

California - Child and Family Services Review
Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR)
Sacramento County



May 2 0 11

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Acknowledgements

The Sacramento County Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) was a collaborative process between the Sacramento County Child Welfare Department and Probation Department and California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and was facilitated by Shared Vision Consultants.

Sacramento County thanks the PQCR Team members and Planning Team Committee listed below for their hard work, commitment and important contributions to this effort. This process and report would not have been possible without their expertise, insight, and dedication.

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Executive Summary

In an effort to ensure continuous quality improvement for children, youth and families in the child welfare and probations systems, Sacramento County conducted its Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) May 23rd to May 27th, 2011.

Throughout the planning and the PQCR event itself, Sacramento County was committed to the principle that the PQCR is an informative process in assisting to drill more deeply into practice areas which address the needs of the children, youth and families they serve. This commitment led to the desire to learn more about two areas: Child welfare was curious about the re-entry rate after reunification; Probation desired to examine the least restrictive placement setting.

In an effort to glean as much information as possible from peer counties, Sacramento invited the counties of Santa Clara, Nevada, Tulare, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Bernardino, and Orange to participate on the interview teams and provide peer county insights and recommendations. These counties were selected due to their excellent outcomes in these areas or because of promising practices that had been observed by staff.

To help guide the development of tools to be used for focus groups and interviews, literature reviews were conducted. For Child Welfare Services, a literature review revealed a number of factors that are correlated with re-entry - child characteristics, family characteristics, and at times the child welfare services provided. For Probation's focus area of least restrictive placements, the literature review revealed less restrictive placement alternatives, such as community programs, are better able to meet the multifaceted needs of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. All of the information was synthesized and is presented in this report.

This report is divided into five sections: the background and introduction to the PQCR process can be found in Section 1, the methodology for choosing the focus area and how the process was conducted can be found in Section 2, the summary of practice and recommendations can be found in Section 3 and peer sharing can be found in Section 4 and final observations can be found in Section 5. Within each section, CPS and Probation are separately addressed.

Several trends were found in the PQCR process and have been clustered under the headings of strengths, challenges, resources, systemic factors, state technical assistance and documentation.

We believe that one of Sacramento County's strengths lies in our passionate staff and our value of permanency, including family reunification, placement with relatives and lifelong connections.

Section 1: Background and Introduction

In January 2004, the implementation of Assembly Bill 636 brought a new CWS Outcome and Accountability System to California. This new Outcomes and Accountability System, also known as the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR) focuses primarily on measuring outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency and child and family well-being. The new system operates on a philosophy of continuous quality improvement, interagency partnerships, community involvement, and public reporting of program outcomes. The C-CFSR includes several processes which together provide a comprehensive picture of county child welfare practices. The principal components of the system include: quarterly data reports published by the CDSS; County Peer Quality Case Reviews (PQCR); County Self Assessments (CSA); System Improvement Plans (SIP) and annual updates; and state technical assistance and monitoring.

- Quarterly Outcome and Accountability Data Reports
CDSS issues quarterly data reports which include key safety, permanency and well being outcomes for each county. These quarterly reports provide summary level federal and state program measures that serve as the basis for the C-CFSR and are used to track state and county performance over time. Data is used to guide both the assessment and planning processes, and is used to inform policies and procedures. This level of evaluation allows for a systematic assessment of program strengths and limitations in order to improve service delivery. Linking program processes or performance with federal and state outcomes helps staff to evaluate their progress and modify the program or practice as appropriate. Information obtained can be used by program managers to make decisions about future program goals, strategies, and options. In addition, this reporting cycle is consistent with the perspective that data analysis of this type is best viewed as a continuous process as opposed to a one-time activity for the purpose of quality improvement.
- PQCR
The PQCR is the first component in the cyclical C-CFSR process. The purpose of the PQCR is to learn, through intensive examination of county practice, how to improve child welfare and probation services in a specific focus area. To do so, the PQCR focuses on one specific outcome, analyzes specific practice areas, and identifies key patterns of agency strengths and concerns. The process uses peers from other counties to promote the exchange of best practice ideas between the host county and peer reviewers. Peer county involvement and the exchange of promising practices also help to illuminate specific practice changes that may advance performance.
- CSA
The CSA is the next process in the cycle. The CSA is driven by a focused analysis of child welfare data. This process also incorporates input from various child welfare constituents and reviews the full scope of child welfare and probation services provided within the county. The CSA is developed every three years by the lead agencies in coordination with their local community and prevention partners.

The CSA includes a multidisciplinary needs assessment to be conducted once every three years and requires BOS approval.

Along with the qualitative information gleaned from the PQCR and the quantitative information contained in the quarterly data reports, the CSA provides the foundation and context for the development of the county three year SIP.

