



CASA PACIFICA

"The Home with a Heart"

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June 11, 1997

George Billinger, Foreman
 Ventura County Grand Jury
 800 South Victoria
 Ventura, Ca. 93009

Dear Mr. Billinger,

On behalf of the Board, the staff, our public partners, and the clients we serve, thank you for the comprehensive and thorough investigation into Casa Pacifica and its "public partners" which the Grand Jury conducted over the last several months. Please accept this letter as the required formal response to the report issued by the Grand Jury two weeks ago.

In many ways the report was a critique of the entire child welfare system, especially as reflected in the recommendations discussed below and also in our "Roadmap to the future" report dated February 1997. Before commenting on the recommendations, however, and in light of the negative press the report generated, we wish to highlight the following observations contained in the report.

- "Casa Pacifica is an important function of the child care service program in Ventura County."
- "Casa Pacifica is the only public/private partnership providing services to these kinds of children in the state."
- "State regulations which govern Casa Pacifica do not properly reflect its unique situation. Article (Title) 22 needs revision."
- "These kinds of problems are not unique to Casa Pacifica; they also happen at other facilities dealing with the same level of disturbed children."
- "Most of the incidents (reported to Community Care Licensing) are for very minor things."
- "Casa Pacifica's administration is responsive to recommendations. There have been tremendous changes in procedures since 'The incident.'"
- "All agencies reported that their communication with Casa Pacifica was satisfactory. There is willingness to work together."
- "Foster parents and Casa Pacifica should not be in competition with one another. . . PSSA has the responsibility to mend the breach. . ."
- "Ventura County taxpayers have invested less than expected in Casa Pacifica."
- "The administrative and professional staff of Casa Pacifica are dedicated to their work. . . and have made a valiant effort to maintain equilibrium in an atmosphere of misunderstanding and confusion."

Sixteen specific recommendations are contained in the report. Ten of the sixteen – 63% – can only be addressed by the County agencies involved in services provided at Casa Pacifica or in tandem with Casa Pacifica. For

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purposes of this response these are titled "Recommendations involving County partners." Six other recommendations – 38% – fall under the purview of Casa Pacifica exclusively and are called "Recommendations for Casa Pacifica."

Recommendations involving County partners

1. *The Board of Supervisors should appoint an advisory panel to make recommendations to them and all related agencies regarding all of the children's services programs of the county.*

Response. We have made this same recommendation on several occasions including in the document titled "Casa Pacifica: Serving Ventura County's Vulnerable Children – A Roadmap to the Future," dated February 1997.

2. *Casa Pacifica should add another building, not a cottage, in order to separate all the different kinds of programs, genders, and ages.*

Response. Though this has been recommended by Casa Pacifica it is not a solution we can undertake without the support of the County.

3. *Casa Pacifica should designate one cottage for displaced shelter children from foster homes, group homes, and failed adoptions and try to rehabilitate them.*

Response. By definition an emergency shelter program is short term. Our shelter care program provides crisis intervention and trauma treatment. "Rehabilitation" would take place in a long-term program such as our Residential Treatment Program. The only possible way to achieve separation of children is to add another cottage which is what we recommended in "A Roadmap to the Future."

4. *PSSA should place infants and pre-school children in foster homes within 48 hours.*

Response. Casa Pacifica has recommended to the County that our infant area be closed and that foster homes be used for emergency shelter for infants. This is because children under 24 months of age cannot take advantage of the wide-range of available services, e.g., mental health assessment and treatment and educational evaluation and classroom instruction.

However, we have also recommended that we retain the capability of admitting children over 12 months of age when keeping siblings together is of paramount importance.

Our recommendation to the County with regard to pre-schoolers is that they continue to be placed at Casa Pacifica because they benefit greatly from the services available on-campus. Furthermore, the capacity for visitation between parents and children has helped triple the number of children from shelter care safely reunited with family.

The length of stay should continue to be around three weeks – the legal time-frame between the dependency court's detention hearing and the jurisdiction and disposition hearing at which time a decision is made by the dependency court judge regarding the next placement.

5. *PSSA must substantially reinvigorate the size and quality of the foster care program.*

Response. We absolutely agree. Particularly missing in the system of care are foster homes that can manage difficult children. Between August 1994 and May 1997 for every four children sent to foster care from Casa Pacifica, three children were placed at Casa Pacifica from foster homes for a variety of reasons including foster parent abuse and unmanageable behavior. Casa Pacifica continues to be the safety net for these children too difficult for foster care and who would otherwise be sent out of county.

