

The focus of the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families (Commission) during Fiscal Year 2003-2004 has been supporting the Department of Children and Families (Department) in the transformation of the present child welfare system to a system that is family-centered, strength-based and that provides families with coordinated, continuous and integrated systems of care. Such a transformation needs to be achieved through community capacity building and the development and nurturing of public and private partnerships. These efforts were triggered in October 2004 with the Children's Planning Council Scorecard Report, approved by the Board of Supervisors (Board). In part, the report focuses on the need to increase the number of children who are living in safe, stable and nurturing families by improving services in three critical areas: **Prevention, Family Reunification and Permanency**. Pursuant to the Board approved recommendations, the Commission and the Department of Children and Family Services (Department) co-chaired a work group to develop strategies in the area of prevention. At the request of Dr. David Sanders, the Commission joined the Department in co-chairing work groups in the areas of Family Reunification and Permanency. Each of the work groups endeavored to develop strategic recommendations to reduce child maltreatment and strengthen families, as part of a system wide design that significantly shifts County agencies away from separate silo approaches and toward collaborative and integrated approaches with each other as well as the ways in which they interact with children, families and communities.

These recommendations are a culmination of twenty years of dedication and hard work on the part of the County of Los Angeles, the Commission, the Department, private child services agencies and a committed advocacy community that has always believed in the right of children to grow up in safe, stable and nurturing families. By focusing on Prevention, Family Reunification and Permanency services, the work group recommendations present the elements of a strategic plan by which the Department can achieve its three primary goals: 1) decreased reliance on out of home care, 2) decreased timelines to permanency, and 3) reduced episodes of child maltreatment while in care. The work group recommendations also serve as a blueprint for how various county agencies work together by highlighting and encouraging the coordination of county resources to create a seamless service delivery system and to maximize families' potential to become safe, stable and self sufficient.

While the development of the work group recommendations was the main thrust of the Commission's work during this fiscal year, the Commission also continued to pursue its charge to advise the Board on issues related to child welfare, review county programs providing services to children at risk and provide oversight to the Department. This annual report to the Board of Supervisors highlights the Commission's continued efforts to improve the lives of children and families in our communities by working with consumers, communities, advocates and stakeholders throughout the county.

PREVENTION, FAMILY REUNIFICATION & PERMANENCY

Systemic Reform

In convening the work groups, the Commission and the Department brought together representatives from many public and private organizations, advocacy groups and child focused stakeholders. Each of the work groups met for approximately six months to study and review the current child welfare system and to develop service improvement recommendations based on their findings and analysis. Although each of the work groups conducted their work independently, a number of the recommendations overlapped and indicated the need for system-wide fundamental changes that must take place if an effective child welfare delivery system is to be achieved. Among the systemic change recommendations of the work groups, the Commission has determined the need to focus on the following three systemic issues:

1. ***Culture Change:*** The way in which services are provided to children and families in need of support is critical to improving child safety and well being outcomes in our county. Each work group report emphasized the importance for all stakeholders, both public and private, to begin working with families from a strength-based, child centered, and family focused approach. Service providers need to support families' competencies, their ability to make decisions for themselves, enhance their strengths, and respect their cultural identities. This approach as distinguished from an adversarial approach or an approach that focuses on the deficiencies and weaknesses in the family requires a philosophical shift in practice and represents a formidable challenge. The Commission believes that if the county, the Department and community stakeholders are committed to improving the health, safety and well being of our families, it is a challenge that must be overcome.
2. ***Training:*** Central to any reform plan is a training strategy and training programs that embraces the necessity for change and prepares individuals for successful implementation and practice. Each set of work group recommendations documents the importance of new and ongoing training to help staff better understand the needs and dynamics of the populations and communities they serve. Family-centered team practice must be the core of such a training program. How the Department engages youth and their families in decision-making is a critical element to achieving improved and sustained outcomes. If such a practice model is to be successful, training must also be collaborative in design and include other county departments, community-based organizations, and foster and kinship care providers.
3. ***Outcomes and Data Collection:*** A comprehensive data collection system is vital to evaluating whether the desired outcomes for Prevention, Family Reunification and Permanency are achieved. It is essential that a data

collection system measure both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data should provide information about program practice fidelity on the part of Department staff. The quantitative data should measure effectiveness of the implemented programs in achieving the established goals. Data collection should scan the service delivery continuum for resource gaps in each community so as to provide an understanding of individual community service needs. Of equal importance is the need for and the capacity of county agencies to share information pertaining to the provision of services to individual families to ensure continuity and integration of services. The Commission understands and appreciates the changing and dynamic needs of the county's at-risk population and firmly believes that without a comprehensive and integrated data collection system the development of a responsive and integrated service delivery system is not possible.