- SIP
The SIP is the next step in the cycle. The SIP is a culmination of the first two processes and serves as the operational agreement between the county and the state. It outlines how the county can adopt new strategies to improve outcomes for children, youth and families. The SIP is developed every three years by the lead agencies in collaboration with their local community and prevention partners. The SIP includes specific milestones, timeframes, and improvement targets and is approved by the County BOS and CDSS. The plan is a commitment to specific measurable improvements in performance outcomes that the county will achieve within a defined timeframe including prevention strategies. Counties, in partnership with the state, utilize quarterly data reports to track progress. The process is a continuous cycle and the county systematically attempts to improve outcomes.

Sacramento County completed its PQCR May 27, 2011; the CSA is due January 27, 2012, and the SIP is due May 27, 2012.

In reviewing our quarterly data reports and discussing an area to focus on, it was very clear that we wanted to focus on re-entry into foster care for child welfare, and least restrictive placements, especially in regard to relative placement for probation.

Section 2: Methodology and Process

2A: Methodology for Choosing the Focus Area and How the Process Was Conducted

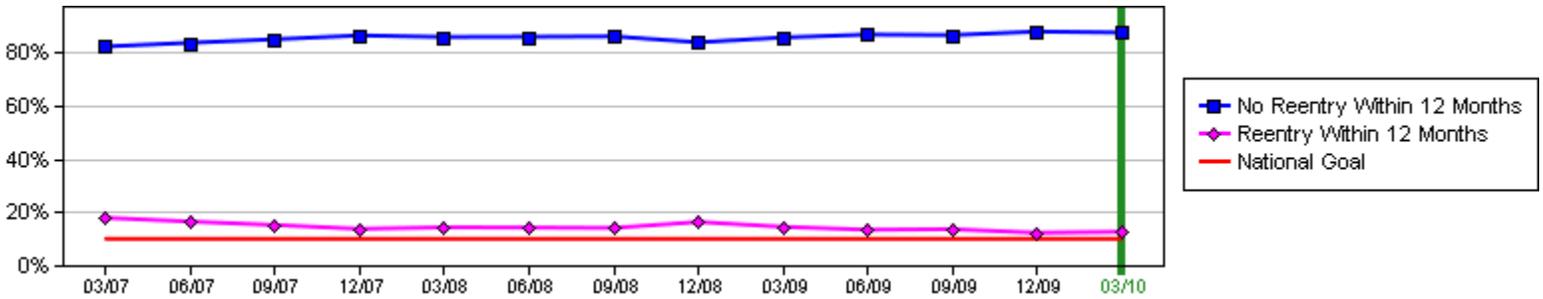
Child Welfare: Re-entry after Reunification

Reunification with the child’s family of origin is the most common permanency outcome, with 49% of US children placed in foster care ultimately reunifying (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2008). As of October 2010, there were 3229 children in Sacramento’s Child Welfare System (CSSR). 43.5% of children in Sacramento reunified with their parents within 12 months as compared to 44.2% statewide (CSSR 9/09).

According to the Center for Social Service Research, in 2009, Sacramento’s re-entry rate was 13.5% (192). This is higher than the statewide average of 12% (CSSR 09/09) and the national goal of 9.9%. At the end of 2008, CSSR reports that 19.9% or 264 of Sacramento’s children re-entered care between 12-24 months after re-unification. A data collection software program, Safe Measures shows an updated, although provisional 12 month reentry rate of 12.5%

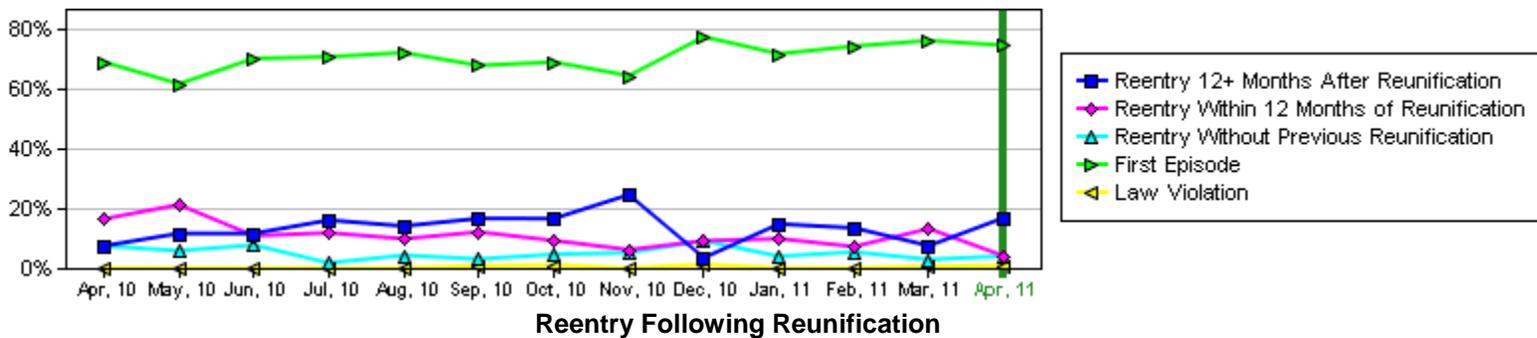
Re-entry is one of Sacramento’s outcomes contained in its current (starting in 2009) System Improvement Plan. The strategies to reduce re-entry were to use TDMs before reunification and before reentry. These have made an impact as shown by the pink line below. However, Sacramento still felt its reentry rate was too high and thus selected it for the PQCR focus area, hoping to learn additional strategies from high performing counties. The tools developed for this focus are, honed in on service delivery characteristics rather than attributes of the parent or child. We wanted to gain information about what practice changes we could make to reduce reentry.

