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June 12, 1998

Mr. Koester, Chief Admin Officer  
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## **RESPONSE TO THE 1997-98 GRAND JURY INTERIM FINAL REPORT, FOSTER CARE**

**Grand Jury Conclusion:** The department suffers from a lack of consistency in the quality and effectiveness of its protective services.

Response: CFS shares the Grand Jury's concern about the quality and effectiveness of its protective services, and we have initiated a number of actions to address that concern. 1) Our agency has contracted with a private consultant to evaluate our program and to recommend changes that will improve our ability to protect children. The consultant has interviewed staff at all regional offices of CFS to gather information for a report; the report "Review of Intake and Long-Term Procedures Regarding the Safeguarding of Children and Prevention of Service Failure" has been completed. 2) We have initiated an internal quality assessment team designed to review certain "high profile" cases for the purpose of evaluating the services provided and to recommend policy and procedure changes that would improve our system of service delivery. 3) The California County Welfare Directors Association is very interested in developing a system of "quality assessment" to measure the effectiveness of California's child welfare services. Several counties, including Ventura, have already experimented with this system by having one county sending staff to another county for the purpose of evaluating the host county's provision of child welfare services.

**Grand Jury Conclusion:** Foster care social workers are not visiting their clients often enough to provide ongoing assessments of their placements.

Response: We encourage and support our social work staff to visit their clients as frequently as possible. Although state regulations mandate that we visit the children in out-of-home foster care once a month, we believe more frequent visits would reduce risk and enhance our ability to minimize the trauma of separation a child experiences as a result of being removed from his/her birth parents. Greater contact with our clients could also expedite reunification of families.

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Frequency of visitation is dependent upon the number of clients each social worker is assigned. Case management involves a great deal of time spent on the requirements of the juvenile court and case record keeping. Juvenile court law mandates many time-consuming tasks for CFS workers. The court process is legalistic and formal. Social workers must be prepared to legally defend any and all recommendations made to the court on behalf of a child. Any recommendation made by a social worker can be, and often is, challenged by an attorney representing someone other than the child. Federal, state, county and agency requirements for documentation of casework activities are significant and require a great deal of social workers' time. In the last year, the State of California initiated a state-wide computer system in which all counties were required to participate. Besides having to learn computer skills, social workers had to learn a new system that has experienced a number of problems which consumed much of our social workers' time. We are working on procedures to reduce court work and expedite documentation. However, caseload size remains a crucial determinant of how much time social workers can spend with their clients.

**Grand Jury Conclusions:** (1) Children and Family Services (CFS) does not have a formal set of critical success factors linked to its strategy for managing the foster care program and (2) foster care performance measures are organized around process and compliance and few are linked to outcomes or results.

Response: It is true that there are no federal, state or county outcomes measures for the foster care program. Historically, the foster care program has been considered successful if children placed in foster homes were quickly and safely reunited with their birth parents. In a report prepared by the California department of Finance, dated April 1997, it is noted that "...we found little empirical evidence that could be used to make a reliable statement about the effectiveness of child welfare programs in California or elsewhere ...most of the existing information about the State's system is either process-related...or information describing the child welfare population...very little exists about the outcomes of the services." However, there is now a growing demand for accountability at the federal, state and county levels. The Ventura County Childrens' Services System Oversight Committee has made the development of outcomes measurers a priority for all agencies involved in providing services to children and their families. Casa Pacifica, Ventura County's shelter and residential care facility, has been working with an interagency team to establish a data base for children entering the child welfare system. The data base will be used to assess the effectiveness of services designed to meet a child's educational, medical and emotional needs. The team is trying to find a way to access each member agency's data system in order to collect all available information about each child. Laws governing confidentiality of client records are sometimes a barrier to information sharing and may require legislation to overcome.

