



CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS
IN CALIFORNIA, 2003–2005:

Early Implementation of Key Reforms

The child welfare system in California is changing for the better. New community partnerships, a new focus on results and more inclusive practices are all helping to improve the lives of children and families. Some of the changes underway:

- Child welfare officials and community organizations are using quarterly data reports to measure how the services they offer are helping children and families and to identify areas needing improvement.
- Government agencies and community partners are joining forces to provide prevention and early intervention services to troubled families who previously received little or no assistance from the child welfare system because abuse or neglect, as defined in law, had not yet occurred.
- By providing services such as child care, housing or transportation assistance through community-based programs, local agencies are working to help families before their problems become crises.
- Social workers are reaching out to family members and other adults who are important in the lives of children — and listening to what children and youth say — to better plan for their safety and their futures.

This progress report is intended to provide Californians with a better understanding of the broad, collaborative work that is underway to improve the state's child welfare system. The California Department of Social Services, the County Welfare Directors Association and the Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth have partnered in supporting improvements over the past three years. Our continued vision — and our promise to California's youngest and most vulnerable residents — is for every child in California to live in a safe, stable, permanent home and to be nurtured by healthy families and strong communities.

Progress Report



CDSS
CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT
OF SOCIAL SERVICES**



CWDA

**COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA**



**FOUNDATION CONSORTIUM
FOR CALIFORNIA'S CHILDREN & YOUTH**

“Our top priority is keeping children safe and families intact. CDSS views its partnership with the counties and philanthropic and community organizations as tremendously vital to deliver the outcomes that are possible with these reforms. We are committed to staying the course and building on the momentum we have begun to improve California’s child welfare system.”

—Mary Ault
Deputy Director,
Children and Family Services
Division, California Department
of Social Services

What’s driving these improvements? Over the past five years, two major initiatives of the state legislature have converged to produce a new climate in which results for children are driving practice and policy change. The first initiative charged a statewide stakeholder group with researching best practices and developing a consensus-based plan for redesigning child welfare services. The second established a statewide accountability system that measures progress and encourages county governments to engage the community in evaluating and improving practices.

Although it will likely take a decade to fully implement these changes, the strategies undertaken to date appear to be having a positive impact — especially when coupled with investments in earlier reforms that are also showing results. Children today are less likely to enter the foster care system than they were five years ago. When children do enter foster care, they are more likely to exit and they tend to exit more quickly. Overall, we have seen a 20.5 percent reduction in the number of children in foster care due to abuse and neglect since 2000.

While promising, the new reforms are still in their initial stages of implementation and expanding improvements statewide will be challenging. Funding is scarce for the types of prevention and early intervention services that communities are seeking. Programs to assist emancipating youth are small and do not reach all who might benefit from them. County social worker caseloads remain above recommended levels on a statewide basis. We need better recruitment, support and retention of quality foster parents, relative caregivers and adoptive parents.

Despite these challenges, enthusiasm is building among the families, communities and child welfare workers that are benefiting from the first wave of change. Selected counties are serving as “learning laboratories” to further develop and test key improvement strategies. An unprecedented partnership among the state, counties and philanthropy is providing leadership and support for these improvements. Building on the early results and meeting the significant challenges that lie ahead will require sustained commitment and additional resources. It will take dedicated efforts on the part of state policymakers, legislators, local

leaders and communities to make sure that every vulnerable child and family in the state experiences the impact of these improvements.

- California’s child welfare system is the largest in the nation. With 58 counties and a diverse population, it is also among the most complex.
- More than 700,000 children come into contact with California’s child welfare system each year. This includes children who are the subject of reports of abuse and neglect as well as the more than 83,000 children who are in the foster care system.
- The number of children in foster care has decreased from 104,000 in 2000 to 83,000 in 2005, a 20.5 percent reduction. This decline is due in part to state and county efforts to promote adoption and guardianship and work with community partners to prevent abuse and neglect.





I. Articulating a Common Vision, Researching Best Practices

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES STAKEHOLDERS GROUP

In 2000, California established the 65-member Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group, charging it with reviewing the state's child welfare system and recommending consensus-based improvements. Over a three-year period, this diverse group of foster youth, county welfare directors, judicial representatives, foster parents, advocates and national experts worked together to address issues facing the system and its impacts on children and families. Led by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), the group researched the most promising strategies being implemented in California counties and throughout the nation.

In its final report, the Stakeholders Group laid out this vision for the child welfare system in California: "Every child in California will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities." The group set forth a number of objectives aimed at changing how child welfare agencies and their partners respond to children and families. This included providing better supports for struggling families, changing the system to be more responsive and less adversarial, placing a greater emphasis on restoring and rebuilding families and ensuring that youth who turn age 18 in foster care are better equipped for adulthood.

National experts and advocates widely see the programmatic strategies embedded in the Stakeholders' final report as the most effective ways to improve the safety, stability, health, mental health and well-being of children and families that come into contact with the child welfare system. This consensus on best practices along with the non-partisan nature of the Stakeholders' vision and plan has given these strategies the credibility to continue across two administrations of different parties and to earn both legislative and local support.

In September 2003, CDSS identified 11 counties to develop and test the implementation of key redesign strategies. These counties are currently testing changes in practices, measuring results and sharing lessons learned with the rest of the state. Many other counties are initiating similar programmatic changes as feasible within existing resources.

PHILANTHROPY: PARTNERS IN CHANGE

Out of the emerging consensus around needed improvements in California's child welfare system, a new breed of public-private partnership was born based on shared values of inclusiveness and accountability. The Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth, an alliance of 20 of California's leading foundations, formed a partnership with CDSS in 2003 to help put the stakeholder vision into action. Having funded key initiatives and demonstration projects that were now being recommended for replication statewide, philanthropy had an interest in assuring high-quality implementation of reforms. The Foundation Consortium committed to raising several million dollars in private donations to leverage state and federal resources to further the reform effort.

Mindful that implementation is always more difficult than planning, the Foundation Consortium and CDSS also partnered with the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) to assist in establishing realistic goals, timelines and support for system improvement strategies.

"The reforms that are underway in California are reflective of a true collaboration between people who make and uphold statewide policies and the people who actually implement those policies at the local level. Because these reforms were developed from the top down and the bottom up they have the best potential for sustainable change that will directly impact and improve the lives of children and families."

—Bonnie Armstrong
Senior Fellow,
Foundation Consortium
for California's Children
& Youth



“California child welfare professionals have learned that ‘data are our friends.’ We have incorporated the intelligent use of data into our day-to-day work.”

—Barbara Needell
MSW, PhD
Center for Social
Services Research,
University of California
at Berkeley

data

II. Using Data to Improve Results for Children

INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR OUTCOMES

Fundamental to reforming California’s child welfare system is the outcomes-based accountability system that went into effect on January 1, 2004. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act¹ shifted California away from a process-based accountability system — focused only on whether a child received a particular service or a certain action was taken — toward a cycle of continuous improvement focused on achieving results related to safety, permanence and well-being. The new accountability system is intended to measure progress toward these outcomes:

- Children are protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate.
- Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
- Continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.
- Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs.
- Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
- Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.
- Youth emancipating from foster care are prepared to transition to adulthood.

California’s new accountability system is built on an open and continuously recurring cycle of self-assessment, planning, implementation and review. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data is fundamental to this cycle. The quantitative data comes from the statewide child welfare database, known as the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System.² The qualitative data is drawn from reviews of individual cases within each county.

