

**County of Santa Clara**  
**Social Services Agency**  
Department of Family and Children's Services



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DATE: February 18, 2004

TO: Supervisor James T. Beall, Jr., Chairperson  
Supervisor Don Gage, Vice-Chairperson  
Children, Seniors & Families Committee

FROM:   
Will Lightbourne  
Agency Director, Social Services Agency

SUBJECT: Report Back on Children's Shelter Reuse

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Accept status report from Social Services Agency on potential alternative uses of the Children's Shelter.

## **FISCAL IMPLICATIONS**

None.

## **CONTRACT HISTORY**

Not applicable.

## **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

At the May 21, 2003 meeting of the Children, Seniors and Families Committee, there was discussion of the need for reevaluation of new long-term strategies for the Children's Shelter based on the successful placement of children into homes and ensuing decline of the Shelter population. Federal performance standards for child welfare require states and counties to reduce the number of times children in the foster care system are moved among placements and to minimize the use of institutional care. Decreased reliance on the Children's Shelter helps Santa Clara County achieve this goal, and makes it increasingly important to determine the appropriate role for the children's shelter facility as a factor in child welfare system reform. At the subsequent Committee meeting of June 4, 2003, the Committee approved the formation of a task force to propose ideas for potential alternative uses of the facility.

A Shelter Use Committee was formed in August 2003, comprised of a subset of participants from the broader Child Welfare System Community Stakeholders' group who met for the first time on August 7th to learn about impending federal and state system reforms. The Committee met four times in half-day meetings, and subcommittees convened more frequently, to review focus group findings, research reports, federal and state outcome measures, and local need and capacity. The Committee narrowed down recommendations for Shelter Use to three ideas and presented them to the SSA Director on January 30, 2003.

This status report provides a description of the work and recommendations of the Shelter Use Committee. In order to proceed thoughtfully, the Social Services Agency proposes to take the following next steps before reporting back to the Children, Seniors & Families Committee at its April 21, 2004 meeting:

- a. Explore potential funding opportunities to support the specific suggested alternative programming at the facility;

- b. Research licensing and regulatory requirements and constraints regarding the specific suggested alternative uses; and
- c. Explore the interest and preferences of other key stakeholders involved in the Children's Shelter.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Shelter Use Committee began its first meeting in September 2003 by formulating a vision and affirming its charge. The Committee adopted the vision of the statewide CWS Redesign, and added some additional definition:

"Every child lives in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities. Strong communities provide safe and nurturing environments for children who are removed from their parents, and a speedy return to a family and a home."

The Committee operated under the following set of assumptions:

1. Emergency, short-term residential care will continue at the Children's Shelter for 15-30 children.
2. The intake and assessment function for the child welfare system will continue at the facility.
3. Alternative uses will be for children and families served by the dependency system or at clear risk of entry or re-entry into the system, and compatible with the functions listed above.
4. Alternative uses must be able to be implemented in a timely manner.

The charge of the Committee was to identify and make recommendations regarding possible additional activities that would be compatible with the continuing shelter and child welfare system intake and assessment center functions. See attachment for Committee membership.

Prior to exploring potential alternative uses, the Committee generated its criteria, or "rules" for deciding which ideas would be recommended. These were considered, along with the assumptions stated above:

- Serves the vision
- Meets a compelling need
- Contributes to local, state and/or federal outcome measures

- Avoids duplication
- Consistent with philosophy of family-centered care
- Evidence-based

The Shelter Use Committee gathered information necessary to make informed recommendations, including input from national experts, and local experts represented on the Committee, demographics on the county's child welfare population, and input from 25 community stakeholder focus groups. As ideas emerged and solidified, the Committee matched them to its decision-making criteria and prioritized the identified need areas and service ideas.

