Celebrating Family Reunification

by Renee Cage

Family Reunification (FR) is the heartbeat of Children and Family Services. During the FR process the hard work is done by the families with the support of the Department to reunify with their children. On a Quarterly basis our Department celebrates multiple families for their success during the reunification process. The celebration occurs every year in January, May and September. On average 23 families and 30 children are invited to the celebration each quarter. Prior to the celebration, each reunified family receives a formal letter from our Department Division Director, Robin Luckett, acknowledging the families for their success in reunifying. Closer to the event an invitation is sent to the families. Each family is encouraged to bring a support person to the celebration. Families often bring multiple support people. Previously the celebrations were held in the mornings from 10:30-12 noon as a brunch. However, earlier this year Child Welfare Supervisor/Reunification Liaison, Lynne Lanctot suggested to pilot an afternoon celebration from 3:30p-5p in efforts to increase attendance from the families. The celebrations were moved to Wednesday afternoons which are typically minimum days for school age children. Attendance from parents and children has since increased significantly.

Refreshments are provided at the celebration, statements are made by the Division Director; Robin Luckett, Program Manager; Gloria Carroll and various Child Welfare Supervisors including Nicole Radford, Michael Little and Lynne Lanctot. Each giving well wishes, encouraging words and praises for the parents’ hard work in addressing the reasons that brought their child(ren) in care. In addition, the Parent Advocates

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Dear Colleagues and Community Partners,

As a busy 2013 came to a close, the Department had fully implemented AB12, successfully supporting a co-hort of 419 Non Minor Dependents. We also welcomed a new class of child welfare workers—and celebrated 20 families on Adoption Day. We recognized our foster parents for their important contribution and acknowledged the Assessment Center’s decade of service—to name but a few notable milestones. We also have experienced losses with the passing of friends and colleagues—most recently Warren Turner, Program Manager, who passed away unexpectedly at the end of December. In his memory, a trust fund has been created, commemorating Warren’s dedicated service to young people. The Warren Turner Trust Fund will provide funds for holiday gifts and care packages for our Non Minor Dependents—a population of youth that Warren was keenly interested in supporting. We hope that as the year goes on, donations to the fund will benefit young people that are making that often stressful transition to adulthood.

January 2014 has arrived—and as with the start of every new year—one has the sense of fresh beginnings and of hopefulness. It is my hope this year will bring us all, as colleagues, professionals and as a department—to a place of collective resilience, peace and wellbeing—coupled with gratitude to have another year to make our way there together.

Michelle Love  
Assistant Agency Director

In late 2013, the Department began partnering with Casey Family Programs, to implement a new practice called Permanency Round Tables which is designed to explore and achieve more successful permanency outcomes for youth in foster care.

Permanency Round Table (PRT) meetings are a type of supportive and professional case consultation that has established guidelines to assist the group in understanding the current case circumstances, the past work that has been done and developing the next steps in the search for permanency for youth. The process is internal to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and involves DCFS staff and invited service support staff. The PRT is about supporting staff in working with the children/youth/Non Minor Dependent they work with on a daily basis in exploring and achieving permanency outcomes.

To date, several states across the United States have implemented PRTs and have seen remarkable results. In light of this success the Department and Casey Family Programs have invested in this effort and held staff trainings to review the role of PRT members and the process. As a pilot, the first round of PRT’s began the week of October 14, 2013 and focused on youth who have been in care for 2+ years. Supervisors discussed with Child Welfare Workers which cases were appropriate to be part of PRT’s and together they prepared a summary of the case for the PRT. The PRT is held for 1.5 hours for 1 child to about 2.5 hours for multiple children. The initial feedback from PRT members is very positive and staff reported that they are a real opportunity to help them brainstorm as a staff and find permanency for the youth in care.