Key components of the new accountability system include:

- **Quarterly County Data Reports.** Individual county performance on 14 data indicators is used to measure progress. The data are provided to each county welfare agency and published online.
- **County Self-Assessments.** In collaboration with community partners and stakeholders, each county identifies its strengths and challenges. Reassessments occur in three-year cycles.
- **Peer Quality Case Reviews.** Each county welfare agency forms teams composed of its own social workers, staff from other counties and CDSS staff to review randomly selected cases in at least one of its identified improvement areas. Teams conduct structured interviews to evaluate the cases.
- **System Improvement Plan.** Based on its self-assessment, each county welfare agency collaborates with local partners to develop a plan that specifies priorities, improvement goals and action steps. The County Board of Supervisors must approve the plan.

By late 2004, all 58 counties had submitted self-assessments and system improvement plans to CDSS. Most counties have identified community organizations with whom they would like to partner in order to improve outcomes for children and families. Several counties also have used the peer review process to generate qualitative case data to help them clarify needed improvement strategies. The state is now in the process of reviewing each plan and working with counties to identify areas where further support and assistance is needed. In June 2006, the Child and Family Policy Institute of California is scheduled to release a comprehensive analysis of the data generated by the new accountability system.

In support of the counties’ successful completion of the first planning cycle, the state authorized \$11.6 million in targeted funding in 2005–06 to help 38 counties implement their system improvement plans to better their performance on specific outcome measures. Examples of how the counties are using these funds include expansion of a children’s assessment center, purchasing services for children and families, and staff training.

SHARING RESULTS, SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHANGE

While presenting a wealth of information and new opportunities, shifting to a focus on results for children and families has not been without its challenges.

Learning to use quantitative data. A staggering amount of data is now available about California's child welfare system. Understanding and analyzing what the data mean — and just as importantly, what the data do not mean — has been an evolving process for both CDSS and county child welfare agencies.

In the two years since California's new accountability system took effect, a number of issues have surfaced regarding the data and their use:

- Are the performance indicators measuring what is intended?
- Do child welfare staff have a common understanding of how to enter data into the statewide system?
- Are the right data being captured?
- Are the policies and/or procedures clear?

Researchers from the University of California at Berkeley are working with CDSS and county staff to improve data quality and to help the child welfare community use data more effectively. As the data are understood and improved, they will be used more often to track performance and implement effective system changes.

Completing the development of well-being measures. California's new accountability system requires the development of outcome measures in the areas of child safety, permanence and well-being. Building on the federal set of measures in each of these areas, CDSS formed a workgroup to develop additional measures for safety and permanence. The well-being measures have been the most challenging to define. Although significant progress has been made, completion of the well-being measures is one of the key pieces of unfinished business remaining to fully implement the outcomes and accountability framework.

Inviting public participation in system improvements. Implicit in the new accountability system is a commitment to expanding the public's knowledge and understanding of the child welfare system.

For example, county performance data are available to the public online.³ County self-assessments and system improvement plans are encouraging counties to elicit input and support from a broad range of community partners. The experience of openly reviewing, debating and approving these plans is countering the perception that child welfare agencies are isolated from the community.

Many county child welfare administrators are discovering that the new process is helping the community to understand the complexity of providing child welfare services. Some are finding that other agencies and community partners are more willing to share responsibility for improving outcomes for children and families. The process is helping some counties underscore the need for integrating multiple local initiatives and targeting resource allocations. A few county boards of supervisors are increasing funding or staffing because of the more open, outcomes-based planning process.

Building the foundation for future improvements. With California's new accountability system just 24 months old, resulting improvements cannot yet be adequately reflected in the quarterly data collected for each county. By the time the federal government conducts its next Child and Family Services Review,⁴ the state will have more data available to show the impacts of these changes. Counties will continue to build on their improvement plans in the meantime, gaining more experience with community partners, improving the collection and use of performance data and finding ways to work strategically to improve their services for California's vulnerable children and families.

"California's new Outcomes and Accountability System provides the tools for us to do a better job for children and youth who are in the state's child welfare system. Coupled with the other key reforms underway we are moving forward toward our goal of improving the lives of children. We're not yet there — but government and community partners are working together like never before to help get us there."

—Darrell Steinberg
*Former State Assemblymember
and author of AB 636, which
established the Outcomes and
Accountability System*



WHAT THE DATA TELL US

Tracking child welfare performance with data can be a powerful tool. It is also complex. Data related to one measure of the system cannot be analyzed without considering its relation to all other measures. Nor can data reveal what happened before or after the point at which the measurements took place.

Even so, knowing how our current and past performance compare to desired outcomes is critical. Only then can we understand whether we are making progress.

PROMISING TRENDS

Data collected during 2005⁵ show promising trends in the ability of California's child welfare system to keep children safely with their families and, when that is not possible, to find permanent homes more quickly.

- **Fewer children and youth are in foster care today than five years ago.** The number of children in foster care has declined from 104,000 in 2000 to 83,000 in 2005, a decrease of 20.5 percent.⁶
- **The likelihood of children entering foster care for the first time is decreasing.** Between 2001 and 2004, there was a 6.4 percent reduction (from 3 per 1000 to 2.8 per 1000 children) in the incidence of children entering foster care for the first time. The number of children entering foster care has decreased slightly despite a 3.4 percent increase in California's child population.
- **The recurrence of child abuse or neglect is decreasing.** Between 2001 and 2004, the percentage of children who experienced a second incident of abuse or neglect within six months of a previous incident declined by 12.4 percent.
- **When children enter foster care, they are exiting more quickly.** Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of children who returned home within 12 months increased by 14.4 percent. The data also show a 9.9 percent decrease in the percentage of children who re-entered foster care after returning home, indicating overall improvement in reuniting children safely with their families. Additionally, between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of children adopted within 24 months of entering care increased by 56.7 percent. This improvement is offset by a slight decline in the annual number of children exiting to adoption.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Early data also indicate several areas that remain a challenge, reinforcing the importance of sustained commitment to continued improvements in child welfare practices.

- **California is doing only slightly better at reducing the number of placements children in care experience.** Between 2001 and 2004, the percentage of children with two or fewer placements within the first 12 months of care improved by only 0.7 percent to 84.2 percent. As more counties implement practices that engage youth and families in placement decisions and service planning, further progress is anticipated in this area.
- **California has not yet succeeded in sufficiently reducing the incidence of abuse within the foster care system itself.** The limited data currently available indicate that the percentage of children who are victims of abuse or neglect during a nine-month period while in foster care (excluding relative and group home placements) has ranged from a high of 0.9 percent in 2003 to 0.75 percent in 2004.

This data indicator exemplifies how the examination of data has led to policy and practice changes. Necessary improvements were made in the state child welfare database to increase the system's capacity to collect more accurate data for this measure. In tandem with the database changes, CDSS and the counties also examined current practices and clarified policies on investigating and recording allegations of abuse and neglect in foster care. As these changes are implemented and data recording increases, this data indicator may worsen. Data will continue to be monitored to improve its quality and to target improvements where they are needed. The statewide safety assessment system, discussed on page 10, will be used to address safety in foster care as well. Other efforts are focused on increasing caregiver assessment and supports.