Service Improvement Recommendations

Prevention:

The Prevention Work Group recommends a comprehensive county-wide plan that supports children, family and youth in each stage of the service continuum by leveraging multi-departmental and existing community resources, enhancing public and private partnerships and increasing community capacity building. Since many county agencies are involved, it is recommended that the Chief Administrative Office (CAO) lead a coalition of community partners to participate in the implementation for such a plan. The Prevention work group determined that prevention services take place at three separate levels: 1) **Primary Prevention** (Universal) programs and services that support families in their communities so they can provide the best possible care, thereby preventing maltreatment from occurring. 2) **Secondary Prevention** (High Risk/Inconclusive) that provide supportive services to families who have been identified as being at higher risk for child maltreatment. Service participation is voluntary. 3) **Tertiary Prevention** (Substantiated Cases of Maltreatment) services provided to children and families when abuse and neglect has occurred to prevent further maltreatment and reduce the negative emotional effects of the abuse.

While the work group made recommendations for each level of prevention, six overarching recommendations are suggested, that if combined with the above described countywide plan, would reinforce preventive approaches to child maltreatment.

1. "Fund, organize and integrate first, second and third level prevention resources in at least eight high need geographic communities where children are at high risk of maltreatment...and where disproportionate numbers of

children of color are involved with the child welfare system". Resources should target communities not families.

2. "Build on existing community-based partnership coalitions so that community residents can connect to support one another in natural settings like childcare facilities, schools or faith-based organizations."
3. "Use a Team Decision Making process that engages families in a family-centered approach wherein families and county partners identify the strengths and needs of families". It is important that the CSW perceives the family as a partner and not an adversary.
4. "Develop a Family Unity Approach to third level prevention to (1) reduce the cause for the separation, 2) achieve accountability for child abuse offenders and 3) strengthen families who are at risk."
5. Improve the foster care program through the development of a Charter Home Development Program which provides specialized foster homes for children and youth who have exhibited behaviors that put them at high risk for recurrence of maltreatment, delinquency, and for homelessness.
6. Develop a plan for funding such an initiative through the identification of existing financial resources in both the public and private sector, expanding the use of preventative services that can be funded through Title IV-E Waiver and through the pursuit of legislative changes at the local, state and federal levels to support prevention services.

Family Reunification

The Family Reunification Work Group engaged a wide array of stakeholders throughout the county's various communities to receive input and feedback about current family reunification practices and suggestions on how services could be improved. As a result, the work group concluded that if families are to achieve safe, timely, and successful reunification, a family centered team must be engaged to support the family throughout the reunification process. The family centered team's support efforts must be coordinated and collaborative. All members of the team must work in the best interest of the child and the family. Membership on the family centered team includes various members of Department staff, Dependency Court representatives and children's attorneys, representatives from the Department of Mental Health (DMH) and Department of Social Services (DPSS) and other community organization representatives unique to each families needs. Most important to this team however are the family and those related and non-related extended family members who have traditionally been left out of the decision making process.

The Family Reunification work group also identified substance abuse as a critical element needing attention by the Department and the County if children and families are to be safely reunified. A collaborative effort that includes the substance abuse community, the family, CSWs, and the court is essential to assessing family function and determining whether a child can be returned home

safely. Substance abuse assessment, treatment, monitoring, and the provision of follow-up services must be provided by experts in the field which currently does not exist in the Department. Los Angeles County has no reliable figures to determine the number of families with substance abuse issues; however, anecdotal information suggests that 60 -80% of the child welfare case load involve substance abuse.

The work group structured its report on the five building blocks identified by the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency as essential for successful family reunification. The following represents the work group's findings in those five areas:

1. Placement Decision Making: Upon the detention of a child, a family centered team is immediately organized and engaged to develop a case plan that is routinely and regularly assessed by the family centered team until the family is either reunified or an alternative permanency plan is established.
2. Parent/Child Visitation: Visitation is recognized by all members of the family centered team as the most important aspect of the family reunification case plan. Visitation takes place immediately after detention and occurs regularly to maintain family connectedness, identity and the prospect of reunification.
3. Community-Based Intensive Services: The development of and linkage to community-based intensive services is necessary to support and strengthen a family's ability to reunify. Intensive services would include substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, education, regional center, housing and peer self-help groups. A Community Resource Specialist would coordinate these services. The Department's Point of Engagement pilot embraces this concept.
4. Resource Parent/Birth Parent Collaboration: Providing support to the birth parent is critical if family reunification is to be safe, timely and successful. The Resource Coordinator and Parent Advocate must ensure that families are linked to the appropriate services in a timely manner and that the case plan addresses the safety issues which made detention necessary.
5. After Care Services: For children to remain safely with their families, services must be provided to families for at least 1 year after reunification.