There will be much more to share in the coming months and we hope to be able to highlight some successes as well in future issues of the DCFS Press.
Exiting Extended Foster Care in 2014
by Janet Patton-Ormé

Many of us will begin to think about what the New Year will bring. For some of our Non Minor Dependents (NMD’s) the New Year will signify their transition into independent living. The Department estimates that in 2014, a total of 94 NMD(s) will transition into permanent adult status as they turn 21.

Since the implementation of AB12 on January 1, 2012, the Department has taken proactive steps in providing Extended Foster Care services to our NMD’s. For example there have been a series of trainings offered to staff to improve their skills in working with older youth. One such training was offered by a national youth engagement trainer, Michael Sanders who provided department staff with practical coaching and engagement strategies to enable the youth they are working with to actively participate in planning for their own futures. Another training called “The AB12 Summit” was held in San Francisco and was led by youth in an effort to support the brainstorming process with other counties about how to approach implementation successfully. The Summit was attended by many disciplines such as attorneys, probation officers, and child welfare from many counties. The Department has also teamed and collaborated with Youth Advocate Partnership (YAP) and community partners to support NMD engagement and services. The Department also offers the monthly Tips and Tidbits to share useful information and resources with child welfare staff, probation staff and community partners. Now, the time has come to see the results of our diligent work preparing our older youth for a successful transition into independent living. Given this, I’d like to offer some thoughts.

As we all know, no one is ever totally independent in life. If you look at your own life, there is at least one person that you depend on and go to when you have a need. So I would like to challenge us all to change our thinking from focusing on independent living skills when we work with our youth, to a focus on providing support to youth in developing interdependent living skills. Let’s focus our time and attention more on engaging our NMD’s in conversations about the value and importance of lifelong connections. After all, it will be these lifelong connections that will be their life skills coaches long after the safety net of AB12 has ended.

To further support my point, recently the department offered a Permanency Values Training by renowned permanency expert, Sue Badeau which focused on the value of permanency for all foster youth and the most effective means to make this a reality for even the most challenging. Some of the questions that she posed to help engage NMD’s in a discussion about permanency are:

➢ Who does the youth spend time with?
➢ Who did the youth ever spend time with?
➢ Who is the youth connected to?
➢ Who has expertise related to the youth’s needs?
➢ Who has a network related to the youth’s interests, talents, and strengths?

These are all basic questions that we can start to ask and engage our NMD’s in conversations as we support them to identify and build their teams of lifelong connections.

As the Department continues to work with NMD’s there have been challenges and lessons learned. For example, determining when a NMD is ready to live in a Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP) has been a decision made by a Child Welfare Worker’s general assessment of a NMD’s budget and life management skills. However, the potential use of a SILP readiness tool can help workers gauge whether a NMD is ready to live in a SILP. The Department is working closely with labor to create a SILP Readiness Tool to support the assessment process. Another challenge is locating housing resources for NMD’s. The Department is committed to supporting NMD’s with this challenge and one way they are helping is supporting NMD’s with establishing and utilizing their permanent connections. Staff have gained skills and strategies in exploring and revisiting potential permanent connections that youth have. For example, a close family friend, who was once very close to a youth two years ago but lost contact with the youth once the youth moved away, can now be contacted to explore their interest in reconnecting with the youth. Both staff and NMD’s are embracing the value of permanent connections and understand that case management services up to age 21 is simply not enough to prepare a NMD for their transition into the adult world. Permanent life long connections has been proven to be essential in their successful transition.

So as the year closes out, remember that permanent transitions from extended foster care could be starting as early as January and lasting throughout the year. Join me in setting the standard of supporting interdependent living skills by creating teams of lifelong connections with our youth.
The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act, Public Law 112-34, revised existing data collection and reporting requirements for child welfare agencies. Under the law, states are required to collect and report certain data on monthly caseworker visits with foster children and meet certain performance standards. States are penalized for non-compliance.

California has implemented the performance standard that currently requires Child Welfare Workers to visit in-person with at least 90% of the foster children on their caseload during the year. However, as of October 1, 2014 the standard will increase to require visits with 95% of the foster children under age 18 who were in care for at least one month during the year. The Department of Children and Family Services will continue to work diligently to ensure that it remains in compliance with the monthly visit requirements.