- **African-American and Native American children remain disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.** In 2005, 29 percent of the children in foster care were African American despite constituting only 7.2 percent of California's total child population. Across all age categories, children of African American descent had the highest rates in care. Such disproportionality remains a significant challenge, but some progress has occurred. The proportion of African-American children in care has declined 15.7 percent (from 34.6 percent in 2001 to 29.1 percent in 2005). The standardized safety assessment being implemented statewide is intended, in part, to help reduce bias in assessing risk and safety.

data

A NEW WAY OF DOING BUSINESS

At the heart of the child welfare system are the personal interactions between social workers, children and families. Over time, the social work practices that guide these interactions have been through many changes. The improvements now underway in California's child welfare system embrace the best practices to date and model the essence of the values that are the foundation for systemic change.

STANDARDIZED TRAINING

The aim of the Common Core Curricula, the new standardized training programs required for all new child welfare workers and supervisors, is to develop the capacity of the workforce to use these best practices with consistency and equity in all 58 counties. The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC),⁹ working together with its coordinating partners, developed the curricula in response to the 2002 federal review of California's child welfare system.

The Common Core Curricula provide child welfare supervisors and social workers with the knowledge and skills needed to operate in California's new outcomes and accountability system. They also teach core competencies related to key elements of reform, such as critical thinking in assessment, engaging families in case planning and case management and adapting child welfare practices in a multicultural environment. The content also prepares the child welfare workforce for new initiatives such as the statewide safety assessment system and differential response.

COMMON THEMES

Four themes identified by CalSWEC are woven throughout the curriculum. These common themes reflect fundamental shifts in culture and practice that underlie all of the state's program and system improvements.

- **Fairness and Equity** — modifying practices and broadening community resources and supports to ensure that all children and families have the same opportunity to obtain positive results from child welfare interventions, regardless of the community in which they live.
- **Family and Youth Engagement** — including and engaging parents, youth and extended family members in assessing the family situation and developing appropriate plans and interventions.
- **Strength-Based Practice** — identifying and building on the strengths and resources that exist in families and helping families use those strengths to help solve challenges.
- **Outcomes-Informed Practice** — using outcome data to periodically assess whether current practices are leading to the desired results for children and families.

"Internal staff philosophy change was hard. Layering new ways of doing business on top of all the usual requirements for social workers was difficult because the additional work didn't reap immediate rewards. Over the course of a year, however, our staff bought into changing the way we interact with families and the community. We now involve families sooner and more comprehensively in their services and we engage partners outside of our agency in helping with prevention more directly — even though it takes more time and effort than the 'old way'."

—Tehama County
*Excerpted from 11 Pilot County
Lessons Learned Report*

"Redesigning child welfare services requires a big cultural change at the staff level. As we train staff (including our community partners), we find that the culture is slowly changing. Most are finding this 'new way' of doing business more family friendly."

—Glenn County
*Excerpted from 11 Pilot County
Lessons Learned Report*





III. Testing Strategies at the Local Level

California offers an excellent environment to develop and test strategies to improve child welfare services. Ours is one of 11 states where the child welfare system is administered by counties with state oversight. This allows for broad policy direction at the state level coupled with innovation and flexibility at the county level where the programs are administered. Providing counties latitude in implementing improvements within a principled set of statewide policies recognizes California's demographic and geographic diversity. Needs in urban Los Angeles, for example, can be vastly different from those in rural Tehama County.

As the state oversight agency, CDSS selected 11 counties⁷ to begin piloting some of the system improvements identified in the Stakeholders' report. The idea was for these counties to become laboratories for child welfare practice, developing and testing the strategies as well as evaluating outcomes.

TARGETED IMPROVEMENTS

In 2003–04, CDSS set aside \$3 million to help the 11 counties begin planning for implementation. In 2004–05, the new Administration focused on three specific improvement areas as a starting point for implementation. Each of the targeted improvements had the potential to make a notable difference for children and families, and each could be implemented on a limited basis and tested using the limited resources available:

- **Statewide Safety Assessment** — developing a standardized safety assessment process to ensure the consistent evaluation of risk from county to county, social worker to social worker and child to child.
- **Differential Response** — working with community organizations to develop a broader set of responses when child welfare agencies receive reports of possible abuse or neglect, including prevention and early intervention, engaging families to address issues of safety and risk, and improving access to a broad range of services for families who are formally involved in the child welfare system and those who choose to participate voluntarily.

- **Permanency and Youth Transitions** — including youth, extended family and community partners in decision-making and case planning in order to create more permanent homes and lasting relationships for foster youth and ensure their successful transition to adulthood.

These three improvement areas complement and support one another. Assessing a child's safety, the risk of future abuse and the parents' capacity to fulfill their parental role helps county social workers make more informed decisions. Differential response gives county staff a wider variety of ways to help families, based on their initial assessments. When community-based services alone cannot meet the needs of the child and family, resulting in out-of-home care, the priority becomes helping the child achieve permanence — either through reuniting with his/her parents or establishing lasting connections with a new caregiver — in a timely way.

The Legislature supported this targeted approach and appropriated \$17.4 million for state-level planning, training, curriculum development, technical assistance, technology and evaluation, as well as for the 11 pilot counties to begin implementing and testing the reforms.

Developing frameworks for implementing strategies. To provide statewide consistency and the foundation for additional counties to implement these changes in the future, CDSS and the 11 counties formed workgroups to develop conceptual frameworks that provide detailed guidelines and protocols for each set of improvements. The pilot counties are now using these frameworks as a basis for implementation, tailoring their approaches to meet local needs and to test specific changes with targeted client populations. CDSS is analyzing and evaluating the data from these counties as it looks for ways to take the best strategies to scale statewide.⁸

PILOT COUNTY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Eleven counties agreed to serve as “learning laboratories” to work in collaboration with CDSS to develop, test and refine key child welfare improvements prior to the state bringing the reforms to scale. The following is a snapshot of key accomplishments of the state and participating counties.

- Collectively developed a standardized statewide approach and framework for assessing a child’s safety, ensuring consistent evaluation across all counties, and guiding county decision-making and practice.
- Implemented a safety assessment framework in each of the 11 counties.
- Developed standardized processes for collaborating with community partners to ensure consistent services and treatment of children and families.
- Implemented initial efforts to join forces with community-based organizations to intervene earlier with struggling families, to provide services to help keep children safe and to help families prevent and find solutions to abuse and neglect.
- Participated in a statewide training project that enabled teams of county staff and staff from community partner agencies to conduct small-scale, rapid tests of practice changes and share the results with all counties.
- Developed more effective decision-making processes that include extended family members and other concerned adults and incorporate the wishes of children and youth.



testing strategies



“We developed a pre- and post-services family assessment screening tool. This allows us to develop a customized plan for individual families based on the most in-depth understanding of their unique circumstances and strengths and provides the framework for us to determine the effectiveness of services.”

—San Mateo County
Excerpted from *11 Pilot County Lessons Learned Report*

assessment

TARGETED IMPROVEMENT AREA:

Statewide Safety Assessment

WHAT IS CHANGING?

