

NANCY M. RICHARDSON
1750 South Bobolink, Fresno, CA 93727
Telephone (559) 251-7253 Fax (559) 456-2778
E-mail: relax@onemain.com

October 4, 2001

Chairman Deran Koligian and Supervisors
Anderson, Arambula, Case, and Waterston
Fresno County Board of Supervisors
Hall of Records, Room 300
2281 Tulare St.
Fresno, California 93721-2198

Dear Chairman Koligian and Supervisors:

I am taking this means of trying to articulate some of my concerns on a subject which is both hugely complex and vitally important. I am aware that you, your colleagues on the Board of Supervisors, and the County Administrative staff have a gigantic scope of responsibility, and all of you work hard to make the very best decisions you can. I offer this information in the hope of assisting you to understand more clearly one little corner of the vast sea of information upon which you must make decisions.

The subject, broadly, is the impact of economic swings on the well-being of children who need the services provided by the County's Department of Children and Family Services, particularly Child Protective Services. Stated briefly, the crux of the issue is that childhood is of short duration, so what might look at the macro level like a small percentage reduction in services, means that some very real, specific children who desperately need a helping hand will languish until their needs become so pronounced that later we will be spending tax dollars for intensive, long-term care for them.

This is not theoretical. In the early 1990's, when counties throughout California were financially devastated from the effects of a severe recession, and by the response of the Legislature to that recession in the form of the ERAF shift, Fresno County was severely strapped for funds. As one of the State's poorest counties, Fresno County was disproportionately impacted by the State's economic woes. At that time, policy decisions were made to maintain only those services which were legally mandated. Also, the County took a position that, generally speaking, all county departments should be treated the same in regard to budget cuts.

On the surface, both of these premises made sense. However, we can see now that both deserve deeper examination. Unfortunately, the services provided to neglected and abused children and their families are funded most readily at the back-end. In other words, the county receives compensation from state and federal sources, and, in fact, is legally

required to provide services, for those children who have suffered the most severe neglect and abuse. When state, federal, and local funding sources shrink, the County responds by tightening the criteria determining which children make it through the "front door" of the CPS system. As a result, children who are *at risk, even severe risk*, of removal from their parents, receive no assistance. In the early '90's, Fresno County dropped altogether its limited system of serving children and families who fit this description. The result was that only the most egregious cases were accepted into the system, and virtually all of them were cases in which children were removed from their parents, and the case was sent to the Juvenile Court. Once children get into foster care, it is not easy or fast for them to get out.

In the past few years, Fresno County has begun to make the slow, painful climb out of the shameful black hole into which it had fallen. The County, in fact, has distinguished itself in the last couple of years by developing an array of early intervention services far superior to what the County has ever had before. The transformation has been stunning—both in terms of humane intervention to needy children and families, but also in achieving a marked reduction in the use of the Juvenile Dependency Court process and attendant costs, such as foster care. I will leave it to the Department of Children and Family Services to provide you data, which they have carefully accumulated, as to what the avoided costs have amounted to so far. Court filings are down significantly, and foster care costs have actually declined.

Let me point out that it was only a few years ago that the increase in foster care costs in Fresno County was something like 20% per year. I no longer have exact data, but I am quite sure that in the mid-'90's, there were annual increases of this magnitude for several years in a row. We joked, ruefully, at the time that if this continued, at some point every third home in the county would have to be a foster home, and virtually every county employee would be associated with Child Protection functions.

The vastly improved economic climate of the nation, State, and county in the late 1990's, accompanied by a swing of the pendulum away from expansion of the prison system as the dominant response to social ills, has allowed forward-thinking counties, such as ours, to develop vast improvements in all social services. In addition, the Board of Supervisors has had the wisdom to develop, encourage, and, in fact, require good management in the social services. The magnitude of the change cannot be overestimated.

As the State and nation, and thus the county, suffer a precipitous decline in revenues, there is a great danger that we will again retreat to budget reduction techniques which yield results which are the opposite of what reasonable people would want. As you probably know, Fresno County now pays over \$3.4 million annually to house our most serious delinquents at the California Youth Authority. What you might not know is that many counties of similar size have far fewer kids at the Youth Authority and pay a far lower annual tab. In a study I am just completing which examines, as part of a larger study, half of the kids sent by Fresno County to the California Youth Authority in 2000, the nexus between inadequate early intervention and subsequent serious delinquency is clear and profoundly disturbing. Child Protective Services and Children's Mental Health Services, along with schools, are the pillars of the wider network of early intervention services. The average age of children entering the Youth Authority is just under 17. So, the children our county sent in 2000 were roughly 6-9 during

the years when our ability to help them was, one might say, "recessioned" and then "ERAF-shifted" away. All of them displayed serious problems early in life. Most were referred to Child Protective Services again and again without effective intervention. In some, allegations were deemed to be "unfounded" or "unsubstantiated" year after year, following what could only be called cursory investigations by poorly trained and severely overburdened social workers. In others, an ever-changing stream of social workers assisted the family to make nominal improvements just long enough to close the case, only to have problems pop up again later. In still others, some siblings received services, while others in the same family were virtually invisible to the system. The County should think of this when it writes out the check to the California Youth Authority.

