)

The CPSU was established in 2010 to have dedicated staff conduct a comprehensive assessment of each child to understand the circumstances, family history and mental health issues in order to identify the most appropriate and least restrictive placement that will meet the youth's needs. The CPSU has experienced, compassionate and dedicated staff whose priority is the welfare of the children they serve. They are focused on problem solving and pro-actively communicate suggestions to their management. The social workers at the CPSU have relatively low turn-over when compared with other units within CPS.

The CPSU has experienced, compassionate staff whose priority is the children they serve

Children's Receiving Home (CRH)

The Children's Receiving Home is a primary placement source for CPSU. CRH is a private non-profit organization that receives over \$6 million annually from Sacramento County. Resource staffing and funding allocation were thoroughly reviewed as well as how CPSU and CRH work together to place children with families in the foster care system.

The current co-location of the CRH and CPSU is in a high crime neighborhood. The 2017 Sacramento Police Department Crime Analysis Unit reported 3,149 missing persons within a two-mile radius. The location is in close proximity to motels, bars and adult shops, increasing the potential for children to be exposed to sex trafficking by predators in the area. The location puts CPSU staff and traumatized youths in undue danger.

One of the challenges of placing youth in an appropriate environment is having their cooperation as they can legally refuse placement for any reason. Children (12 and older) who have been in/out of the foster care system may repeatedly refuse placement and/or leave the premises at any time. CPSU and CRH staff have limited ability to intervene. Although they have security guards at the CPSU, it remains a highly vulnerable and questionable area to accept and shelter traumatized children.

In March 2018 CRH filed an application with the State of California to become licensed as a Short Term Residential Treatment Center (STRTC) in accordance

with Assembly Bill 403 which mandates that all group homes make the transition to STRTCs by the end of this calendar year. The reimbursement rate for STRTCs is \$13,500 per child per month, compared to the \$9,800 monthly rate CRH currently receives per child per month. CRH anticipates providing placements for 36 children in their STRTC with a treatment time of 3 to 6 months, a shorter time than a regular group home placement.

According to staff, the CRH is underutilized with a bed occupancy rate of about 55% of their capacity. Several people interviewed told the grand jury that the low utilization was due to the lack of adequately trained staff because of high turnover. Additionally, the need to group children according to their age and development level further limits occupancy. Another reason given was the safety concern of placing the higher risk youth and the less traumatized youth together in the residential cottages. The \$9,800 monthly rate applies to all CRH youths including those requiring minimal support to those needing extensive services.

CRH receives
\$9,800 per child
per month from
Sacramento
County

In September of 2017, the Board of Supervisors allocated an additional \$700,000 to the CRH to address the issues cited in the violation. The funds were used to remodel a comfort room into a sibling cottage with 10 beds, increasing the total number of licensed beds from 89 to 99. They also used the funds to hire more staff but continue to have a high number of unfilled positions.

Recent Legislation – Senate Bill 855 and Assembly Bill 403

SB 855: In 2014, California enacted legislation (SB 855) stating that sex trafficked children are victims and as such are more properly served by child welfare. The legislation essentially reclassified these children from the probation/correctional system to the child protective services system and are now referred to as Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC). This transition resulted in an influx of higher risk children with greater needs for placement.

Sacramento County received additional funds through participation in an opt-in initiative to develop programs to recruit more foster homes that accept CSECs. Although more support services have been developed, home placements remain an urgent need.

AB 403: Continuum of Care Reform is a comprehensive reform effort to make sure that youth in foster care have their physical, mental and emotional daily needs met and that they have the greatest chance to grow up in permanent and supportive homes. Continuum of Care refers to the spectrum of care settings for youth in foster care, from the least restrictive to the most restrictive and most service intensive environments. The bill supports a shift in placement options from congregate care (group homes) settings to resource family settings. The goal is to better meet the needs of youth in foster care and to promote positive outcomes for those youth as they transition out of foster care. AB 403 addresses these issues by giving families who provide foster care, now known as resource families, targeted training and support so that they are better prepared to care for youth living with them.

Placement Options

There is a nationwide shortage of resource homes which has also been an ongoing challenge in Sacramento County. Although CPS received \$1 million for recruitment, retention and support, no formalized plan and timeline has been developed. CPS has two social workers whose responsibility is to interface with the public to find, recruit, retain and support resource families. These recruitment social workers have been focused on transitioning current foster families to the CCR resource family model since Jan. 2017, negatively impacting recruitment of new foster families. A relatively low-level staff person has had primary responsibility for recruitment. While everyone employed at CPS has been asked to promote fostering children, a higher level of commitment and accountability is needed.