When a county receives a report of child abuse, social workers must balance the child’s risk of harm against the possibility of keeping the family together. They must make immediate and difficult decisions in high-stress situations. Is the child in danger? Is there a likelihood of the child being abused? Should the child be removed? What are the family’s strengths and needs?¹⁰

In California, where there have historically been multiple systems for assessing child safety, a standardized approach to this important process is a significant shift in practice. Research shows that accurately assessing safety reduces the likelihood of subsequent abuse and neglect. A Michigan study of one approach to safety assessment demonstrated the value of using a standardized process that assesses safety, risk of future abuse and parental protective capacity; outcomes included fewer re-referrals, fewer children removed from their homes and fewer injuries to children.¹¹ Given that a portion of California hotline referrals are re-referrals of the same families from the previous year, the cost to children and families — let alone the wise use of scarce resources — clearly warrants improvements in this area.¹²

The framework for safety assessment developed by CDSS and the 11 counties contains a number of core safety factors (such as family history and home environment) that must be assessed for every child. Specific assessment tools may vary by county — the 11 pilot counties are implementing two different tools — but the core factors remain the same. A key purpose of the assessment framework is to ensure that children are consistently protected from harm while removing as much subjective bias as possible from the decision-making process.

A safety assessment does not happen only at the beginning of a child welfare case. The statewide protocols developed by CDSS and the 11 pilot counties require that safety be assessed and reassessed from the point of referral through the time that the child is returned home or adopted, using the same set of factors.



HOW ARE COUNTIES IMPLEMENTING THE CHANGES?

Seven of the 11 pilot counties were already participating in a CDSS project to develop and test a standardized assessment tool. These counties reworked this assessment tool to achieve the goal of addressing child safety both initially and throughout the child’s stay in the child welfare system. Four of the 11 counties collaboratively developed a new standardized tool.

All 11 counties are using one of these two tools to implement the standardized safety assessment system. Having invested significant resources in developing resources and training staff, they are now evaluating and validating their new tools and systems and identifying statutory and/or funding changes that are needed for statewide implementation.

CHANGING LIVES: A CASE STUDY

Using Core Safety Factors to Improve Objectivity and Outcomes

Changing Practice: Using a standardized tool to assess core safety factors for every child at key decision points in a child welfare case can help reduce subjective influences, increase consistency across situations and ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of the child.

Situation: Chandra, an 8-year-old girl, was removed from her home because of issues relating to domestic violence. Her father, Thomas Brown, had previously been incarcerated for spousal abuse and there were concerns that her mother, Sophia Brown, could not effectively protect Chandra from serious harm. Chandra loves her parents and wants to live with them.

Action: After Chandra was removed from their care, the family, including Chandra's aunt and godmother, attended a meeting together. The Browns began by arguing about why they were good parents. Mrs. Brown appeared confused and Mr. Brown was hostile, reinforcing the social worker's initial view of the family as incapable of providing a safe home environment. The meeting facilitator pointed out that everyone present needed to work together to resolve the safety issues for their daughter so that they could

be reunited as soon as possible. The social worker then handed out copies of a blank safety assessment and guided Mr. and Mrs. Brown through its nine safety factors.

After reviewing each factor, everyone in the room agreed that only three factors were of concern in the family. Everyone's attention then turned to how they could resolve these issues. As the Browns' focus shifted from defending themselves to meeting clearly described safety objectives, their anger and confusion subsided noticeably. By the end of the meeting, all but one safety factor had been addressed and a plan was developed to resolve the other factor.

Impact: Mr. Brown acknowledged that he has a problem and agreed to attend anger management classes and remain out of the home until the court allows him to return. Chandra's aunt (Mr. Brown's sister) offered him a temporary place to stay. Mrs. Brown agreed to abide by this decision and to attend counseling. The godmother agreed to help with transportation to counseling appointments. Once the plan is implemented, another assessment will be conducted to determine when Chandra can safely return home.

**Names and identifying circumstances have been altered.*



“We have seen the many benefits of outreach to the community. The process of building collaborative and trusting relationships takes time and patience but the benefits to children, families and the community are well worth the investment.”

—Humboldt County
*Excerpted from 11 Pilot County
Lessons Learned Report*

“As a result of Differential Response and other changes that are happening in [Tehama County’s] child welfare office, we are working more collaboratively as a community to ensure child safety. There is also a newfound respect and appreciation for the good work that child welfare staff do for families and children and our communities. We are thrilled with these shifts in practice and doing all that we can to help children and families in need.”

—Ted Klemm
*Director,
Northern Valley
Catholic Social Services*

differential response

TARGETED IMPROVEMENT AREA:

Differential Response

WHAT IS CHANGING?

Every year in California, child welfare agencies receive more than one-half million reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. Most of these reports are cases where families are experiencing some type of stress and need help, rather than serious cases of abuse and neglect. Loss of a job, lack of child care, inadequate housing, poor health care — stressors such as these can compromise a family’s ability to care for their children and lead to an increased risk of abuse and neglect.

At the core of California’s new child welfare improvements is a broader set of responses for helping families in need. Differential Response improves the lives of children and families by helping parents take better care of their children and avoid entering the child welfare system. Because Differential Response engages families in more respectful ways, it also is helping to reposition child protective services as a place that families in need can turn, before their problems become crises or escalate into front-page tragedies.

Differential Response is an evolution of child welfare practice that has shown promise in a number of other states and represents a growing movement to provide services to children and families at the earliest signs of trouble. In California, Differential Response is built around three guiding principles:

- Children are safer and families are stronger when communities work together.
- Children and families do better the earlier family issues are identified and addressed.
- Families can more successfully resolve issues when they voluntarily engage in solutions, services and supports.

The framework for Differential Response developed by CDSS and the 11 pilot counties offers three paths for ensuring child safety — all of which include engaging families whenever possible to help identify solutions to the challenges they face and that may pose risks to their child. All three paths also rely on collaboration between child welfare agencies and community organizations.

- **Path 1: Community Response.** This path is used when a family is experiencing problems but the situation does not meet statutory definitions of abuse or neglect. Instead of being turned away without any assistance, families are linked to services in the community through partnerships with local organizations.
- **Path 2: Child Welfare Services and Community Response.** In this situation, the report meets statutory definitions of abuse and neglect. County staff assess that the child is safe and at low to moderate risk of future harm and the family is likely to make changes and mitigate risk voluntarily. The county agency works with the family and community-based organizations to identify strengths and needs. If the family is unwilling to make needed improvements or the situation deteriorates, endangering the child, the case would be re-referred to the child welfare agency.
- **Path 3: Child Welfare Services Response.** In this situation, the child is not safe and he or she is at a moderate to high risk of continued abuse or neglect. Actions may be taken with or without the family’s consent, court orders may be sought and criminal charges may be filed. Social workers seek to engage families more fully and work with other county agencies to provide focused services. This path is most similar to the child welfare system’s traditional response.

HOW ARE COUNTIES IMPLEMENTING THE CHANGES?

All 11 pilot counties are now working with community partners to respond to reports of child abuse and neglect, the overwhelming majority of which are neglect cases where families are struggling to care for their children. Community partners include schools, faith-based organizations, county health and mental health services, family resource centers, drug and alcohol treatment centers, and AmeriCorps volunteers — as well as other county departments.

Some community organizations are teaming with the counties to provide essential supports that can help keep children safely with their families. Essential supports may include child care, after school programs, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, anger management, job training, employment services and housing and transportation assistance.

Social workers in the 11 counties are receiving training in the use of their county's standardized safety assessment tool and learning the best response path to use when reports of child abuse and neglect are received. In some counties, social workers are requesting staff from community agencies to accompany them to the family's home so they can help provide needed services more quickly. Also, because Differential Response focuses on identifying family strengths that can help keep children safe, social workers are asking families to identify other family members or friends who can help solve problems or provide care for the children.

Pilot counties are testing Differential Response initially by targeting high-risk neighborhoods or age groups. Their efforts are being documented so that the state and counties can assess what is needed to expand the new practices successfully. While Differential Response is still in an early stage of implementation, anecdotal reports from county and community agencies have been consistently positive and encouraging.