Measure C1.4: Reentry Following Reunification



Safe Measures has added a new report presenting the previous reunifications of those children entering care which shows the most current data. When measured by the entry cohort, Sacramento has improved from a reentry rate of 21.1% in May 2010 to 13.1% in March 2011 and 4.0% in April 2011.

Previous Reunifications of Children Entering Care



	Count	Percentage
Reentry 12+ Months After Reunification	21	16.8%
Reentry Within 12 Months of Reunification	5	4.0%
Reentry Without Previous Reunification	5	4.0%
First Episode	93	74.4%
Law Violation	1	0.8%
Total	125	100.0%

Sacramento went beyond the requirements of the PQCR in deciding to interview the parents of the reentering children. This point of view hadn't been included in our strategy planning up to this time. To get specific feedback from parents, they were individually interviewed in their home or a neutral place. Since Sacramento had never done this before, it had no idea of how successful this effort would be.

Probation: Least Restrictive Placement

Youth placed in group home settings are more than twice as likely to be delinquent than youth who were placed in family foster care. As of October 2010, there were 224 youth placed through Probation in Sacramento County. Of those, 62% were placed in group care. On average in the state, 58.2% of probation youth are placed in group care. Clearly Sacramento's probation placements in group care are much higher. Ninety-three (93) were in placement less than 12 months and 107 were in placement for more than 12 months. 82% of all probation youth have committed an assault.

Least restrictive alternatives to secure out-of-home placement, such as home detention, have demonstrated positive outcomes, particularly when combined with electronic monitoring. 67% of probation youth reunified within 12 months after entry into foster care. A variety of community-based programming options have emerged in recent years that offer wrap-around services aimed at delivering services to reduce delinquency through meeting a variety of youth needs (e.g., supervision, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, family programming, mentoring, etc.). The PQCR inquiry will hopefully shed light on achieving the least restrictive level of care for probation placements.

Probation picked our focus area to help discern if our current practice of placing youth in the homes of relative and non-relative extended family members WITHOUT fully certifying the homes was in the minor's best interest. The youth we work with represent significant challenges to whoever is their caregiver. It is our assumption

that if we had a process to certify homes of relative and non-relative caregivers, an income stream would be available to these families to assist with the care of a youth, which would ultimately provide a lesser restrictive placement option for more youth.

2B. PQCR related research

Once the focus area was determined, a literature review was conducted to ascertain the current thinking regarding what is needed for reducing re-entry after reunification and least restrictive placement. The literature review was also used to inform the development of the questions that were asked in the interviews and focus groups.

A copy of the Literature Review can be found in Appendix A.

Child Welfare

In California, of the 13,332 children who were placed in foster care due to abuse or neglect between January 21, 2005 and June 30, 2005, 55 percent were reunified with their families of origin within 24 months (first entry and a stay of at least 8 days) (Needell et al., 2008). Reunification is the goal for many children in the foster care system and is the most common permanency goal. However, return home cannot be considered a success right away. Unfortunately re-entry due to further abuse or neglect is a real fact that child welfare systems must contend with. In California, of the 22,740 children reunified with their families between July 1, 2005 and June 30, 2006, a total of 12 percent, or 2,737 children, re-entered foster care within 12 months (Needell et al., 2008).