Despite the additional training for resource families mandated by AB 403, it is unlikely that the highly traumatized children removed from their families due to abuse and neglect will have more immediate and long-term placement opportunities. Many of these children have been in and out of the foster care system for years and have experienced repetitive trauma. As a result, these children are difficult to place due to assaultive behaviors such as fire setting, drug addiction, sexual acting out and suicide attempts. They may also victimize younger children, destroy property and habitually run

Additional financial expenditures have not resulted in obtaining more foster homes

away. These “outlier” children have been refused foster care by resource families, group homes and until recently the CRH.

It is clear to the grand jury that additional financial and human resources have not resulted in obtaining more foster homes. CPS has relied heavily on CRH to accept the difficult-to-place youths. The county has fewer group home settings so at times has utilized group homes in other areas to accept Sacramento County children. The practice of placing children out of county is unpopular with teens and their advocates because an out-of-county placement further disrupts their lives and distances foster children from their communities. There is a decreasing number of placement options for traumatized youths who cannot be maintained in a family type setting. The common response to our inquiries throughout our investigation of how to deal with these children was typically “to find more foster homes.” This limited response lacks insight and innovation. It raises the concern that the recent changes for CRH to accept all CPSU referrals is short-sighted even if CRH eventually becomes a Short Term Residential Treatment Center (STRTC).

ACCOUNTABILITY

The investigation was challenging. The grand jury sought to understand the aggregate cost and effectiveness of the current CPS intake/placement model of which the CPSU is part of but was unable to get sufficient data to do so. Based on numerous unanswered questions, it was evident that data collection and targeted analysis is inadequate pertaining to budget expenditures and outcomes.

The grand jury was disappointed to learn that most effort and expense is still spent on a foster family model that has been in place for decades even though this model is not keeping up with the demands of the expanded population. Although AB 403 was designed to enable families to care for the children, the required training and transition phase is slower than anticipated and lacks a plan/timeline to deliver the desired results.

The County Executive Office (CEO) is responsible for the county budget and recommending departmental policies to the Board of Supervisors. The Board

Agencies need to consider more innovative approaches to better serve their expanded population

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depends on the CEO for factual, timely and complete information so they can make decisions on behalf of their constituents. The public deserves to know what is happening with these abused children and how resources are being spent. Lack of long range planning for Sacramento County traumatized and troubled youth has created a chronic problem which resulted in the Department of Social Services forcing CPS to take action, long overdue.

FINDINGS

- F1. CPSU has experienced, compassionate and dedicated staff whose priority is the welfare of the children they serve.
- F2. The current location of the CPSU is in a high crime neighborhood that places CPSU staff and traumatized youths in undue danger.
- F3. Since the enactment of SB 855 in 2014, no measurable progress has been made to find suitable options that address the unique treatment and placement needs of the expanded population of high risk children.
- F4. There is a lack of communication on spending priorities between senior management and the needs of the service providers.
- F5. CPS and DHHS are still focused on ineffective recruitment strategies rather than considering innovative approaches to gain more placement models for the expanded population it serves.
- F6. CPS personnel hired to recruit placement opportunities for children are unable to focus their efforts due to other job activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. Acknowledge the social workers and supervisors of the CPSU for their outstanding service and dedication.
- R2. Relocate the CPSU to a safer environment.
- R3. Develop a plan and accelerated timeline to increase placement options for all children with immediate needs and children requiring Short Term Residential Treatment Centers.

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- R4. Senior management needs to improve transparency and open communication between county policy makers and service providers so that budget allocations better match the needs of Sacramento County foster children.
- R5. Create an analytical model that compares cost effectiveness, resulting in the ability to pro-actively develop and implement alternative models.
- R6. Determine the necessary hiring or utilization of existing staff to allow recruiters to focus exclusively on placement opportunities for children.

Request for Response

Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05 require that the following officials submit specific responses to the findings and recommendations in this report to the Presiding Judge of the Sacramento Superior Court by Sept. 30, 2018.

County Board of Supervisors

All Findings and Recommendations

County Executive

All Findings and Recommendations

Mail or hand-deliver a hard copy of the response to:

David De Alba, Presiding Judge
Sacramento County Superior Court
720 9th Street, Department 47
Sacramento, Ca 95814

In addition, email the response to:

Becky Castaneda, Grand Jury Coordinator @castanb@saccourt.com