Two themes were most often repeated regarding the needs of children and families: supports to strengthen families and caregivers, and support for the educational success of foster youth of all ages. The virtual unanimity in this regard across diverse groups of stakeholders validated the great understanding of county residents about the needs of our community. Indeed, leadership at the state level and in our county have been working over the past several years to design meaningful reforms that better address these needs. Both the County's redesign of the Department of Family and Children's Services, and the State's Child Welfare Services Redesign reflect a stronger emphasis on strengthening families and promoting educational success of foster youth.

A third theme consistently raised by community focus groups and Committee members was the need to make available a continuum of services to children and their families that reaches beyond a County facility and into the neighborhoods where they live. Many of the services and activities suggested in the proposals below are those that would, ideally, contain components that could be offered at community-based sites throughout the county, enabling children and families to access them more easily.

Once the ideas were reviewed and grouped, the Committee organized into workgroups to conduct further research and develop proposals. A summary of the three proposals follows. All three proposals reflect the repeated themes supported by community residents and research in the field. A strong synergy exists among the proposals such that not only are themes repeated, but some proposed strategies and desired outcomes are interchangeable. This commonality, and the Committee's consensus on the need for services and strategies contained in the three proposals lead to a decision not to rank the three proposals, but to present them on an equal basis.

### 1. Educational Support

It is widely recognized that support for the educational achievement of foster youth is an enormous need that has gone sorely unmet. California counties and educational systems are being held increasingly accountable for this poor record through state legislation and federal and state standards. The California Youth Connection, a statewide advocacy group comprised of former and current foster youth has declared education for foster youth one of its main policy goals.

Children in Santa Clara County's child welfare system, ages birth to 17, need stronger support for their educational success. This would be achieved through the following services:

1. Timely and comprehensive assessments and services to reduce any barriers to learning, such as mental health and physical health care
2. On-site preschool
3. Tutoring
4. Assistance to parents and caregivers in navigating school and human service systems, as well as other support
5. Access to enrichment activities would also be included to increase children's engagement in education, as has been well documented through programs of the Silicon Valley Children's Fund.

### 2. Family Mental Health Services

This concept seeks to promote a unified philosophy of family-centered, strengths-based supports to promote the health and vibrancy of families. Services would be designed to provide comprehensive support to birth parents, foster and adoptive parents and relative caregivers to promote reunification and prevent re-entry into the system. Services would include

1. Therapeutic parenting classes
2. In-home and shelter-based family assessment, care planning, transitional and crisis services, and linkage to mental health services
3. Opportunities for foster parents and birth parents to meet and plan transition to reunification

4. Parent support groups
5. Linkage to public health and drug and alcohol services

### 3. Family Visitation

Supervised visitation in Juvenile Dependency and Family Court cases is inadequate for families, yet a most critical need in the effort to keep families unified and strong, and to keep children bonded to and nurtured by their parents. Research has demonstrated that frequent parent-child visitation is positive for children and parents. Inadequate visitation, particularly for younger children (0-6), can be harmful. Sibling visitation also has been demonstrated to be positive for children who are in out-of-home care.

Visitation and enriched parenting activities would require safe and comfortable areas where parents and children can visit and learn and play together. The following services would be offered:

1. Supervised and secure exchange of children between parents in Family Court cases
2. Supervised visitation for children and parents in Dependency and Family Court cases
3. Interactive (less formal) visitation to include recreational play, cooking together, etc.
4. Therapeutic visitation to include a mental health specialist offering counseling and family therapy
5. Parenting education classes

These proposals represent the hard work and hours of input and analysis by community members and key stakeholders, to whom the Social Services Agency is very grateful. The Agency is now tasked with exploring funding opportunities, researching licensing and regulations, and exploring further the interests of other key stakeholders as next steps before returning to the Children, Seniors and Families Committee with its recommendations.

### CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE ACTION

Negative action would result in the Children, Seniors, and Families Committee not accepting the information contained in this report.

### STEPS FOLLOWING APPROVAL

The Clerk of the Board will follow the usual steps for this type of report.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

- Stakeholders: Shelter Use Committee (Miscellaneous)