There are a variety of reasons re-entry is problematic for states. First, reentry indicates that the prior intervention was not successful in keeping the child safe. Second, the state may fail to meet its child welfare objective measures, leading to potential sanctions. Third, re-entry leads to higher caseloads. When more children enter care than exit care, the caseloads increase causing workload pressures. Fourth, In addition to the direct consequences of this repeat maltreatment, a disrupted reunification means that a child must move to a new home and form a relationship with a new caregiver. (Kimberlin, S., Anthony, E., Austin, M. 2008)

The need for a child to reenter foster care may arise for any of several reasons. Failed reunification may indicate that a child was returned to his or her family too soon or without enough support; With more resources and/or time, the caregiver(s) could have been prepared to provide a safe and stable home environment. Alternatively, reunification may fail because even with support, the caregiver(s) would not have been able to provide an adequate home for the child. In this case, reunification was an inappropriate goal from the beginning. Finally, reunification may fail due to unforeseeable changes in family circumstances, family composition, or the health or mental health of caregivers after the point of reunification. (Kimberlin, S., Anthony, E., Austin, M. 2008)

The first two reasons above can be prevented. It is also important to know how child welfare practices and services can prevent, or inadvertently promote, reentry to foster care. Findings related to risk factors and foster care reentry suggest that a number of child characteristics are associated with higher rates of reentry (e.g.,

health, mental health, and behavior problems; African American race; And infant or preteen/teenager age). Further, family characteristics related to increased reentry include poverty; Parental substance abuse; Maltreatment type; Parental ambivalence about the parenting role; And other parent characteristics such as lack of parenting skills, lack of social support, and mental illness. Research also confirms a number of child welfare service attributes associated with higher rates of reentry such as very short initial stays in foster care; More foster care placements; Placement in group care; Presence of unmet needs, unresolved problems, or continuing need for services at the point of reunification; And prior involvement with child welfare services, particularly prior unsuccessful attempts at reunification. Understanding the factors that lead to reentry and those that can help prevent it is challenging. The myriad of factors leading to reentry requires innovative services and programs to address the diverse and uncertain situations of children in foster care.

Probation

There is a small, but growing, body of literature finding that less restrictive placement alternatives, such as community programs, are better able to meet the multifaceted needs of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Current research suggests that:

- Participants enrolled in programs that specifically identify and target the desired outcomes of the program tend to fare better than youth who are enrolled in traditional probation programming that may or may not have well-defined expected outcomes (Turner & Fain, 2006).
- The more restrictive and intense a judicial intervention is, the greater its long-term negative impact on the youth and likelihood of recidivism. This is due to many factors, including the behaviors that the child learns through his/her peers during the intervention (contagion effect) as well as the attachment of labels among the youth's peers (Gatti, Trembley, & Vitaro, 2009).
- Least restrictive alternatives to secure out-of-home placement, such as home detention, have demonstrated positive outcomes, particularly when combined with electronic monitoring (Barton, 2000). Barton (2000) reports on a three-year evaluation of three home-based intensive supervision programs that shows positive outcomes, suggesting that in-home programs are viable alternative for youth who would otherwise be placed in out-of-home programs.
- Youth placed in group home settings are more than twice as likely to be delinquent than youth who were placed in family foster care. This finding is associated with the negative peer environments, thresholds of acceptable behavior and encounters with law enforcement professionals (Ryan, Marshall, Herz, & Hernandez, 2008).
- In contrast, a formal evaluation of the South Oxnard Challenge Project (SOCP) in California that aimed to prevent probation youth from entering the California Youth Authority facility through the provision of a team-based approach to service delivery that included consistent case management contacts and strength-based services provided in non-traditional settings. The evaluation found no major differences in the outcomes of youth enrolled in SOCP versus the comparison group of youth receiving routine juvenile probation. The authors conclude that greater inquiry is needed into the types of services that prevent recidivism and the movement of youth onto to more formal juvenile justice programs (Lane, Turner, Fain, & Sehgal, 2005).

2 C. Case Selections

Child Welfare

The PQCR case sample was selected using the *Previous Reunifications of Children Entering Care* report. We started with the most recent re-entry cases which met the following criteria:

- Parents living in Sacramento County
- Worker assigned to the previous entry is still employed
- Select only one case of the sibling group
- Select only one case per worker

We then eliminated cases which were currently bypassing reunification, in the process of terminating reunification, in adoption, or guardianship.

The sample selection criteria were based on our interest in interviewing the families of re-entry children. Consequently, we eliminated families who no longer lived in the area or those who were less likely to agree to an interview because of the status of their case.

Probation

The cases selected were identified by Placement Officers as those cases that had been placed in a level 12 group home placement, and were transitioned (step-down) back to a relative or non-relative extended family member. The staff selected to be interviewed were the assigned officers of these cases

2D. Development of PQCR tools

There are five PQCR tools (staff interview, family interview, focus group, case summary, and debrief) that the Planning Committee developed and customized to gather pertinent information from the PQCR.

- i. The interview and family interview tools were developed by taking into account the information gleaned from the literature review and tools that other counties had used regarding the same focus area. The mock interviews conducted by both the child welfare and probation agencies formed a key component of the development of the tools. The mock interviews allowed for the interview tools to be tested for content, timing and flow. Changes were made to the tools after the mock interview to further enhance the interview process. See Appendix B, C, and D.
- ii. Focus Group interview tools were developed by taking in to account the information gleaned from the literature review and the information that the county hoped to obtain from the different groups.
- iii. The Case Summary tool was developed with the purpose of framing the families (in the case of child welfare) and the youth's (in the case of probation) case in a concise way for the interview panel. Additionally, it provided a structure for reviewing the case for the social worker or probation officer to be interviewed. Care was taken to ensure that the tool was user friendly to the social worker or probation officer.