To expedite implementation of the settlement agreement, a Subclass of youth who have the most intensive and complex needs (also known as the Katie A. subclass) has been identified to receive a more intensive array of mental health services.

Children falling under the Katie A. subclass meet the following criteria:
- Are full-scope Medi-Cal eligible;
- Have an open child welfare case;
- Meet the medical necessity criteria for Specialty Mental Health Services;
- Are currently receiving or being considered for wrap-around, therapeutic foster care, a special care rate due to behavioral health needs, or other intensive EPSDT services; and
- Currently resides in or being considered for group home placement (RCL 10 or above), a psychiatric hospital or 24-hour mental health treatment facility, or has experienced three or more placements within 24 months due to behavioral health needs.

Counties are required to provide intensive mental health services to all youth meeting the above listed criteria, and DCFS and Behavioral Health Care Services (BHCS) have been working together to identify youth who meet the subclass criteria. We are also working on a plan to implement services as required under the settlement.

If you know of a child or youth that needs mental health services, please continue to use the current referral process for mental health services.

More information on the implementation of the Katie A. Settlement and services available to youth will be coming as the Department and BHCS continue to work out the details.

Contact Kaitlin Bruner at haymak@acgov.org for more information on the Katie A. Settlement and Subclass.

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New Federal Standards for Monthly Visits with Foster Youth

by Budd Seeley

The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act, Public Law 112-34, revised existing data collection and reporting requirements for child welfare agencies. Under the law, states are required to collect and report certain data on monthly caseworker visits with foster children and meet certain performance standards. States are penalized for non-compliance.

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What’s New with Family Preservation

by Michael Little

Family Preservation has undergone a few changes in 2013. As with other parts of the Department, there have been staffing changes. FP has a new CWS, one CWW left the Agency, and another CWW has transferred into the unit. The FP referral form has been added to CWS/CMS for ease of use for primary workers. Through all of these transitions, FP is still committed to the same high standards to provide families with weekly clinical case management and practical assistance in order to facilitate successful reunification or stabilization of children in the home.

Each month FP receives an average of 7 referrals for 13 youth. Cases are typically assigned within 3 weeks. For 2013, FP staff has been able to stabilize nearly 100% of the FM cases served and helped to reunify more than 60% of those referred for reunification.

Please watch for more Family Preservation news in upcoming editions of the DCFS Press.
Educational Mentors for Alameda County Foster Youth

by Cerise Grice

Do you know an Alameda County foster youth between the ages of 15-18 years that could use the help of an Educational Mentor in achieving success in school? If so, please refer them to the Alameda County Office of Education, Foster Youth Services Mentor Program.

Foster Youth Services has educational mentors who will serve foster youth ages 15 -18 who reside in Alameda, Contra Costa, Solano, and/or San Joaquin counties. The Education Mentors will help facilitate student school enrollment and academic activities that will result in better educational outcomes for foster youth.

EDUCATION MENTORS:
• Communicate school information and collaborate with child welfare workers and foster care providers.
• Function as an advocate for special education students.
• Work with individual students to meet their educational needs and goals.
• Assist in making sure the IEP is current.
• Secure tutorial and other academic support services for foster youth.

Foster youth who face multiple school challenges including those with learning disabilities. Youth eligible for services can be referred from:
• Foster Family Agencies.
• Foster Families.
• Group Homes.
• Court Specified.

EDUCATION MENTORS HELP:
• Facilitate student enrollment and monitor school attendance.
• Support the foster care provider in meeting the academic needs of youth in care.

EDUCATION MENTORS FOCUS ON:
• School placement stability.
• Completed SST and/or updated IEP resulting in appropriate school placement.
• Improved grades and attendance.
• Passing of California High School Exit Exam and high school completion (GED or diploma).

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT
Elizabet Tarango, Program Manager, Foster Youth Services
(510) 670-7752 lizt@acoe.org

Contact Elizabeth Tarango at (510) 670-7752 or lizt@acoe.org for more information.