6. *Casa Pacifica, PSSA, and BH must improve communication between management, line staff and one another. Directors of PSSA, BH, and Casa Pacifica should meet on a regular basis to discuss mutual problems and clarify roles of the various agencies now that they know what the problems are.*

Response. We agree. Meetings have gone on at senior management levels as needed. At the middle management level meetings have been regularly scheduled but have not always been carried out. Meetings at all management levels are being scheduled now. These will be held on a regular basis.

7. *Casa Pacifica, DSS, and the Superintendent of Schools must settle legal and liability issues regarding the Refocus Room.*

Response. These issues were resolved in January. The Refocus Room and all related procedures are now certified and overseen by the State Department of Mental Health and do not fall under the purview of the Superintendent of Schools.

8. *The Superintendent of Schools should close the public school operation and bus Shelter children to local schools.*

Response. The concept of a centralized emergency shelter program was intended to eliminate the need for transporting children to obtain needed services including educational assessment. Busing children to local schools is counter to that goal, would have an adverse impact on local schools that must be considered, and would eliminate the ability to provide the specialized educational assessments provided at Casa Pacifica and not available in public school setting. Casa Pacifica is opposed to busing shelter children to local schools.

9. *PSSA and Casa Pacifica need to change admittance applications to include a parental consensual release of pertinent information to staff who have a need to know.*

Response. Most children coming into the shelter program are brought by social workers not parents. As pointed out in the Grand Jury report the right and responsibility to share information across agencies involved in a "collaborative" is already contained in law. County council must also sign off on the sharing of information.

10. *County personnel who are involved in making decisions regarding Casa Pacifica and County policies should refrain from participating in either one to eliminate the perception of conflict of interest.*

Response. To the extent that both a partnership exists and that contracts are negotiated between the County and Casa Pacifica the perception of a conflict of interest will always be present for persons deeply involved in County policies and in the way Casa Pacifica carries out those policies.

Recommendations for Casa Pacifica

1. *Casa Pacifica must add a surveillance system for the entire campus. It should cover open areas of cottages, hallways, gym, Refocus Room, all areas of the campus and include a 24-hour monitor.*

Response. Casa Pacifica's electronic security system involves five cameras strategically located around the campus with 24-hour monitors in the security office. Two camera's have been added since we opened and our long-range plan includes adding more cameras to assist in monitoring campus perimeters. However, we believe cameras in living areas and inside other buildings is unnecessarily intrusive and would present the children with an "institutional" atmosphere not conducive to the therapeutic environment.

2. *Casa Pacifica should hire a uniformed security guard to patrol the campus during late afternoon and evening hours.*

Response. A uniformed security guard would have the effect of creating an environment approximating the juvenile justice system. This would be opposite the kind of nurturing and protective setting required of a crisis care and trauma treatment center.

3. *Casa Pacifica should hire older staff members who have more life experience and mature judgment.*

Response. We strive to recruit and retain staff who are mature and who have relevant professional and/or life experience. It should be noted that our direct care staff currently average 33 years of age and 36 percent are married with children.

4. *Casa Pacifica should change children's activity patterns in the late afternoon and evening hours to prevent incidents.*

Response. Next year's budget calls for additional activities staff in the evening hours and during weekends. In addition, we have recently established an activities committee composed of staff and child representatives from each cottage. Their responsibilities include critiquing activities and suggesting changes in the activities program. We have also established a "student council" to solicit suggestions regarding activities as well as all aspects of the program from clients. This council provides clients with a sense of empowerment and participation in the program.

5. *Casa Pacifica should consider taking RTC children from outside the county to increase revenue.*


Response. This recommendation only becomes necessary if Ventura County does not refer a sufficient number of children requiring an intensive residential treatment program. We recommend instead that all Ventura County children requiring intensive treatment be considered for placement at Casa Pacifica.

6. *Casa Pacifica needs to increase its fund raising from the private sector to balance its budget and eliminate the costly line of credit it carries. Private funds should represent a larger portion of its finances. Only 15% of its revenue as a non-profit organization comes from private sources.*

Response. Casa Pacifica now raises considerably more toward operating expenses than any other human services nonprofit organization in the County. It is unrealistic that at this point the private sector should be expected to generate even more funds.

We appreciate the time spent by the Grand Jury and its thoughtful review of our programs. Your observations and recommendations have taken into account a most complex and difficult public sector responsibility which Casa Pacifica is attempting to help address. We thank you for a serious consideration of these important issues and for your recommendations.

Sincerely,



Steven E. Elson, Ph.D.
Executive Director

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