- iv. The Debrief tool was developed to flow along the areas identified in the PQCR Guide.

2E. Selection of the Interview Teams

Fully embracing the “peer” component of the PQCR process and to ensure that the maximum amount of information was obtained, numerous peer counties were selected to attend. Peer counties were chosen for their innovative programming, performance in focus area outcomes, and location. The teams all consisted of child welfare peers and probation peers.

2F. Process used for the review

The Planning Committee educated staff regarding the purpose and of the PQCR process, by means of informational meetings and staff bulletins.

The Planning Committee determined that nine focus groups would be conducted as part of the PQCR process. The focus groups were conducted the week prior and the week of the PQCR event.

Focus Groups for CWS were conducted with:

- Social Workers
- Reunified Parents
- CWS Attorneys
- Supervisors and Managers

Focus Groups for Probation were conducted with:

- Probation Officers
- Probation Supervisors
- Probation Youth
- Youth in Juvenile Hall
- Caregivers

The focus groups were conducted as a “conversation,” ensuring that specific information was obtained in a safe, comfortable and confidential environment. The staff focus groups were conducted either in the county buildings or the hotel where the PQCR was being held. The focus groups were conducted by Shared Vision Consultants and the California Department of Social Services.

The Probation Youth and Caregivers focus group was conducted at Juvenile Probation; the environment was made very comfortable with dinner being prepared by Probation and enjoyed by the participants. Parents, Attorneys and youth in Juvenile Hall, enjoyed lunch as the "conversation" proceeded.

The PQCR event was held at the Citizen’s Hotel in Sacramento from May 24th - May 27th, 2011. The Citizen Hotel is a beautiful recently renovated hotel in downtown Sacramento. Upon arriving at the hotel, each interviewer was given a “welcome bag” of information, and other items, to welcome them to Sacramento, orient them to where they were and provide information about the different local attractions and restaurant information.

2G. Review Team Composition

Sacramento County's Peer Review team consisted of twelve members, eight from the child welfare and four from probation systems. Peer counties were selected with the following criteria in mind: Innovative programming; performance in focus area outcomes, and geographical location.

In total, there were four teams consisting of three members. All four teams had two child welfare and one probation team member.

2H: Review Process

The first day of the five day review event consisted of training for review team members. Training goals were as follows:

- To provide information regarding this week's work and purpose
- Provide an orientation on the PQCR process
- Develop a common understanding of the desired outcomes for this week
- Develop cohesive and effective interview teams
- To practice the interview and debrief process
- To develop a plan for creating a safe and supportive interview environment

Interviews were scheduled for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. There were seventeen child welfare and seven probation interviews conducted. Teams were given fifteen minutes prior to the interview to review the case summary, an hour for the interview and thirty minutes to complete the interview debrief tool.

All teams met together each afternoon for a debrief session that consisted of summarizing daily trends in practice around seven areas (documentation trends, strengths and promising practices, challenges and barriers in practice, systemic and policy changes, training needs, resource issues and state technical assistance).

Two final debriefs were held. Probation's final debrief occurred after their seven interviews were completed. The process used was to identify the overarching trends and then further prioritize. For Child Welfare, the trends for the week were summarized and posted around the room on flip charts. Each reviewer voted for the top five trends under each practice area mentioned above. The top trends were noted in each practice area and are recorded in Section 3.

On Friday morning the planning committee, agency staff, and staff members that had been interviewed (and were available) returned to the final presentation of the week's themes and trends. Peer reviewers were also asked to identify their local best practices specific to the focus areas, which they believed may help Sacramento improve outcomes for children, youth and families.

2I. Data Collection

Social workers' and probation officers' individual responses to interview questions were typed on the social worker or probation officer interview tool. At the end of

each interview, the review team conducted a debrief session and entered that information on a laptop provided in the interview rooms onto the debrief tool. To protect confidentiality, no case or staff names were documented. To ensure that all information from the interviews was collected, a quality assurance process of review was employed for reviewing each interview tool.

The data collected from the focus groups followed the same process. Interview notes were rolled up into debrief tools, and then compiled in an aggregate manner depending on the identified trends.

2J. Unique Factors of the Sacramento PQCR

- A focus group was conducted with youth in Juvenile Hall, a population that has excellent information and which is typically not drawn upon.
- Family Interviews were conducted by CWS on cases to draw additional information.

Section 3: Summary of Practice

The PQCR is a process that surfaces a large quantity of information which we have attempted to synthesize and organize in this report. Throughout the stages of the PQCR process, learning occurred; promising practices were identified or reinforced and in some instances quickly implemented. The planning committee obtained information from the following sources.

