

FOSTER CARE

INTRODUCTION

Foster Care is an arm of Children and Family Services (CFS) of the Ventura County Public Social Services Agency (PSSA). State-mandated child protective services is an integrated children's services program including 24-hour child emergency response system (response to all reports of child abuse and neglect) 24 hour emergency placement of dependent children of the Juvenile Court in foster care, own home or relative home; therapeutic home for children with emotional and behavioral problems; adoptions; alternatives which offer long-term planning for those children who cannot be reunited with their natural families.

Foster care is the temporary, full-time care of children outside their homes who enter the system because of family related problems such as abuse, neglect, exploitation and abandonment. The children who come into foster care are likely to be struggling with the effects of painful life experiences. These include a lack of stable attachments, rejection, tragedy and violence. These children require affection and caring by the individuals around them.

INQUIRY

The subcommittee met with the Ventura County Childrens' Services' Manager and the Program Assistant for foster care licensing and placement. We met with the executive director and district administrator of ASPIRA; with the Supervisor of SHOMAIR and four psychiatric social workers of that project; and with the director and deputy director of PSSA. We visited a foster home with a caseworker.

FINDINGS

There are several facilities in which children entering the foster care system are placed:

- Group homes - a facility which provides 24-hour nonmedical care and supervision to children in a structured environment with services provided in part by staff employed by the licensee. The providers choose the type of children they want to serve; sexually abused, infants, adolescents, emotionally disturbed, boys or girls only and other specialized categories.
- Placement with relatives - this is the preferred alternative when a child cannot safely remain at home.
- Foster Family Homes - any home in which 24-hour nonmedical care and supervision are provided in a family setting in the licensee's family residence for not more than 6 foster children, exclusive of

members of the licensee's family. The state contracts with CFS to license foster family homes following state regulations. The child's stay is intended to be for temporary care to substitute for the parent.

- Emergency Foster Homes (Shelter Care) - these facilities are intended for short-term placement until the needs of the child can be assessed so a plan can be developed to either return the child to his/her home or remove them to another placement. Shelter care facilities are licensed and regulated as foster homes.
- Small Family Homes - these facilities are licensed by the state for up to 6 beds for developmentally disabled, emotionally disturbed or physically handicapped children. The licensee must implement a service plan which specifies the child's individual needs.
- Casa Pacifica - this is the county's 24-hour emergency shelter facility for abused, neglected or abandoned children. It also has a long-term residential program with a non-public school on site. They do not accept children under 6 years of age unless they are siblings of older children in the shelter or a child of a teenager there.

CFS has 33 social workers working in the on-going cases unit which are responsible for approximately 300 children in 185 foster homes and 400 children in relative care or in supervised own home care who at any point may go into foster care. The size of their case loads do not permit more than once a month home visits, if that. State regulations only require that CFS social workers visit a child once a month. Of the 33 social workers, 15 have Master's degrees, 11 have BA degrees, 2 have AA degrees and 5 have no degree. Of 6 supervisors, 3 have Master's degrees and 3 have BA degrees. Any combination of education and experience which has led to the acquisition of the required knowledge, skills and abilities is acceptable for employment.

SHOMAIR (from the Hebrew word for guardian) is a county program providing intensive care for troubled children in foster care. It is a joint program with CFS which provides mental health services to children in foster homes. SHOMAIR social workers screen all children who need intensive care thus determining which foster care program is right for each child. All children within this program receive therapy. They are visited once or twice a week by psychiatric social workers who are Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW). The SHOMAIR program, within Ventura County's Mental Health Services to children, encompasses a special group of Enriched Foster Care Parents. These foster parents provide foster homes as an alternative to non-family group home placements for those children who may be failing in their placements or have troublesome problems.

The SHOMAIR parent is a specially trained foster parent who uses his/her training and experience to help children gain self-esteem and learn skills needed to deal with their past and express feelings appropriately.

ASPIRA is a statewide, nonprofit agency which was invited by Ventura County in 1991 to provide foster care for special needs children, those

who have been emotionally, physically or sexually abused, those who may be developmentally delayed, educationally or physically handicapped. Others may be involved with drugs or with the law. Their social workers who have Master's degrees, work with smaller case loads which allow them to develop a close partnership with referring agencies and foster parents. They make weekly to bi-weekly therapeutic home visits. Currently, ASPIRA has 61 certified homes housing 86 children, infant to 18 years.

Foster homes are licensed by the State of California, Department of Social Services. Becoming a foster home involves several applications for licensing as such, including criminal record clearance, child abuse index check, applicant information regarding ability to meet the needs of foster children, budget information, home plans with disaster exit plans and health screening. Before a license can be issued, the applicant must attend an orientation provided by the licensing agency and training sessions. At least one parent must hold a certificate for First Aid and CPR. In-home interview and inspection are required.

The state of California provides a fund to pay for certain liability claims on behalf of foster parents for certain activities relating to licensed foster family homes; up to \$300,000 per home for occurrences during a single calendar year. The fund will pay, on behalf of licensed foster family homes, valid claims of bodily injury or personal injury arising out of the activities of a foster parent or parents, which occur while the foster child lives in the family.

A foster care home is legally permitted to be licensed even though a family member living there may be on probation.

FOSTER CARE RATES

Foster Home Placements

Rate for child up to 4 years	\$345 per month
Per Diem Rate:	
28 day month	12.32
30 day month	11.50
31 day month	11.13
Rate for child 5-8 years	\$375 per month
Per Diem Rate:	
28 day month	13.39
30 day month	12.50
31 day month	12.10
Rate for child 9-11 years	\$400 per month
Per Diem Rate:	
28 day month	14.29
30 day month	13.33
31 day month	12.90
Rate for child 12-14 years	\$444 per month
Per Diem Rate:	
28 day month	15.86
30 day month	14.80
31 day month	14.32

Rate for child 15-18 years	\$484 per month
Per Diem Rate	
28 day month	17.29
30 day month	16.13
31 day month	15.61

Shomair Homes	\$702 per month
Aspira/Moss Beach Homes	\$1,435-3,363 per month
Youth Connections Shelter Care Rate	\$4,423 per month
Per Diem Rate:	
28 day month	157.96
30 day month	147.43
31 day month	142.68

RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT CENTERS

Casa Pacifica	\$5,013 per month
Children's Learning Center	2,950 per month
Emerald Foundation	4,423 per month
Living & Learning Center	2,950 per month
Rolling Hills	3,245 per month
McAvoy	3,834 per month
Care	3,539 per month
The Family Home	4,127 per month
Living Workshop	3,834 per month
Moss Beach Excell	3,834 per month

CONCLUSIONS

Social workers in the foster care on-going unit have many families to keep track of and there is voluminous paperwork involved. That leaves little time to sit down with a family to try to solve problems.

The department suffers from a lack of consistency in the quality and effectiveness of its protective services.

Foster care social workers are not visiting their clients often enough to provide on-going assessments of their placements.

CFS does not have a formal set of critical success factors linked to its strategy for managing the foster care program.

Foster Care performance measures are organized around process and compliance and few are linked to outcomes or results.

CFS does not know what happens to the children once they leave the Foster Care system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There should be a rate increase for county foster care homes. There have been none for seven years.
- No children should be placed in foster homes where there are family members on probation or parole.
- Master's degrees in social work for all foster care case workers and supervisors should be required.
- On going training and education for CFS case workers and supervisors should be required.
- There needs to be a review of weaknesses within the system.
- CFS needs to fast track its adoption process; it currently takes too long.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

PSSA