- Government agencies and community organizations are working more collaboratively to ensure child safety.
- Social workers are energized because they are able to more accurately assess families' needs and then connect them to services.
- Families are appreciative that county officials are more respectful and responsive to their needs.

HOW IS IMPLEMENTATION BEING SUPPORTED?

In 2003, 43 county child welfare agencies opted to participate in the California Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Differential Response — a large-scale training and technical assistance effort initiated by CDSS and the Foundation Consortium.¹³ A Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) is a method for achieving system change that was introduced in the child welfare field nationally by Casey Family Programs. In a BSC, small-scale practice changes are rapidly tested to achieve system-wide improvements in a short period of time. These small-scale tests of change often go through multiple cycles of modification, and those that prove successful on a small scale are then spread throughout a larger segment of the organization.

Over the course of two years, a 16-member team of national experts on Differential Response provided intensive support to teams from participating counties. County teams tested more than 300 small changes, primarily in the areas of broader response, family engagement and community partnering. They shared their tests of change with other teams through conference calls, an Internet site and in-person meetings. While dozens of practice changes resulted from the BSC, some of the most innovative and widely adopted include:

- Asking the person making a report of child abuse and neglect about the family's strengths as a way of engaging the family more positively in an initial home visit.
- Calling lower-risk families before making an initial home visit to show respect and begin developing a relationship.
- Inviting community-based providers or parent mentors to join child welfare workers in an initial home visit to decrease anxiety and link families to services more quickly.
- Having community-based specialists make in-person visits to engage Path 1 families and offer services.
- Holding an in-person "transition" visit with the family, child welfare staff and community provider after the initial assessment determines that the community provider will take the lead in service delivery.

"Our partnership with AmeriCorps has been very successful. We have stationed their workers in outlying schools where there is a dearth of services and they have vastly improved our relationships and our ability to serve families in these communities."

—Trinity County
Excerpted from 11 Pilot County Lessons Learned Report

"Change can be accomplished relatively easily when a group of staff are motivated, interested and feel they are supported. The Breakthrough Series has been a great tool in changing practice, trying new strategies and creating culture change. It works!"

—Placer County
Excerpted from 11 Pilot County Lessons Learned Report



CHANGING LIVES: A CASE STUDY

“With Differential Response, social workers are asking children and youth what they want — and most want to stay with their families. What’s changing is that more people are trying to get families the help that they need.”

—Berisha Black
*Emancipation Ombudsman
Los Angeles County*

“Parents want what’s best for their kids. Sometimes, we just need a little help.”

—Angela Le Beau
*Parent Leader whose children
were formerly in foster care
Sacramento County*

“The experience I have had is that if you treat people the way you want to be treated — with respect — they’ll respond.”

—Mike Barry
*Emergency Response Worker
Sacramento County*

differential response

Leveraging Community Resources to Strengthen Families

Changing Practice: Determining appropriate responses and accessing available services can help struggling families better care for their children.

Situation: Juanita Lopez has four children ranging from 4 to 16 years of age. A single mother, she is struggling with depression, anxiety and health issues. The children’s father is not in the home and the 16-year-old is in foster care. The family’s home is dirty and there is little food in the house. The school-age children have missed a month of school. The family’s car is unreliable.

Action: A concerned neighbor referred the family to child protective services. Based on information provided at the time of the referral, county social workers identified this family as needing Path 2 services. A case worker from the county mental health office joined child protective services staff in meeting with Ms. Lopez, who they quickly determined loved her children but was overwhelmed by their needs and the other issues in her life. Based on their initial meeting, the social workers helped Ms. Lopez access county mental health services to deal with her depression. They also helped get her children back to school and enrolled in after school programs. In addition, they connected her with community food networks and public transportation. Most importantly, the social worker team helped Ms. Lopez realize that she wasn’t alone in dealing with these challenges, a critical issue given her lack of family or close friends in the area.

Impact: Because county and community agencies stepped forward at a critical time for Ms. Lopez and connected her with helpful services, Ms. Lopez is able to better care for her children. The alternative — having her remaining children enter foster care — would have meant a protracted cycle of court-ordered directives and would have shuttled her children to temporary foster care homes. What was most needed, and what Differential Response provided, was a helping hand that enabled Ms. Lopez to get back on track.

**Names and identifying circumstances have been altered.*

California’s BSC on Differential Response ends in December 2005. A report of the lessons learned and most promising practices will be available in spring 2006. CDSS has agreed to continue some of the support that has been available through the project, specifically the Internet site and the peer technical assistance process.

A support network for Differential Response also is being offered by Prevent Child Abuse California through a major grant from AmeriCorps. The network includes nine counties that draw on 37 AmeriCorps members serving at family resource centers, foster family agencies, community-based organizations and child welfare agencies. Two new counties and 10 more AmeriCorps members were added to the network for 2005–06.

Also on the horizon in 2005 is a new statewide association of family resource centers and other organizations that serve families, representing many of the community-based organizations that are local Differential Response partners in communities throughout the state. The California Family Resource Association will support implementation efforts by helping local programs become strong partners and by advocating for the policies and resources needed for families and communities to thrive.





TARGETED IMPROVEMENT AREA:

Permanency and Youth Transitions

WHAT IS CHANGING?

All children need loving and stable relationships in their lives. Whether those relationships are with their biological parents or relatives, with a foster parent or adoptive parent, or with another adult such as a favorite coach or the parent of a friend, making at least one connection that lasts a lifetime can help children grow into happier and more successful adults.

While permanency and transitional services are often discussed in the context of finding support for the thousands of youth who “age out” of the foster care system each year, meeting this need actually begins much earlier than this. Permanency and transitional support begins with finding new ways to reunite families. It requires involving extended family members and other connected adults as soon as problems first come to the attention of the child welfare agency. It means listening to the needs and wishes of children and youth, and including them in the planning process. It requires providing educational and other supports long before the child reaches high school.

The framework for permanency and youth transitions developed by CDSS and the 11 pilot counties addresses three sets of practice changes that have the potential to profoundly change the way in which child welfare agencies relate to families, children and youth, and to other agencies in the community.

Every year in California more than 4,000 foster youth turn age 18. Most often, this transition from foster care to adulthood is abrupt and without support. Studies show that youth who “age out” of the foster care system face daunting odds:¹⁵

- 46 percent do not complete high school
- 51 percent are unemployed
- 10 to 25 percent are homeless

Including everyone involved with the family in the decision-making process (*Team Decision Making*). Using teams to determine alternatives to placing a child in foster care helps develop strong family and community connections. Teams might include the child and family, extended family members, community members, service providers and other people who play an important role with the family. When a child does need to be placed into foster care, the team decision-making process is more likely to result in a placement with a relative or another adult with whom the child has an existing relationship. Decisions made with a team tend to result in fewer placement changes for a child.

Involving families earlier and more often. When parents and extended family members help identify and address both their family’s needs and strengths, it leads to more effective, individualized case plans. When these issues are addressed, a child is more likely to stay in the home or to return home more quickly.

Listening to young people and including them in planning. Engaging foster youth in planning their own future, including their preferences about placements, services, school, extracurricular activities and the possibility of reuniting them with their parents, helps them prepare for adulthood. Helping older youth forge a permanent, caring relationship with an adult can help them navigate a successful transition to adulthood and sometimes beat the daunting odds against their success. Services and resources are also critical in implementing the plan.