- The Literature Review
- Focus Group Debrief
- CWS and Probation Debrief
- Family Interview Collection
- Re-entry Themes

This section is therefore a summary of the practice that was found in the completed process and is intended to be presented in a manner that concisely explains the trends found throughout the focus groups, interviews and process debriefs.

This section has been divided in to a summary of practice for child welfare and a summary of practice for Probation.

Child Welfare

Strengths and Promising Practices:

- The practice of Team Decision Meetings (TDM) at various stages in the case provides for an opportunity for all stakeholders to participate in the decision making process
- The practice of conducting unannounced visits to both biological parents and foster parent homes allows the social worker to see what is actually happening and helps make good assessments and determine service needs
- Utilizing the WRAP program to support the case plan
- Having a Children's Receiving Home for placements
- Progressive visitation from supervised to unsupervised to overnights prior to reunification.

Barriers and Challenges in Practice:

- High caseloads hinder work
- Returning children to unstable environments, for example, homelessness, and families struggling with long term Mental Health issues
- Not enough time to do what is required. There are numerous competing priorities around mandatory compliance, documentation, training, etc.
- Too many unnecessary items on case plans for the family to comply with which results in overwhelmed, stressed parents, social workers and children
- No CPS aftercare services for parents, family maintenance services have been cut in the budget.

Training Needs:

- Specialized training needed regarding: Mental Health, domestic violence, children with special needs and children who are medically fragile
- Interviewing and engagement skills with clients who are difficult to engage
- Training for Social workers who have been transferred into new positions
- Cultural competence training on how to deal with cultural differences
- Training for foster parents regarding difficult behaviors of children. Sometimes these behaviors are not worked on in foster care and when the child returns home the parents are unable to deal with the behavior which may precipitate re-entry into foster care.

Resource Issues:

- Lack of in-home support services with flexible hours
- Lack of individual counseling for parents
- Lack of time to spend with clients
- Limited time provided for reunification services
- Lack of Family Maintenance services

Documentation:

- Structured Decision Making (SDM) used to document decisions (strength)
- Cookie cutter case plans lack individualized information (challenge)
- TDM action plans used to document assessments (strength)
- Corrective Action Plan to re-address needs of family on re-entry (strength)

Systemic and Policy Changes:

- Not enough time to do what is required
- Currently social workers have generalized caseloads. But, sometimes cases require specialized expertise that the l social worker may not have
- Less meetings and generalized trainings so can spend more time doing job
- Different social workers serving same family results in confusion
- Court not listening to recommendation of Social worker contributes to an adversarial relationship which impacts the family

State Technical Assistance:

- Funding for equipment for field work (Netbook)
- Ways to decrease documentation required by social workers
- State liaison to Kaiser Permanente to break down the barrier of getting information from Kaiser when needed.
- Documentation of undocumented citizens for MediCal process

CWS Focus Group Aggregate findings:

- Lack of both Community Resources and the knowledge of where those community resources are
- Case plans need more individualizing
- Maintaining sobriety and recovery are key to preventing re-entry

- Aftercare services needed to prevent re-entry
- Support system and community important for families
- Parent Partners can provide support to parents
- Vertical case management is appreciated by parents
- Limited resources due to recent budget cuts
- Lack of aftercare support for parents after reunification
- Resources in the various communities in Sacramento County are unfamiliar

Probation

Strengths and Promising Practices:

- Interagency Management Authorization Committee (IMAC) comprised of Child Welfare, mental health, probation and schools
- FCCTP
- Utilize assessment Center
- Focus on least restrictive placement and placing minors in county to help foster connection with family.

Barriers and Challenges in Practice:

- Lack of resources for youth being placed back in community, including lack of Independent Living Skills training
- Court's limited knowledge of placement process
- Court not following PO's recommendations; more collaboration and education needed.
- Agency's lack of a protocol for relative placement assessment
- Relative's difficulty accessing financial programs (CalWORKS) can impact relative placement
- Lack of kinship funds for relative placement
- Lack of access to mental health services due to Medi-Cal issues
- No clear process of how to assess out of state caregivers

Training Needs:

- Probation Officers need training in relative assessment and how to certify homes for placement and allow funding

Resource Issues:

- Funding for Relative/NREFM placements
- Lack of resources for youth in community, in particular ILP and Transitional Aged Youth resources
- There would be fewer minors in placement if relative placements were funded

Documentation:

- Comprehensive assessment plan from Assessment Center with one page "to-do" list to work from (strength).

