



Foster Care Standards and Oversight Committee

Our Mission: To lead the charge for excellence in every system that touches kids.

July 3, 2002

Chairman Bob Waterston and Supervisors
Anderson, Arambula, and Case
Fresno County Board of Supervisors
Hall of Records
2281 Tulare St., Room 301
Fresno, CA 93721

Dear Supervisors:

As your appointed Foster Care Standards and Oversight Committee, we would like to furnish some information and advice to you. It is for this purpose that you constituted this group and made it a permanent advisory committee. We believe it is incumbent on us to advise you about the impact on vulnerable children of the proposed position cuts in the budget of the Child Welfare Services portion of the Department of Children and Family Services. There is no more important public safety issue than this.

During the approximately 1¼ years of our existence, we have employed the metaphor of needing to repair the bicycle while riding it, as descriptive of the situation in which the Department of Children and Family Services finds itself. We are pleased that the Department agrees that this metaphor is apt, and that it understands and is making progress toward reforming its work.

As you no doubt recall, you formed our Committee in the aftermath of the "motel kids" publicity. The Department was placing its hardest-to-place foster care children in unlicensed motel facilities until a suitable placement could be found. The number of children and the length of their stay was expanding. Since that time, the Department has begun to address the need to place these children in licensed facilities with services which address the particular problems which make these children hard to place.

More importantly, there is increasing focus on providing early intervention which (a) enables children to remain safely with their families and thus avoiding the need for out-of-home placement, and (b) when needed, on rigorously assessing and addressing children's and families' needs *when they first require Court-ordered out-of-home care*. Also, the need to reduce the movement of children from one placement to another and to reduce the number of changes of schools a child attends, is receiving much-needed attention.

Naturally, it is not easy to institute sweeping changes in the way the Department and the larger system work in such a manner that ground-level, day-to-day social work reflects these changes. As you might imagine, our Committee is perpetually frustrated at the slow pace of change. Nonetheless, we are pleased that there is momentum in the right direction.

Now, unfortunately, we see a proposed budget which forces the Child Welfare Services Division of the Department of Children and Family Services, and indeed, the larger system of which it is a part, to fix the bicycle while riding it and while some of its vital parts are dismantled and discarded. Frustrated as we are with the current system, it troubles us enormously to see this happen.

It is unfair, and could well be illegal, to penalize children who are currently in the system by depriving them of the services needed to get them out of it. Over the past few years, the Dependency Court judges, the attorneys who work in that Court, the many community-based organizations, the foster parents and relatives who care for children outside their parental home, the Department, and others have struggled to dig out of a very deep hole of years of inadequate attention to these children. The Courts threatened to impose sanctions against the Department for late and inadequate reports regarding individual children just a few years ago. And it is no wonder that we developed "motel kids," through inattention to their needs earlier in their lives. Motel kids are made, not born. Their parents started, then we unwittingly finished the job.

While the Department no longer literally places children in motels, it has a long way to go to implement systems which are most likely to prevent the creation of more kids who are so out of control that nobody, nobody, wants to keep them at any price. The Department does have direction and momentum, however, toward this end. It is nothing short of horrifying to think that these hard-won gains, achieved with the hard work and cooperation at all points in the larger system, could be lost overnight.

Positions can be deleted, but the children who need the services of people who occupy these positions cannot be deleted. In fact, as they are poorly served, their growing needs will only show up in other ways:

- Count on an increase in County-only costs as children's cases exceed the time limits for which federal and state funds are available.
- Count on fewer families being successfully reunited.
- Count on a growing budget for payments to out-of-home placement providers—more placements for longer durations at increasingly expensive levels of care.
- Count on additional costs in the mental health system at increasingly higher levels of care.
- Count on the need to expand the juvenile justice campus before it is even opened.
- Count on the Sheriff needing more jail space.
- Count on more babies born to children and young adults who have been so badly nurtured that they in turn produce children who continue the cycle.

We do not think this is an overly dramatic description. Recently, you received a copy of our recent report entitled "Interviews with Hard-to-Place Foster Children," dated May 29, 2002, which captures the words and thoughts of some of our hard-to-place children. It gives a human face to the subject. We commend it to your re-reading.

We are hereby asking that for the coming fiscal year you fully fund no less than 75% of the 108 positions otherwise slated for elimination. We believe the Department cannot reasonably serve the children already in the system and those who by law must be admitted to the system due to neglect or abuse without at least this level of personnel. We chose 75% as a reasonable number, although 100% would of course be preferable, because we (a) recognize fiscal reality, and (b) recognize that the current ratio of filled to unfilled-positions slated for cuts might give a distorted impression that unfilled positions are unneeded positions. In fact, unfilled positions

have created significant hardships for the children who need the services of the people who should fill them. The impact of vacancies has been a matter of great concern to our Committee from the inception of the Committee. Using numbers provided in the CAO budget narrative, keeping 75% of the 108 positions proposed for elimination would result in retention of all 62 employees in currently-filled positions, plus salvaging 19 currently vacant positions, a tiny 2.5% vacancy rate. That vacancy rate is well within County guidelines. (A vacancy rate of zero is unachievable, since there is always some turnover.) Our proposal would result in elimination of 27 positions. As you know, the Department has a high rate of turnover and a low average length-of-service for its employees, factors which detract from the effectiveness which experienced workers bring to serving children. So we are very committed to keeping current employees, all of whom have some training and experience.

We ask that you tie the maintaining of these positions for the 2002-03 fiscal year to a stringent requirement that the Human Services System produce a credible plan and implement it as soon as possible to (a) aggressively increase revenues to the Child Welfare Services Division of the Department of Children and Family Services, and (b) to provide a strict system of expenditure monitoring and management. In addition, the Department should be required to clearly articulate what resources it needs to meet the needs of the children and families whom it serves and to specify how it intends to aggressively go after adequate resources. We believe that there are significant opportunities for revenue enhancement, and we believe that careful attention to expenditures can result in better use of resources. Further, we request that there be significant involvement of the Child Welfare Services Divisions stakeholders in the devising and execution of these plans. We ask that you require a progress report on these matters within 30 days of budget adoption.

We respectfully request that you review all resources available to you to come up with the money to reduce as requested the number of layoffs for the period from October, 2002 through June, 2003, in order to give the System time to do the tasks specified above. Please consider the unspent portion of the Tobacco Settlement money, the reduction in costs to the County as a result of changes in the County's health care plan, and all other currently undesignated funds. Further, we ask that you recognize that *the legal and moral obligation to protect children is a primary public safety issue and the responsibility of this community*. As such, it should get equal consideration with other public safety needs as to its rightful claim on the County's General Fund dollars.

Thank you very much for your consideration of these matters. We have confidence in you. We know you will do your very best to address these difficult problems. We thank you.

Sincerely,

Nancy M. Richardson
Committee Chair

Cc: County Administrative Officer Bart Bohn
Human Services System Director David Dent
Department of Children and Family Services Director Gary Zomalt