Extended family members who agree to provide relative placements offer children in foster care an important source of stability. State findings show that children in relative care placements are more likely to be placed with siblings, less likely to have multiple foster care placements and more likely to maintain family relationships when they turn age 18.¹⁴

“It has been critical for us to look beyond the traditional permanency plans of guardianship and adoption and focus instead on relationships. Most of the lifelong connections identified for these youth were people that are currently or formerly involved in the youth’s life. As we talked and listened to the youth, they were able to identify these people who were special to them.”

—Crystal Luffberry
Child Welfare Service Manager
Stanislaus County

permanency



“We focused on family engagement through cross training of social workers, attorneys and the courts. Our parent partnership leadership team identified target families for parent mentor programs and we piloted a training curriculum, ‘Engaging Families Through Fairness and Equity.’ We also trained 100 staff and community partners on adolescent brain development.”

—Contra Costa County
Excerpted from *11 Pilot County Lessons Learned Report*

permanency

HOW ARE COUNTIES IMPLEMENTING THE CHANGES?

All 11 pilot counties are systematically implementing practices to incorporate the core strategies for developing lasting relationships for children in foster care. Recent practice changes implemented by some counties include better methods of searching for relatives when children are at risk of entering foster care, training social workers to ask families and youth more comprehensive questions about key decisions in their lives and linking transitional supports for older foster youth with efforts to build lasting relationships.

Team Decision Making is also being tested with a portion of the families in all pilot counties. In 2004–05, Los Angeles County used the team decision-making process for about 4,200 cases.¹⁶ Counties are also developing and testing innovative ways to encourage family participation in case planning, such as providing parent mentors, holding ice-breaker meetings and publishing family-friendly educational materials. In general, increased family involvement in decision-making is beginning to change not only the way youth and families relate to the child welfare system, but the perceptions of social workers as well.

HOW IS IMPLEMENTATION BEING SUPPORTED?

Increasing family participation and a team approach in decision-making are core strategies of the California Family to Family Initiative, a public-private partnership that is active in all of the pilot counties and 13 others.¹⁷ In addition, California Family to Family is testing new strategies to better prepare older foster youth for the transition to adulthood through “California Connected By 25.”

Developing comprehensive transitional services. The Youth Transition Action Teams (YTAT) Initiative is a systems improvement approach developed and supported by CDSS, the Foundation Consortium, Casey Family Programs, the Peninsula Community Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and operated by New Ways to Work. Now active in 12 counties, the initiative supports community teams that bring together youth with leaders from child welfare, education, workforce development and others. These teams build on existing local efforts and ensure that youth are confident, educated, ready for a career and connected to adults, peers and services. The initiative offers training and technical assistance to support county efforts to build a comprehensive youth-serving system. YTATs also ensure coordination among workforce development and education initiatives, such as foster youth pilot training and employment projects that use funding from Welfare-to-Work and the Workforce Investment Act.





CHANGING LIVES: A CASE STUDY

Identifying Extended Family Resources to Maintain Permanent Connections

Changing Practice: Using a team to make important decisions such as removing a child from home often creates opportunities to place children with extended family members, which can reduce trauma for the child, develop new sources of support for the parents and facilitate family reunification.

Situation: Four children, all under age 10, were found without any supervision or provisions to meet their basic needs in a home that was unsafe. The children were placed in emergency shelter homes. A letter was left at the home for their parents informing them of the whereabouts of the children and listing appropriate contact information.

Action: When the mother, Carrie Johnson, contacted child welfare services, a team decision-making conference was held. The mother came, along with a sister who lived nearby and Mrs. Johnson's in-laws. County staff included an intensive service worker, family preservation staff and administrators.

Mrs. Johnson's relatives expressed their concern for Carrie and her children, including two older children who were in juvenile facilities, and said they were glad that the county had intervened. They also expressed full support of the family and said they were willing to take the children while the mother improved her situation.

Although the mother was reluctant to admit that she was having trouble being a good parent, she decided to accept the help that was being offered. The mother enrolled in an inpatient substance abuse treatment program and the children were placed with relatives.

Because the relatives had limited financial resources, emergency referrals were made to the local Kinship Support Services Program for food and clothing vouchers. A second team meeting was held upon learning that both relative placement homes were being forced to relocate. A safety plan was established, including the request of special payments to secure funding for rental deposits and rental assistance to prevent the families from being homeless.

Impact: The children remained together and maintained family ties. The mother has maintained her sobriety while in treatment and receives transportation assistance so she can visit the children weekly. She is scheduled to graduate from her treatment program and receive a certificate of completion.

**Names and identifying circumstances have been altered.*

“There is great value in working together. The strength of our local collaboration has allowed us to leverage resources and serve more youth in our community.”

—Jill Jacobs
Executive Director,
Family Builders
Alameda County

Creating lifelong connections for older foster youth. The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) was started in 2003 to focus on the needs of older foster youth who have traditionally been viewed as unadoptable. CPYP, administered by the Public Health Institute with funding from the Stuart Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, assists counties in developing skills and programs to help older youth connect with their own family or with another caring adult. Four initial counties — Alameda, Stanislaus, Monterey and San Mateo — tested approaches for helping youth find and connect with relatives and other adults they have known. Social workers in these counties reported up to a 25 percent increase in securing permanent connections through the project. Stanislaus County targeted 90 youth between the ages of 14 and 18, all of whom had been unable to safely reunify with their families,

had no identified guardian or adoptive family and were likely to “age out” of the foster care system. With the county’s work and help from CPYP, 80 of the youth have established lifelong connections with adults — and a third have been formally placed with those adults. Based on these successes, the project extended its work to 10 additional counties in 2005.

Many counties are now beginning the work of searching out relatives and other significant adults in the child’s life from the beginning of a child’s entry into foster care. CPYP has established three workgroups to develop recommendations to assist child welfare agencies in partnering with the courts, group homes, and adoption and foster family agencies to improve permanency outcomes for all children and youth in the child welfare system.

permanency



IV. Supporting Change

One of the themes of California's reform efforts is that improving outcomes for children and youth who have family histories of abuse or neglect must be a shared responsibility. Government agencies must do a better job of coordinating their services for the benefit of vulnerable children and families who are eligible for, or in need of services from, multiple programs. In addition to providing technical assistance and training for targeted program and practice improvements at the county level, CDSS, CWDA and the Foundation Consortium have worked to strengthen the state's capacity to support improvements in child welfare services and outcomes. These efforts have included enhancing state interagency coordination, encouraging flexible use of resources and educating the public about ongoing improvements and challenges.

ENHANCING STATE INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Founded in 2003, the State Interagency Team for Children and Youth¹⁸ is charged with improving the coordination of policy, services and funding for children, youth and families in California. The group includes deputy directors from 10 state agencies and departments. Its goals include:

- Facilitating local implementation of system improvements.
- Escalating policy and programmatic issues to senior leadership levels to better coordinate services across programs.
- Maximizing funding for services that support children, youth and families.
- Removing systemic and regulatory barriers to coordination.
- Ensuring that policy, planning and accountability systems are driven by outcomes, not process.
- Sharing information and data.

One of the group's key accomplishments is the creation of an initiative to maximize the use of available funds for programs and services to help children, youth and families. As part of this Fiscal Strategies Initiative, a technical advisory group of local and state representatives was created in 2004. This 25-member technical group — which named

itself the "Barrier Busters Interagency Team" — works to identify and address procedural, regulatory and other barriers. The team's goals are to recommend activities or training that focus on practical suggestions, to clarify what can be done within current authority and to identify additional opportunities where new authority needs to be enacted.

