

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



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DATE: June 9, 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: DFCS Activities Related to San Jose State University Children of Color Study

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Accept this report on activities related to the San Jose State University Children of Color study.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

None.

CONTRACT HISTORY

Not applicable.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

At the December 17, 2003 meeting of the Children, Seniors and Families Committee, the Committee heard a report from the Child Welfare Research Team of San Jose State University (SJSU) College of Social Work on their three-phase "Evaluation of Factors Related to the Disproportionate Representation of Children of Color in the Santa Clara County Child Welfare System". The Committee requested at that time that the Department of Family and Children's Services report back on activities undertaken to address the evaluation ("study") findings.

BACKGROUND

The study was conducted in three phases, beginning in April 2000 and completed in August 2003. Since the conclusions of the SJSU study were reported to the Children, Seniors and Families Committee in December, the Social Services Agency has convened six discussion and work groups comprised of DFCS staff and community stakeholders to discuss the findings and other data on ethnic representation in the child welfare system. This process has been used to inform the County's mandated participation in California's new Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR, formerly known as AB636, and reflective of the federal CFSR).

Based on the study findings and intensive community input, the Agency will include a goal and strategies in its mandated System Improvement Plan that relates to the reduction of the number of children of color entering foster care in Santa Clara County. This Plan must be approved by the Board of Supervisors in September 2004.

Discussions and Workgroups with Community Stakeholders

- Family to Family, January 22, 2004: Approximately 25 individuals participated,

representing birth parents, foster parents, placement agencies, community-based organizations (CBOs), and DFCS staff.

- Outcomes in Child Welfare 2nd Community Dialogue, Break-Out Session on Overrepresentation of Children of Color, March 2, 2004: Twenty-four individuals participated, representing law enforcement, CBOs, Mental Health, advocacy organizations, professional networks, labor and DFCS staff.
- DFCS Practices Focus Group, March 19, 2004: Ten DFCS staff, including workers, supervisors and managers, from multiple units participated.
- Safety Outcome Workgroup, March 29 and April 12, 2004: Eighteen individuals participated, representing current and former foster youth, birth parents, foster parents, CBOs, advocacy organizations, Mental Health and DFCS staff.
- Birth Parents Outcome Workgroup, April 28, 2004: Eight parents whose children had been placed in foster care participated.
- Gilroy Community Action Team, May 20, 2004: Twenty individuals participated, representing birth parents, foster parents, placement agencies, CBOs, and DFCS staff.

The results of these discussions and work groups affirmed many of the findings in the SJSU study about best practices and barriers to best practices. Specific strategies for addressing the problem were suggested and are summarized in the attached chart. The attachment displays the findings of the study, a prioritized list of strategies for addressing those findings, and budget considerations, as requested by the Children, Seniors and Families Committee.

Besides the items mentioned above, the Committee requested information on what changes might be needed at the state and federal levels. Five suggestions are reported below.

1. SJSU Study Finding: Need to Expand Child Welfare Services

The study cites the need for more prevention services and more in-home services as likely to contribute to decreased overrepresentation of children of color in child welfare. Services are recommended to be inclusive, culturally appropriate, and community based and tailored to meet the individual needs of families. This is a widely held opinion, and is supported by the recently released report of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care which calls for the federal government to increase spending on child welfare services and create greater flexibility for states and local agencies to reinvest dollars in prevention, treatment and support of children once they leave foster care.

2. SJSU Study Finding: Legal time limits are a barrier to implementing best practices

Time limits are largely governed by state and federal law. The 6-month reunification timeline for parents with children three years and younger is seen as a particularly difficult barrier for incarcerated and substance abusing parents. This affects the African-American population disproportionately, as reflected in the Study findings: 72% of mothers of African-American children in the system had a criminal history compared to 56% of Latino mothers, 49% of White mothers and 26% of Asian/Pacific Islander mothers. Following a similar pattern, 62% of African-American children in the system had mothers suffering from substance abuse, compared to 56% of White children, 55% of Latino children and 29% of Asian/Pacific Islander children.

3. SJSU Study Finding: Shortage of substance abuse treatment services is a barrier to implementing best practices

Studies have shown that substance abuse treatment is effective for families involved in the child welfare system. Despite limitations in the availability of services, Santa Clara County's investment in Drug Court and residential treatment for women and their infants has paid off. But more services are required to meet the need, and increased resources for alcohol and drug treatment that is culturally appropriate and community based are needed from the State and Federal government that target families in the child welfare system.

4. SJSU Study Finding: Difficult protocols for placement with relatives are a barrier to implementing best practices

Federal policy is establishing rules to make approvals of relatives and foster families the same. This is contrary to our local and state goal to make relative approvals easier. There is a bill pending in the State Senate that would improve the relative approval process by allowing CLETS clearance to suffice for initial placement decisions rather than needing to wait for LiveScan results, which take longer. In 2003, DFCS was able to obtain direct access to CLETS through the Sheriff's Office, and approvals have been occurring more quickly.

5. SJSU Study Finding: Heavy caseloads and staff shortages are a barrier to implementing best practices

The findings from the AB2030 study, commissioned by the California State Legislature, showed inadequate resources have been allocated to support Social Work staffing. Little has been done on a statewide basis to address this problem. The Governor's May Budget Revision

proposal to have counties assume a 30% share of cost on the CWS Augmentation will hurt counties like Santa Clara that have heavily overmatched in the past. Locally, the DFCS reorganization and intended caseload reduction will help address this issue, as long as vacant positions from retirements and other employee departures are filled.

NEXT STEPS

The 11 strategies listed in the Attachment are in progress or will be undertaken in FY 2004–2005. The first five strategies will be included in the County's mandated System Improvement Plan, due for submission to the State Department of Social Services on September 30, 2004. In the Improvement Plan, a measurable goal will be set for reducing overrepresentation, and progress toward that goal will be monitored by the State and Santa Clara County quarterly thereafter.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE ACTION

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

STEPS FOLLOWING APPROVAL

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

ATTACHMENTS

- Study Findings, Prioritized List of Strategies, and Budget Considerations (Miscellaneous)