A New Partnership — DCFS and Sesame Street

by Barbara Lozer-Muriera

The creative team at Sesame Street Workshop has taken all 40 Years of their collective experience successfully engaging and teaching kids of all ages — and poured it into Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration — a bilingual (Spanish-English) program designed to:

★ Support, comfort, and reduce anxiety, sadness, and confusion that young children may experience during the incarceration of a parent.

★ Inform incarcerated parents themselves that they can parent from anywhere, and provide them with simple parenting tips highlighting the importance of communication.

★ Provide at-home caregivers with strategies, tips, and age-appropriate language they can use to help communicate with their children about incarceration.

Sesame Street is seeking to introduce Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration resources into correctional facilities and organizations that specialize in early childhood education, mental health and counseling, parenting programs, foster care, and organizations serving families with incarcerated parents. Arkansas, California, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin are among several states that will be targeted for Little Children, Big Challenges pilot projects.

Alameda County is proud to be a pilot site — so stay tuned — and keep your eyes peeled for “…the way to Sesame Street!”

To view Little Children, Big Challenges tool kits and for more information, check out http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration

We currently have DVD’s on Incarceration, Healthy Nutrition, and Divorce available.
Findings from Alameda County’s Peer Review

by Budd Seeley

As reported in the last DCFS Press, the Alameda County departments of Children and Family Services and Probation jointly conducted their Peer Review process during the week of July 29, 2013. The Peer Review is one component of the mandated California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR) cycle. Alameda County conducted its Peer Review in partnership with the California Department of Social Services, the Bay Area Academy, and Shared Vision Consultants.

Alameda’s Peer Review focus area of family reunification was explored through interviews with Alameda County Child Welfare Workers and Probation Officers in order to identify common themes and patterns of agency strengths and challenges. Some of the Peer Review findings for Child Welfare include:

- Successful reunifications were influenced by:
  - Early parent engagement in cases;
  - Parents accepting services, communicating with staff, and advocating on their own behalf;
  - Parents maintaining contact with their child(ren) who are in foster care placement; and
  - A child’s resiliency and receipt of needed services, such as mental health services.

- Reunification was less successful when:
  - The Department was not able to provide ongoing, reasonable efforts in maintaining contacts, arranging visitation, and delivering reunification services;
  - Parents demonstrated an inability to engage with family reunification services, possibly due to their mental health and/or use of alcohol or drugs;
  - Parents have financial needs that are unable to be met; for example, with housing, food, etc.; and
  - The Department may have needed more consistent search efforts to locate parents, especially fathers, and relatives.

The Peer Review also found that the placement of foster children in the home of a relative caregiver was more stable when the family was engaged early and accepted responsibility for visits. There were also some relative caregivers who were challenged financially when they received state benefits to support their foster child, due to being ineligible for the larger federal benefits, and some were without additional financial assistance they needed for child care. It was also recognized that family finding search efforts and utilization of Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings by the Department showed positive results when conducted early and consistently through the life of the case.

DCFS management will consider the information gathered through the Peer Review to potentially develop or modify strategies and services to better serve children and their families. The information has been included in the County’s Self Assessment report, and will inform the development of its System Improvement Plan. These efforts, and the improvements in services that they will bring, wouldn’t be possible without the contributions of the DCFS staff who participated in the Peer Review.

Changes to the Child Care Allowance Program

by Kaitlin Bruner

In 2014, changes to the Child Care Allowance Program will go into effect and new referrals (as space and funding allows) will be accepted.

Starting in January, county licensed foster parents and relative caregivers will be eligible to receive up to a $350 childcare allowance per month, for six months, for each eligible child in their care.

The child care allowance is for dependents of Alameda County, under age 13, who live with an Alameda County Licensed Foster Parent or Relative/NREFM Caregiver.