Permanency for Youth Age 14 years and Older

Recognizing the difficulty the older youth in the dependency and delinquency system experience in achieving permanency or establishing a lifelong long connection to a committed adult, the Commission's standing Emancipation and Adoption Committees met together over the course of two meetings to examine this issue. An exhaustive list of permanency obstacles and potential solutions for this population were developed and ultimately became a recommended focus area of the Board approved Scorecard Report. In recognition of the complexity of this population, the Permanency work group focused its efforts in four separate areas. First, an overarching permanency plan and set of strategies for

all foster youth ages 14 years and older was developed by a consultant hired by the Department. The Permanency work group informed the plan and strategies by providing input during work group meetings. Second, a subcommittee of the Permanency work group focused on developing a plan to address the legislative demands of AB 408¹. Third, the Department of Probation analyzed the needs of the youth in the probation system and developed targeted strategies to increase their permanency outcomes. Finally, in recognition of the unique needs of youth who live in relative care, Dr. Sanders requested that the Commission's standing Relative Care Committee develop a specific set of permanency recommendations for the relative population. The permanency recommendations for older youth under the county's supervision are comprehensive and provide a road map to improved permanency outcomes. Recommendations include:

1. As part of a larger "Youth Permanency Initiative", recruit and hire retired social workers to research and investigate permanency options for youth by working with the youth, their families, and other important people in the youth's life.
2. Ensure that youth age 10 years and older participate in identifying permanency options and decisions through interviews with social workers and that if no potential person(s) is identified, that social workers begin the process of identifying a mentor for the youth.
3. Educate social workers and others in the child's life on the value of permanency. They should learn and believe that permanency is a viable and obtainable option for older youth. An educational effort should also include teaching social worker techniques that would improve outcomes for this population.
4. Develop a marketing campaign that would educate various communities throughout the county about the need for permanent families and committed connections for older foster youth.
5. Create an Ombudsman position within the county that would work specifically on the implementation of AB 408. This person would be able to provide resources and supports that would ultimately help youth, social workers and other support representatives during the process of achieving permanency.

¹ Assembly Bill 408, effective January 1, 2004 sets forth (in part) a series of reforms aimed at promoting and ensuring permanence through lifelong connections for all children in foster care. AB 408 also mandates that foster children have access to age and developmentally appropriate extra-curricular, enrichment and social activities. See WIC 362.05

Permanency Goals/Resolutions/Solutions for Youth Age 14 Years and Older Living in Relative Care

At the request of Dr. Sanders, the Relative Care Committee of the Commission co-chaired a work group with the Department to examine the barriers youth in relative placements experience in reaching permanency. The need for a specific examination was critical when considering that approximately 40% of all youth in out of home care are placed with relatives. As of June 2004, of the approximate 8,000 youth 14 years and older in out of home care, about 3,000 are in relative placement and approximately half of those youth have been in relative care for 10 years or more. After engaging a number of stakeholders, including youth and relative care providers, The Relative Care Permanency Workgroup concluded that permanency for this population is difficult to achieve because 1) the termination of parental rights is disruptive to family relationships, 2) legal permanency changes the dynamics within the family and 3) youth and families see themselves in a permanent relationship that does not need to be validated by the courts. Education with relatives is critical if they are to understand the importance and value of legal permanence. Although the work group was charged with researching the barriers to permanency for this population, they chose to focus on the positive by translating the barriers into goals and providing the Department a context in which they can work with kinship families. The critical elements to successfully achieving legal permanence for youth residing with relatives include:

1. Increased levels of resources and support must be created so relatives are able to provide permanency. Relative providers often have less opportunity for support and financial resources as compared to their foster care counterparts.
2. Policy and practice must recognize and address the needs of a diverse population with culturally specific needs and characteristics.
3. Legislative reform must be sought to allow relatives of probation youth to receive KinGAP funding to expand permanency options for this population.
4. In order for legal permanence to be successful over the course of time, families need services that support the placement in the form of post legal services. These services would be akin to the traditional Post Adoption Services but would take into consideration the unique needs of kinship families.
5. A responsive and consistent Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) approval process must be initiated to support relative families in providing a permanent option for our youth. All efforts must be made to assist families achieve compliance with the legal standards.