Some of the areas addressed by the Barrier Busters group to date include: (1) using federal funds to help foster parents pay for child care, and (2) exploring ideas for funding other public/private agencies to provide activities that support children at risk of entering foster care.

In conjunction with the Barrier Busters team, Regional Program and Fiscal Academies were also developed to provide information and training to county fiscal and program leaders throughout California. Launched in March 2005, the purpose of the "Fiscal Essentials for Children's Services" training is to improve local officials' understanding of how numerous funding streams work so that they are better able to use all available funds to meet the needs of California's vulnerable children, youth and families.

More recently, the group has also developed a plan to improve coordination of services to families where there is a nexus between alcohol and other drugs and child safety, health, mental health and education.

FUNDING SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS

The CDSS and the Foundation Consortium have enabled private donations to be matched or leveraged with state and federal funds to help implement system improvements. The Child Welfare Services Improvement Fund¹⁹ was authorized in 2004 to streamline and simplify the process of using private donations as part of the state match for federal funding. The Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Differential Response, the Fiscal Strategies Initiative and the Youth Transition Action Teams have all used federal matching funds to maximize the impact of private donations. Recently developed procedures enable individual foundations to donate to the fund as well, and several foundations have expressed interest in leveraging their investments in this way.



SUPPORTING SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

The current wave of child welfare reform carries well beyond the activities in this progress report. At the same time that the Foundation Consortium has been working in partnership at the state level with CDSS and CWDA, individual foundations also have increased their support for some of the initiatives highlighted in the Stakeholders' final report. Two ongoing projects illustrate the joint commitment of CDSS, counties and philanthropy in helping find new ways to partner to improve child welfare services.

California Family to Family Initiative.

The California Family to Family Initiative is based on a national initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation that was begun in 1992 and is now active in 18 states. The California initiative is a public-private partnership supported by CDSS, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Stuart Foundation and Walter S. Johnson Foundation. It involves targeted efforts to bring neighborhood leaders and community organizations together with local child welfare agencies to strengthen the network of families available to care for abused and neglected children in their own communities. Project goals include reducing the number of children who must be brought into foster care, shortening the length of stay for those children who are placed into foster care and increasing family reunifications.

Following the completion of the Stakeholders' work in 2003, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Stuart Foundation expanded their support for California Family to Family to all 11 pilot counties. Currently, 24 of California's 58 counties receive technical assistance to aid child welfare agencies in the core improvement strategies of (1) community partnerships; (2) recruitment, development and support of resource families; (3) team decision-making; and (4) using data for self-evaluation and informed decision-making.

Five counties are also participating in development of the California Connected by 25 Initiative, another Family to Family strategy to improve transition outcomes for older foster youth. These California counties will join two other cities, Tampa and Indianapolis, as part of a national effort of the Youth Transition Funders Group. The California initiative, which also receives support from Walter S. Johnson Foundation, is designed to test five main strategies:

- Advocating for and supporting education
- Facilitating access to workforce development opportunities
- Providing financial literacy education
- Encouraging savings and asset development
- Creating entrepreneurship opportunities

From 2003 to 2005, the private investment represented by California Family to Family was \$4.7 million. While the goal is to expand this technical assistance statewide, funding and sustainability challenges must be addressed.

Linkages Project. The Linkages Project is another important example of interagency coordination. Recognizing the significant correlation between child neglect and poverty, the Child Welfare/ CalWORKs Partnership Project began working with selected California counties in 2000 to ensure that families receive coordinated services to support them in their attempts to achieve self-sufficiency and promote their children's safety and well-being. Although CalWORKs and child welfare exist within the same agency in most counties, staff had rarely worked together to help families address their needs. Thirty counties are now actively engaged in the implementation of interagency coordination and early intervention activities. Support for this project has come from the Stuart Foundation, the Zellerbach Foundation, CDSS and the participating counties. The Child and Family Policy Institute of California currently directs the project.

The Pew Commission and Home At Last.

A new project is supporting statewide judicial changes in California and elsewhere. Home At Last, led by the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, is a new partnership focusing on national reform of the foster care system. The project is partnering with five other states to draw attention to the recommendations of the non-partisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, which address federal financing and court oversight of foster care. Home At Last will focus specifically on recommendations related to improved court oversight.²⁰

"Changes in county organizational structure led to combined units that include CalWORKs, Medi-Cal, Food Stamps and Child Welfare Services. This has opened up the lines of communication so that staff routinely run cross-checks with other programs at the first referral. In addition, CWS workers now ask self-sufficiency questions to ascertain the family's potential need for food and health insurance."

—San Luis Obispo County
*Excerpted from 11 Pilot County
Lessons Learned Report*

Supporting change



“Los Angeles County’s progress in the past 3 years due to deliberate systems reform measures has been remarkable:

- 30% fewer children in foster care than in 2002;
- 30% less time on average that children spend in foster care; and a
- 30% reduction in abuse of children in out-of-home care.

However, there is still much work to be done on behalf of the thousands of children in Los Angeles County who depend on us for their safety and well being. Given the current fiscal climate and funding streams we will have difficulty in continuing these gains.”

—David Sanders
County Welfare Director
Los Angeles County

V. Next Steps

California’s child welfare system is the largest in the nation and is among the most complex and diverse. Thanks to the foresight of the legislature, the support of two state administrations, and the hard work and commitment of local child welfare workers, administrators and community partners, a number of fundamental changes are taking root and changing child welfare practices across the state. Continuing these improvements will require time, resources and persistence.

The twin cornerstones of reform are in place. The first is a vision and framework that lays out the best and most promising program and practice strategies; the second is an accountability system that tracks outcomes and requires continuous performance improvement in every county. Because proven strategies for addressing a wide variety of issues faced in California and elsewhere were identified, we have consensus on what must be done to improve the system. Early implementation, as outlined in this progress report, has focused on three practice areas that are believed to have the potential for relatively high impact at relatively low cost.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY IN PROBLEM-SOLVING:

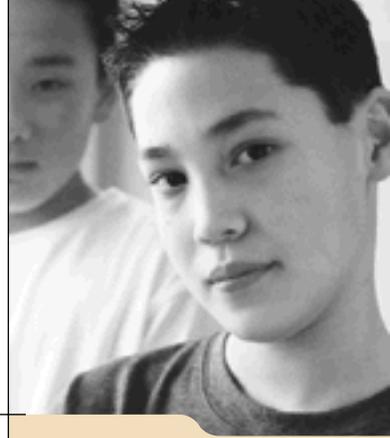
The Role of Communication and Public Education

Increased accountability for improving outcomes and regular reporting of data that measure progress signal a more open approach to child welfare. A key element is telling the public about the progress that California is making and what everyone can do to help children and families in their communities.

Quarterly data reports for each of California’s 58 counties as well as statewide numbers are posted on the Web sites of CDSS and the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California, Berkeley.²¹ Public information materials that provide additional context on child welfare issues have been jointly produced by CDSS, CWDA and the Foundation Consortium and are available on all three organizations’ Web sites. These materials are regularly updated to reflect ongoing child welfare improvements and other issues that are central to child safety and well-being.²²

County child welfare offices can provide further county-specific information on local efforts to improve the lives of children and families, including ways in which the public can become involved. As more community organizations partner with county child welfare agencies, the public will have more opportunities than ever to support children, youth and families. The idea that we are all responsible for child safety and well-being is at the heart of California’s larger reform effort.