Dependent or Non-Minor Dependent (NMD) parents are also eligible for a $700 monthly child care allowance for their children. Dependent or NMD parents must be in school or working during the hours they need child care, and must recertify for the child care allowance every 6 months.

For questions or more information, contact Kaitlin Bruner at haymak@acgov.org. The referral process can be found on OPG.
In fall 2013, SSA welcomed 26, yes twenty-six, new CWWs to the DCFS who received an established, comprehensive, in-depth Child Welfare Worker Induction Training through SSA’s Training and Consulting Team (TACT).

The architect of the CWW Induction Training was Donna DeAngelis, former Division Director, who had a vision for the development of an intensive, foundational child welfare training for new CWWs, at a prime point—before they acquired a caseload. Since its inception, TACT has been responsible for many iterations of its design and CWWs who have completed the training have benefitted from the amazing work and insight of the current (and previous) training staff and the richness of their unique perspectives on child welfare in Alameda County. Over the years, each trainer has made the training better and it continues to grow. Alameda County’s training is exceptional, in part, because of its continuity (it lasts a full nine weeks) and, as such, it satisfies the CDSS’s initial two year training requirement for new CWWs. They are able to focus on job mechanics, skills building and a Department orientation without having to manage a new caseload of families!

TACT partners with the Bay Area Academy to provide the training. Training components include: exercises in report writing, empathy building—the “SSA Amazing Race” where inductees break into small groups and are required to navigate public transportation in order to get to their scheduled DCFS appointment(!!), introduction to TDM, CWS/CMS, a MISSEY presentation, case planning, supervision and orientations to other vital DCFS service components such as clerical support and YAP. To promote the best opportunities for success, during the training, CWWs are assessed for their professional strengths and much thought goes into the specific program units where new CWWs are assigned. Congratulations and best of luck to the new 2013 CWWs!
Each year, State and county representatives convene with Native American tribal representatives for the Annual Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Statewide Conference. This annual conference generally rotates between northern and southern California and takes place in June in Indian Country. This year’s conference was hosted by the Pechanga Tribe whose reservation is situated in Riverside County and was attended by several hundred participants, including two of our very own Parent Advocates, Tina McLain and Alicia Canal.

There were several highlights from this year’s conference, including the publishing of the decision by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) on the “Baby Veronica” case. This lightening rod case involved a couple who fought the South Carolina Supreme Court decision to return a baby that had been placed with them through a private adoption, where ICWA protocols had not been followed correctly, to the custody of her biological father, a Native American man on active duty military, who was estranged from the biological mother, but wanted custody of his baby. The news of the SCOTUS decision came on the 1st morning of the conference and brought about widespread and echoing grief throughout Indian Country and beyond. We were privileged to have the attorneys from the Cherokee Nation and from South Carolina legal team present that morning, who spoke to us about their experiences litigating the case, including making oral arguments before the Supreme Court.

The conference included many other workshops on wide ranging topics from providing “Active Efforts” under
ICWA to stress management and self-care. The Pechanga people were generous hosts and treated conference participants to a dinner of their traditional foods in an area of their land that has remained largely undeveloped where they continue to pass down their traditions to future generations. We were treated to dancing and singing, as well as a tour of the cultural site where youth participating in a summer institute have learned to build traditional houses, to build a sweat house and participate in the practice and to farm traditional foods. They are also taught the games and activities that were performed and played by the Pechanga people for thousands of years, forming an important cultural tie between the present and the past. This tribe’s ability to provide this kind of cultural instruction to their young people contributes their individual well-being and leads to cultural preservation which benefits the entire tribe.

This conference was quite impactful, not only because of the timing coinciding with events in the case of Baby Veronica, but also because it really drove home the urgency with which we all, as child welfare professionals, must address cultural preservation for all of our children and families. This is especially true for cultures that have experienced hundreds of years of historical trauma, which continues to have an impact on these communities today, as it does with Native American people.

Celebrating Family Reunification (continued)

(continued from page 1)

from A Better Way give supportive acknowledgments and information on the Parent Engagement Program and their role in assisting families.