STANDING COMMISSION COMMITTEES

300/600 Taskforce Committee:

In March 2004 the 300/600 Taskforce Committee reconvened. Chaired by the Commission, the committee continued to focus on the expansion of the Start Taking Action Responsibly Today (START) Units in the Department. During the first quarter of this fiscal year a START Unit began operating in SPA 2 and space in the Compton area has been identified for further expansion. Due to EPSDT funding restrictions and organizational changes at the Department, the committee examined ways in which service delivery could be improved. The Department is now the lead agency of this multi-agency collaborative with the Department of Mental Health (DMH), Probation and LAUSD. DMH will lead efforts to complete a program evaluation to be completed during the next fiscal year.

Adoption Committee

The Commission's Adoption Committee continued to participate in the Adoption Division led work groups to streamline the adoption process and integrate adoptions throughout the Department's regional offices. The Committee received periodic updates on the division's progress. The implementation of concurrent planning is at the heart of the division's reform plan and careful planning has been taking place with the Committee's input for the development of a successful model. At the close of this fiscal year, the Commission received a report from the Department on their progress for an improved adoption process.

Relative Caregiver Committee:

Although the full Relative Caregiver Committee focused on developing recommendations on permanency options for youth in relative placement, a subgroup of the committee examined the Department's implementation of the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment Program (KinGAP). Understanding the value of caregiver feedback, the committee developed a survey that was mailed to 7,714 KinGAP participants to help in their examination of the program. The subcommittee also reviewed all of the legislation and other pertinent materials related to the implementation of the program. At the close of this fiscal year a formal report documenting the outcome and conclusion of their work had not been completed.

SPECIAL MEETINGS & PROJECTS

Program Improvement Plan:

As a result of the state failing the federal Children and Family Services Review (CFSR), California entered into a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) in June 2003 which documented a plan to improve services in the outcome areas measured. Those outcomes included: Well Being, Safety, Rate of Recurrence of Abuse and/or Neglect Where Children Were Not Removed, Permanency and Stability, Family Relationships and Community Connections. The Commission participated in the Department led Steering Committee to assist the Department in a "self assessment" of its service delivery system as required by AB 636. The steering committee will continue it's working in FY 2004-05 to develop the county's System Improvement Plan (SIP). The SIP is the county's plan to the state on how it intends to make system improvement in these same areas.

Educational Summit and Coordinating Council:

For a second year the Commission participated in the development of the Educational Summit sponsored by the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles. This summit brought together community stakeholders to identify ways in which the achievement gap for dependent and delinquent youth can be addressed. Recommendations were developed to guide the work of the Education Coordinating Council (ECC). The Board supported the creation of the ECC and the Commission has participated in the planning of the ECC. The first meeting is scheduled to be convened in January 2005.

Grand Jury Testimony: The Commission was invited to testify before the 2004-2005 Los Angeles County Grand Jury. The visit lasted about two hours; discussion centered around permanency, department organizational issues, leadership and child abuse statistics.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

In its capacity to advise the Board on issues related to child welfare, the Commission made the following recommendations to the Board:

1. To urge the Senate Appropriation Committee to approve various funding levels that support the efficacy of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act which provides flexibility to states and units of local government to address juvenile crime and delinquency with greater emphasis on prevention, alternatives to incarceration, treatment and services.
2. To support the Department's plan to seek a waiver for Title IV-E funding from the state and federal government. Such a waiver would allow the Department flexibility to develop up-front preventative services and spend funds on programs and services targeted toward family reunification and permanency.
3. To support the establishment of the Education Coordinating Council which will bring about a collaborative approach amongst those organizations responsible for meeting the educational needs of children under the county's supervision to improve their educational achievement.
4. To support the passage of AB 1913 which provides the necessary safeguards to assure detained children are placed in safe homes and eliminate the unnecessary barriers preventing children from being placed in relative homes.

COLLABORATIVES

The Commission firmly believes that community and multi-agency partnerships are essential to the creation of a seamless system of care that provides support to children and families. In keeping with this belief, the Commission views itself as a community partner with representation on various other commissions and planning groups designed to coordinate services throughout the County to improve outcomes for children and families. The Commission is represented on each of the following organizations:

- Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council
- Education Initiative
- Emancipation Partnership
- First 5 LA
- Juvenile Dependency Court Psychotropic Medication Committee
- Juvenile Dependency Court WIC 241.1 Committee
- Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council
- Los Angeles County Policy Roundtable for Child Care