- Court reports should be concise and reader friendly without too much legal jargon (challenge).
- Lack of verification documentation of relatives (challenge).
- IMAC report was a helpful promising practice (strength)

Systemic and Policy Changes:

- Probation Officers need training in relative home assessment and certification which would then allow funding of these placements
- More time needed to supervise youth in relative placement
- Kin-Gap Financial Assistance and foster care rates are needed for relatives

State Technical Assistance:

- How probation can use Kin Gap
- Medi-Cal issues for out of county youth to access services
- ICPC process which is too time consuming

Focus Group Aggregate findings

- Family Reunification is a top priority
- Youth stay in placement when they are kept busy with activities
- Lack of understanding and resources for relative placements
- Need more qualified professionals to work with high level youth
- Utilize WRAP services to assist with reunification and relative placements.
- More Foster Homes and better quality group homes
- Court does not follow Probation recommendation and orders youth out of state
- Disposition Reports occur prior to offense being sustained
- Court influential in the placement process and sometimes this is a challenge
- Moving Probation Officers around from program to program causes loss of expertise and knowledge
- Parents need more education regarding placement
- More transitional housing programs are needed
- Community resources, in particular those providing Independent Living Skills
- Youth run from placement because they are drawn to the streets for drugs, prostitution, money
- Therapy is not necessarily a desired service for youth

Family Findings

Strengths and Promising Practices:

- Frequent visitation and telephone calls help the parent and child stay connected
- The classes are helpful and encourage parents to develop new parenting skills
- The WRAP program provides valuable resources, particularly for families who struggle with mental health challenges
- Most families experienced progressive visits that provided a helpful transition to full reunification

- For the most part, families found team decision-making meetings helpful because the parents felt that they were better informed of what was happening with their child and they had a voice in decision-making

Barriers and Challenges in Practice:

- The child remained in care for too long. Being away from family for so long had negative consequences on the child's health and behavior
- Social worker turnover prolonged reunification and length of time in care
- CPS was inconsistent with the recommendations made for reunification. This is linked to having different recommendations made by different case workers
- When children are removed from care, the parent loses the financial assistance (SSI, AFDC) associated with the children. This creates new financial challenges for the parent and influences their ability to fully participate in the program
- The distance between where the parent lives and where the child is placed can create transportation barriers for visitation
- The social workers are difficult to get a hold of and frequently do not return telephone calls

Training Needs:

- Training specific to the parent-child relationship for a child who has ADHD
- Training for social workers on how to assess family systems and supports
- Training for social workers on how to demonstrate empathy and communicate more effectively with families

Resource Issues:

- More individual counseling options for the parent
- More counseling options for the parent and the child together
- Employment readiness and job finding resources
- Financial assistance when the parents lose assistance linked to the child
- Transportation for visitation, particularly for children placed in other counties
- Lack of consistency in the non-financial resources that are provide to families. Some families noted that they received car seats and clothing while other families would have liked assistance with household items
- Lack of a 24-hour hotline for parents to call during and after reunification

Documentation: Not Applicable

Systemic and Policy Change:

- Reduced caseloads would enable the social worker to be more attentive to the family during and after reunification
- The establishment of a 24 hour hotline to provide support during and after the reunification process

State Technical Assistance: Not Applicable

Focus Group Aggregate Findings:

- Overall recognition that, although the families did not like involvement with CPS and that the work that they had to do was hard, their experience had a positive influence on their lives and the lives of their children.
- Would like the social workers to demonstrate greater empathy and understanding about the difficult circumstances that the families are in and how hard it is to work within the CPS system towards reunification.
- Certain social workers are compassionate and supportive. Those social workers made a big difference, particularly in helping the parent build confidence about him/herself and his/her parenting skills.
- Visitation was challenging because parents had to work hard to earn back the trust of their children. Systemic challenges, such as a mediator not showing up at a supervised visit, created more barriers for healing.
- There is fear around being too honest or transparent with your social worker. Parents sometime cannot access the services that they really need to become stable because they are afraid to talk with their social worker about their fears, their realities, their relapses, their depressions and their lack of knowledge about how to parent effectively.
- Transportation is a big issue for parents, especially those who and have to rely on friends, family and public transportation to get them to meetings with their social workers, parenting and other classes and scheduled visits with their children.
- A healthy support system and community is identified as a key factor to success. Parents would like CPS to help put them in touch with families who have successfully reunified.
- A CPS aftercare program would be helpful for parents who have been reunified with their children. A mentorship-type program is viewed as one way that families can receive additional support beyond reunification.

Re-entry Themes

At the onset of the PQCR, it was hypothesized that visitation related issues were at the heart of why families re-entered the child welfare system. However, a review of the data gathered from the families' focus group and the social worker interviews has actually shown that this is not the case. Approximately half of the cases were reopened for the same reasons that the child was initially taken into custody. The other half was for different reasons, with several associated with parental mental health issues that had not been addressed in the previous service plan.

Below are the themes that emerged related to why families re-entered the child welfare system.