Early results are promising, and longer-term evaluation of these efforts is underway. The outcome and accountability system also is beginning to produce the desired results. A comprehensive analysis of county data and system improvement plans will be published in June 2006, detailing more fully what we have learned.

If we are to realize the goal of improving outcomes for all vulnerable children and families, a goal that is shared by all stakeholders, California must continue moving forward with the changes that are underway. Much work remains for child welfare agencies, social workers, community organizations, policy makers and philanthropic partners to translate the changes into meaningful, long-lasting, statewide reforms. The major next steps in this work include:

1. Continuation of the 11 pilot counties' implementation and testing of the three targeted improvement strategies.
2. Completion of these tests by bringing the most effective practices to scale across the state.
3. Continuous evolution of the uses of California's new outcomes and accountability system (C-CFSR) to drive policy and practice changes that improve outcomes.
4. Strengthening of the State Interagency Team for Children and Youth to maximize coordination and resources for common populations across programs.

Continued progress in making improvement will benefit from additional systemic changes including:

- Increased flexibility and funding — and enhanced use of existing funding sources — for prevention and early intervention strategies that help keep families strong and children safe in their communities.
- Increased attention to the needs of teenagers who are in the child welfare system, including supports to help them make permanent connections to adults in their lives and successfully transition to adulthood.
- Reasonable workloads and caseload standards for workers in all parts of the system in order to allow a more individualized focus on the needs of children and families.
- A concerted effort to recruit, support and retain resource families for children who need care for a period of time.

The CDSS, CWDA and members of the philanthropic community²³ are committed to continued partnerships in support of improving California's child welfare system. We offer this progress report in the hope that it will encourage others to join with us on behalf of the more than 700,000 vulnerable children who come in contact with the state child welfare system in each year. The improvements undertaken thus far make it clear that child welfare agencies cannot do this work alone. Partnerships with other public agencies and with community-based organizations are a prerequisite to success. Indeed, the welfare of California's children depends on the strength of the partnerships formed in all of the diverse communities across this state, as much as it does on the continued leadership of state level policymakers and partners.

next steps

Endnotes

- 1 Established under Assembly Bill 636 (Steinberg) (Chapter 678, Statutes of 2001). The new accountability system, known formally as the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR), was developed collaboratively, integrating recommendations from the Stakeholder Group, as an enhancement of the federal Child and Family Services Review system.
- 2 The Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) is the result of major federal-state investments in the 1990s to build the state's capacity to gather and share data through information technology.
- 3 County data can be viewed on the CDSS Web site at www.childsworld.ca.gov/CDSSCounty_1954.htm and on the UC Berkeley Web site at <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/>.
- 4 The 2002 federal review included a collaborative Statewide Assessment, onsite review of 49 cases in three counties, and a series of state-level interviews. As with every other state, California was required to develop a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address the areas needing improvement. Many of the action steps in the PIP were drawn from the Stakeholders' work, which was already well underway. California completed its PIP in June 2005 but its data will be monitored until September 30, 2006. The next federal review is anticipated in 2007.
- 5 All data in this section is derived from data reports: Needell, B., Webster, D., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Armijo, M., Lee, S., Lery, B., Shaw, T., Dawson, W., Piccus, W., Magruder, J., Kim, H., Conley, A., Henry, C., Korinek, P., Paredes, C., & Smith, J. (2005). *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. Retrieved [October 11, 2005], from University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research Web site. <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/>.
- 6 Two key efforts contributed to this decline. The Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) was established in 1997, providing a financial subsidy to relatives who took guardianship of children who were in foster care and exited the system. At the same time, the Adoption Initiative of the late 1990s doubled funding to county adoption agencies and streamlined the adoption process, resulting in a 150 percent increase in the annual number of foster child adoptions.
- 7 The pilot counties were selected from among those that applied based on a set of criteria that included their demonstrated capacity and desire for reform. The counties are Contra Costa, Glenn, Humboldt, Los Angeles, Placer, Sacramento, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Stanislaus, Tehama, and Trinity.
- 8 True to California's decentralized approach to child welfare services, a number of additional counties are embracing these changes as they implement their System Improvement Plans.
- 9 The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) at UC Berkeley is a partnership between the schools of social work, public human service agencies, and other related professional organizations. CalSWEC coordinates training for graduate and undergraduate social work students preparing for careers in public child welfare services, and continuing professional education for child welfare workers. More information can be found at calswec.berkeley.edu.
- 10 These considerations are formally known as safety, risk, and (parental) protective capacity. Each consideration is a separate element of the social worker assessment that takes place in examining the situation of each child. For the purposes of this document, the considerations may be summarized as "risk" or "safety," but each is included in the new assessment process.
- 11 Johnson, K. and Wagner, D. (2005) "Evaluation of Michigan's Foster Care Case Management System." In *Research on Social Work Practice*, Vol. 15, No. 5, pp 372–380. Sage Publications.
- 12 The development of a statewide safety assessment system is an action step that emerged from the 2002 federal review of California's child welfare system. It was also a recommendation made by the Stakeholders Group.
- 13 The California BSC on Differential Response is jointly funded by CDSS (including a federal match), the Foundation Consortium (through a grant from the Marguerite Casey Foundation) and Casey Family Programs, and operated through a state contract by the East Bay Community Foundation.
- 14 Derived from Needell et al.
- 15 Cook, R. (1992). *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs For Youth: Phase 2*, Rockville, MD: Westat.
- 16 About 39,000 families were receiving child welfare services from the county as of September 2005.
- 17 The Family to Family Initiative is described more fully under "Supporting Change" on page 19.
- 18 Formerly the State Interagency Child Welfare Team. State agencies and departments represented on the State Interagency Team for Children and Youth include the Departments of Social Services (both the Child & Family Services and Welfare To Work Divisions), Education, Health Services, Mental Health, Alcohol and Drug Programs, Developmental Services and Employment Development, as well as the Attorney General's Office, the California Workforce Investment Board and the State First Five Commission.
- 19 AB 2496 (Horton) (Chapter 168, Statutes of 2004).
- 20 Described in detail in the Pew Commission's report *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care*. For more information about Home At Last, visit www.fostercarehomeatlast.org.
- 21 See the CDSS Web site at http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/CDSSCounty_1954.htm and on the UC Berkeley Web site at <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/>.
- 22 Public information materials on child welfare services in California are posted on the CDSS Web site at www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/ChildWelfa_133st.htm, the CWDA Web site at www.cwda.org/improvinglives.cfm and the Foundation Consortium Web site at www.foundationconsortium.org/what/redesign.html.
- 23 The Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth will close its doors and go out of existence at the end of 2005, after 14 years of productive partnerships with government. Individual foundations will continue their commitment to California's children, youth and families and will form new public-private partnerships.

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The primary authors of this report are: Bonnie Armstrong, Senior Fellow, Foundation Consortium for Children & Youth; Karen Gunderson, Manager, Concurrent Planning Policy Unit, California Department of Social Services; and Frank Mecca, Executive Director, County Welfare Directors Association.

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“We must continue on the path we have forged for improving outcomes and accountability in the child welfare system. These efforts are improving the lives of the vulnerable children who have been entrusted to our care and for whom we are responsible.”

—Judy Chu
Assemblymember



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