**Grand Jury Conclusion:** CFS does not know what happens to the children once they leave the foster care system.

Response: When children leave the foster care system to be reunited with their birth parents, their progress is monitored by CFS under the auspices of the Ventura County Juvenile Court. Services and risk assessment continue to be provided the child as long as he/she remains a dependent of juvenile court. Once the dependency status is dismissed, however, CFS has no legal authority to monitor the child's

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progress. We have long felt that longitudinal studies of children leaving the dependency system would be extremely useful in evaluating the effectiveness of our services. We need to know the impact of our intervention relative to the child's eventual emotional stability, maturation, employment history, and need for public services as an adult. Only by developing a baseline for a child's overall functioning upon entry into the child welfare system, recording services provided, and monitoring the program of the child into adulthood will we be able to assess if we are effective in helping children and how we were effective. It should be noted, however, that longitudinal studies are costly and there are no funds currently allocated for them.

**Grand Jury Recommendation:** There should be a rate increase for county foster care homes. There has been none for seven years.

Response: Foster parents will be receiving a 6% basic rate increase in July 1998. Because we share the Grand Jury's concern about the level of reimbursement foster parents receive for their services, Ventura County began working in September 1997 with a team of foster parents to restructure the specialized rate system. The specialized rates would be paid to foster parents caring for children with medical, emotional or behavioral needs that fall under specific criteria. Foster parents would be required to participate in training designed to prepare them for children with special needs in order to be eligible for the special rates. Our proposal for a specialized rate system is currently being reviewed by the California Department of Social Services.

**Grand Jury Recommendation:** No children should be placed in a foster home where there are family members on probation or parole.

Response: State licensing regulations (copy attached) are specific regarding the licensing of people on probation or parole. By law and regulation certain categories of persons with criminal convictions cannot be licensed (this includes family members in the home). These categories include almost all violent crimes, sex crimes, and crimes against children. Our practice is not to license people on probation or parole. However, Section 87019, paragraph (g) of the state licensing regulations does indicate "...the department shall have the authority to grant an exemption..." to an applicant for a foster care license who "...presents evidence satisfactory to the department of licensing agency that he/she has been rehabilitated and presently is of such good character as to justify the issuance of the license...". We use this exemption with great discretion and never in a situation where the crime involved presents a risk to a child. To our knowledge, we have granted one exemption since September 1997.

**Grand Jury Recommendation:** Masters' degrees in social work for all foster care workers and supervisors should be required.

Response: We are actively recruiting social workers with an MSW. Our agency has created a team to visit colleges which offer graduate study in social work and recruit new MSWs for our county. We believe in the value of having MSWs on our staff because the skills and knowledge they possess are critical to provide appropriate services to our clients. California State University at Long Beach will

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begin providing graduate studies in social work in Ventura County this fall. A number of our staff will be included in the first group of MSW students, and these students will eventually be assigned as interns to various social services programs in the Human Services Agency. We believe the Cal State Long Beach MSW program will help us add MSWs to our staff.

**Grand Jury Recommendation:** Ongoing training and education for CFS case workers and supervisors should be required.

**Response:** We are in total concert with the Grand Jury regarding the need for training and education of CFS staff. Our goal is to enhance the skills and knowledge of our social workers in the area of child welfare services and in all other matters relevant to the protection of children and family preservation. We believe that a continuum of training opportunities is the most effective way in which to promote "best practice," meet immediate and long range goals, support staff retention, and encourage a sense of professionalism. We have contracted with UC Davis, Center for Human Services and with the Central California Public Social Services Training Academy to provide our staff with training associated with general case management issues and with training on specific skills required in providing services to children who have been abused and/or neglected and their families. We have attached a copy of our training plan for 1997-98.

**Grand Jury Recommendation:** There needs to be a review of weaknesses within the system.

**Response:** As indicated above, we are currently developing various methods of evaluating our provision of services to children and their families. We contracted with a private consultant to assess our program, and he has provided us with a report. We now have an internal team to review "high risk" cases and provide us with input as to how we can improve our system of services. We are working with the Children's Services System Oversight Committee to develop outcome measures. We are pursuing accreditation from the Child Welfare League.

Respectfully submitted,

  
BARBARA FITZGERALD  
Agency Director