- Poor choice of partner by parent (i.e. domestic violence in relationship)
- Parent's untreated MH issues affected aftercare compliance
- Parent relapse
- Parents inability to keep it together and comply with the aftercare plan
- Neglect - parents did not realize the extent of the child's medical needs in one case
- Lack of aftercare plans.

Section 4: Peer County Sharing

The following comments were made by the peer counties at the reflections session to provide information and recommendations to Sacramento County on what may or may not work to improve their outcomes, based on their own county practices. These are intended to be helpful to the county and the peer counties are very willing to share information.

Child Welfare

Santa Clara

- Santa Clara uses WRAP to work on Independent Living Plan services with each youth it serves. The WRAP staff provide a binder with all necessary information for youth transitioning out of foster care.
- When a petition is filed, a copy of the petition goes to Victim Witness and the process is started if the case is eligible to access Victim Witness funds; this can be useful in procuring counseling.

Orange

- Orange County's Placement Coordinator places children and their siblings in special certified medical homes which are paid a higher rate. There is one social worker per family. There are three Public Health Nurses who assist this program. Foster families receive specialized medical training for specific child needs and this is coordinated with the hospital.

San Diego

- Court intervention unit develops case plans and sets up services for family. They develop and individualized case plan and monitor the progress/success of parent (i.e. therapy to address specific issues) or parenting classes fit services to needs (i.e. toddler parenting classes doesn't fit teenagers' needs). They clearly spell out objectives in case plans.
- Utilize step down visitation plan, which has been successful. The social worker explains to parent what the expectations regarding visitation are, and what outcomes they are looking for.
- Case plans should be a work in progress and should be updated. It is just not paperwork that must be completed for its own sake.

San Bernardino

- San Bernardino uses a decision making collaborative process. Prior to TDMS they have a multi-disciplinary team meeting (required prior to removal, decision and assessment review evaluations)
- Referral assessment meetings - are used prior to closing referral for high risk children (under 5 and special needs)
- Case Assessment meetings are utilized for case management if the worker needs help making decisions.
- These meetings attended by line workers, managers, PHNs, (voluntary) and are helpful to get other perspectives.
- These meetings are scheduled twice a day and supervisors are assigned for the day to be available. Meetings are generally precursors to TDMS.
- Have several kinds of TDM - pre-removal, end of services (permanency) helps family in the decision making process. TDMS are also used for placement disruptions. The purpose is to provide families, community partners, religious

- affiliates, etc - an opportunity to engage and participate in decisions to link family with community resources and ensure family can access resources to mitigate future involvement of CWS. These result in positive outcomes.
- It is important to have skilled facilitators or the meeting can be long and be ineffective. Surveys are utilized in some counties to gather this information.

Probation

LA County

- LA County Probation utilizes Functional Family Therapy, which is a family centered program that teaches families how to work out problems. The training for the functional family therapy is three days, and they meet with their peer group every week to discuss difficulties. They meet once a month with supervisors to discuss strategies for keeping youth in the home.
- They also have an outstanding ILP program. They plan for youth in Group Homes 90 days prior to release back in the community to make sure they have all the necessary documents.

Tulare County

- Tulare County probation officer bought a packet of information on how to conduct relative placements. Relative placements can lead to guardianship and the packet includes information on this as well.
- There had been issues with court regarding placements, and the probation department met with judges to have an ongoing dialogue on how they can work together better.

Nevada County

- Probation has a strong relationship with Child Welfare. Probation does the assessments and works with CWS who provides all required SOC forms.
- Keep kids in home using Wrap around services.
- Have a close working relationship with the coordinator of the ILP who is very involved with youth and keeps them connected. Also keeps in touch with youth returning from out of county.

Orange County

- Consider looking at certifying relatives/NREFM's as foster parent so they can receive foster home rate.
- CWS contracts for ILP which has an incentive program for minors

Section 5: Final Observations

Sacramento County Probation Department entered the PQCR process with a clear question of "Why aren't more of our youth placed with relatives?" This PQCR clearly identified the reasons for this. While some wards' behavioral traits clearly warrant a higher level of care, there do exist barriers to placement. After careful analysis it is clear that to strengthen the practice of least restrictive placement our Probation department needs to focus on a process for relative approval, certification, and in that lies funding and supportive services. Additionally strengthening ILP services will assist in supporting the least restrictive placement.

Sacramento County Child Welfare Services entered the PQCR process with the question of "Is there anything else we need to know about our re-entry into foster care?". We have slowly been improving and it was an area identified in our most recent System Improvement Plan, but is there something we are missing. Without a doubt the findings conclude that we need to continue our shift in culture for meaningful team decision making, individualized case planning, family engagement and community support.

We will take the information obtained above and incorporate in to the next component of our continuous quality assurance, the County Self Assessment.

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