There’s a lot of team work and collaboration that happens to make the FR Celebrations a success. The Clerical staff’s contribution is tremendous, as they create the certificates given to the families, the program for the day and they take the pictures of all the participants.

CWWs from FR, Family Preservation and SEED introduce the families and share the highlights and hard work of the parents as they are presented with their certificates.

One of the highlights of the celebration is when the families speak to share their experience. For the last two years there has been an increase in fathers that have successfully reunified with their children. Recently a Spanish speaking father that successfully reunified spoke at the celebration and discussed some of the barriers he experienced; as he was undocumented and his daughter had special needs. Using his own tenacity, heroic efforts, support from the Department in many forms and the Family Preservation Program he was able to push through the barriers and regain custody of his daughter. This is just a reminder how important Father Engagement is and the need for additional support in the community for this population.

At the Oakland Main Office on the 5th floor there is the “Wall of Fame” which highlights the various celebrations throughout the years. Clerical Staff creatively display the photos of the families and children that have participated in various celebrations. This “Wall of Fame” and the Family Reunification Celebration is a reminder to our staff that our role is to partner with the families we work with and be mindful of how we serve the community. The FR Celebrations are one way our Department commends the families for their efforts and acknowledges their progress.
The Alameda County Assessment Center celebrated its 11th year of operation since opening in 2008. Entitled “A Chance to Soar,” the “decade plus one” anniversary was held on September 6th at the Alameda County of Education in Hayward. Over 100 individuals filled the kite decorated room as youth performer Drake McCarthy played his electric guitar during the “meet and mingle”. This was followed by dancer/choreographer Mario Rodrigues, who kicked off the formal program with an unannounced, high energy dance routine that took the audience by surprise and provided a lively segue for Assistant Agency Director Michelle Love and ACOE Superintendent Sheila Jordan’s welcome address.

Guest speakers included Lori Cox, SSA Agency Director, Faith Battles, DCFS Division Director, and Aisha Brown, Senior Legislative Aide, Office of Supervisor Keith Carson. Ms. Brown presented the Department with an official county accommodation in honor of the Assessment Center’s 11 years of service, highlighting the significant role it has played in the lives of children and youth that have passed through its doors.

The afternoon’s program also included the premier of the video “It’s All About Children, Youth and Families: The Alameda County Assessment Center.” Produced to commemorate the Assessment Center Anniversary, the 27 minute video features interviews with several Assessment Center founding “mothers and fathers,” as well as Youth Adult Partnership Fellows, present and former Social Services Agency leadership, current Assessment Center staff—along with foster parent, parent advocate and law enforcement representatives. Video participants shared their memories and thoughts about the history, vision and critical functions the Assessment Center performs in its role as the county receiving center for children and youth experiencing first time removal or placement disruptions. Recalling a time before the Assessment Center existed, Ms. Cox and other founders recounted the journey towards creating a child and youth friendly environment that would lessen the impact of the trauma of removal. “It’s something I keep coming back to,” Lori Cox says on the video, “[the Assessment Center] is one of the things that I’m most proud of in my career.”

“WHEREAS, the Alameda County Assessment Center was created to provide a non-institutional, child and youth friendly, supportive environment where children and youth can be looked after safely while thoughtful placements are researched and where crisis intervention and stabilization services are provided to lessen the trauma of removal from home and possible entry to foster care... Since opening its doors in August 2002, The Assessment Center has served approximately 10,000 children and youth...”

Lori Cox, SSA Agency Director; Michelle Love, Assistant Agency Director; Aisha Brown, Senior Legislative Aide to Supervisor Keith Carson; Mia Preston-Buckner, Program Manager; Faith Battles, Division Director

Horace Williams, Child Care Supervisor; Carol Brown, RN, PHN; Carol Collins, former Assistant Agency Director; Jeff Rackmil, Director, JJC Health Services; Marge Deichman, former Director Child Maternal Health; Nicole Garay, Director, Bay Area Field Office, Casey Family Programs.)