This is not an indictment of Child Protective Services. If anything, it is an indictment of the rest of us for allowing this to happen.

I am not sure that all policy-makers understand that for the cases which result in Court action, the vast majority of which entail having children in out-of-home placements, there are ongoing legal and moral imperatives to provide appropriate services to children and parents. The case doesn't go away or remain dormant when there are, for example, vacancies in social worker positions. Suppose a unit of workers is composed of a supervisor and seven social workers. When one worker resigns, the cases are assigned to the remaining six workers. Suppose another social worker receives a promotion. Those cases are assigned to the remaining five workers. Suppose another worker leaves the County. Let's suppose the management temporarily distributes the cases to the remaining four workers, who by now can only respond to crises both for their original cases and for the new cases, about which they have only scant knowledge. Meanwhile, court hearings loom for cases about which they know little. The judges cannot make decisions without good information, so they require supplemental hearings to give the worker more time to get the information. You get the picture. Things snowball. Meanwhile, management awaits new workers and/or transfers a worker from a fully staffed unit, thus disrupting the carefully-wrought relationships that social worker has forged with the people on his or her caseload. That worker's cases are then distributed to the remaining workers in that unit. The functions served by the different units are not fungible; they are so different that it rarely make sense for cases to travel with the worker to the new unit. The snarl created by these frequent changes is catastrophic to the humane, lawful, and cost-effective treatment of children and families. And it exercises a quicksand effect on employee productivity and retention.

The "motel kids" which were the feature of several articles in The Fresno Bee last winter are the product of the overburdened systems which for most of the 1990's too often processed cases, rather than assisting children. Large caseloads and caseloads which change constantly due to personnel changes are anathema to the care of vulnerable children. Caseloads are driven, of course, by overall resources. However, they are driven also by position vacancies and staff turnover.

Frequent redistribution of cases, and increases in caseloads in order to cover otherwise uncovered caseloads result in yet another undesirable effect. As you might know, each case requires that the social worker be in contact with an average of 15-20 people.

When caseloads become unmanageable, productivity declines. This is true in every field, not just social work. If you cannot do a good job on every case, why strain yourself to try to do a good job on any one case. As a sergeant in a police homicide unit once told me, when you have 50 unsolved murders, there is little expectation that you will solve any one of them. When there are 10, you are under much greater pressure to solve them. When workers have an impossible caseload, it becomes very difficult for managers to get workers to adhere to a high or even a medium quality of work, and accountability is compromised.

Productivity of workers, social workers in particular, is further compromised by the County's historical penchant to see technology as a frill, rather than a tool to increase productivity. Workers are expensive. Technology is cheap. If time lost for failure to have adequate faxing or e-mail capacity could be calculated for one week in the Department of Children and Family Services alone, the figure would be astronomical. Similarly, the failure to have adequate telephones, voice mail, cell phones, and software (such as voice recognition software,) seriously compromises the productivity of workers. The amount of time lost to workers and to callers when phone calls are traded unsuccessfully, and when there is no voicemail or e-mail capability, would be highly unacceptable to any business.

Let me suggest that the County, when considering budget cuts, consider the concept of the cost of catching up later. All services which the County provides are vital. For some of those services the cost of catching up when better fiscal times return is onerous but possible. For example, deferring maintenance of buildings is costly but doable. On the other hand, it is not possible to catch up when services are restricted to vulnerable children. The catching up benefits children who are newly-referred, but the children who were left out during the deferral period will have graduated to the most costly, intensive, long-term services. If the County conceptually stratified services according to their catch-up potential, logically children's services would have top priority for minimization of budget cuts. Law enforcement might well be just behind children's services in the top tier of services, when all services are ranked according to their catch-up potential.

I would like to request that as the Administrative Office and the Board consider expenditure reductions, you require clear disclosure of the *long-term* impacts of proposed reductions. When you do so, children's services will take on a new importance, not out of mawkish sentimentality, but out of common sense.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that it is easy to sit on the outside and prescribe what policy-makers should do, but it is infinitely harder to be in your shoes and balance all the competing needs and interests. The efforts of you and your colleagues to do your jobs well is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Cc: Bart Bohn, County Administrative Officer
David Dent, Human Services System Director