

**Child Welfare Services
Outcome Improvement Project**

**California Child and Family Services Review
Peer Quality Case Review**

**San Luis Obispo County
October 2010**



Focus Areas

CWS: Timely Adoption

Probation: Placement Stability

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PQCR Cover Page

California's Child and Family Services Review Peer Quality Case Review	
County	San Luis Obispo
Responsible County Child Welfare Agency	San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services and Probation Department
PQCR review week	October 25-October 28, 2010
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Acronyms and Definitions

366.26 Hearing: A Juvenile Court hearing to identify and implement a permanent plan for a dependent child.

Abscond: To leave hurriedly and secretly to avoid detection or arrest. Used by Probation to describe youth who run away from placement, as it is a crime for Probation youth to leave placement without permission of the Juvenile Court.

ADHD: Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AWOL: Absence without Leave

CAP-SLO: Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County

CASA: Court Appointed Special Advocate

C-CFSR: California Child and Family Services Review

CCTA: Central California Training Academy

CDSS: California Department of Social Services

CSA: County Self-Assessment

CWS: Child Welfare Services

CWS/CMS: Child Welfare Services/Case Management System

Dependent: A child placed with CWS and under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court.

DJF: Division of Juvenile Facilities

DSS: Department of Social Services

FCNI: Family Care Network, Inc.

FFA: Foster Family Agency

ILP: Independent Living Program

NREFM: Non-Related Extended Family Member

OCAP: Office of Child Abuse Prevention

OFR: Options for Recovery

PQCR: Peer Quality Case Review

PRIDE: Parent Resource for Information, Development, Education

SIP: System Improvement Plan

SLO: San Luis Obispo

TDM: Team Decision Making Meeting

THPP: Transitional Housing Placement Program

Tribal Adoption: An adoption in which a Native American tribe is allowed to meet the permanency need of the child while honoring their own tribal values and beliefs. This often means that parental rights are not terminated.

Ward: A child placed with Probation and under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court.

YLS/CMI: Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory

YTP: Youth Treatment Program

Introduction

California Child and Family Services Review

In 2004, California passed Assembly Bill 636, which instituted the Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability System, also known as the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR). The Outcomes and Accountability System measures child welfare outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and child and family well-being. It also requires San Luis Obispo County Child Welfare Services (CWS) and Juvenile Probation Departments to participate in a triennial review process, which includes a Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR), County Self-Assessment (CSA), and System Improvement Plan (SIP). This process of continuous review enables our county to track our progress on outcome measures and plan for improvement, in order to better serve children and families. Both CWS and Juvenile Probation work with and provide services to families and youth who are placed in out-of-home care. Additionally, the agencies often work closely together with youth who fall under the jurisdiction of Juvenile Court. Therefore, CWS and Juvenile Probation partner to review their services and complete the C-CFSR process.

The PQCR is the first step in the C-CFSR process. The purpose of the PQCR is to learn, through intensive examination of county practice, how to improve child welfare and probation services in a specific focus area. Social Workers and Deputy Probation Officers are interviewed to gather information regarding agency practice, strengths and concerns. San Luis Obispo County invited peers from other counties to promote the exchange of best practice ideas between the host county and peer reviewers. This exchange resulted in ideas for practice changes that will help to improve performance on identified outcomes.

Following the PQCR, San Luis Obispo County will conduct the County Self Assessment. The CSA is a review of all child welfare and juvenile probation services provided in the county. As part of the CSA, input is sought from community partners regarding county practices, strengths, and concerns. San Luis Obispo County holds community forums to hear from community partners and families who work with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and Probation. In 2011, for the first time, CWS and Probation will partner with the Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP) for a comprehensive CSA.

Finally, using the information gathered in the PQCR and the CSA, San Luis Obispo County will develop its System Improvement Plan. The SIP outlines the ideas and changes the County plans to implement in order to improve practice and outcomes for children, youth and families. The SIP is developed every three years by CWS and Probation, in collaboration with community partners.

San Luis Obispo County is currently in its third triennial cycle. The PQCR was conducted the week of October 25-28, 2010. The CSA event will follow in March 2011, with the report due June 28, 2011. The final SIP report is due October 28, 2011.

San Luis Obispo County

San Luis Obispo County is a smaller, primarily rural county. In January 2010 there were a total of 273,231 residents. The majority (71%) of residents are white, while about 22% are Hispanic, 3% are Asian and the rest are other ethnicities. Per 2008 census data, the median household income is \$60,088, compared to \$61,017 for the state. The poverty rate in San Luis Obispo County was 12.1% in 2008, below the state average of 13.3%. As of August 2010, the current unemployment in the county was 10.3%.

San Luis Obispo County DSS and Probation Departments offer services to families and youth. DSS is divided into four main regions – North, South, Central and Coastal – with staff located in five County offices. Staff is co-located in each office to enhance services and collaboration between the Adult Services, Child Welfare Services and Participant Services programs, a practice known as Linkages. In addition, DSS staff serves as individual liaisons to community agencies such as the Child Abuse Council of San Luis Obispo (SLO-CAP), Services Affirming Family Empowerment (SAFE), homeless shelters and the Housing Authority. Other County and community-based organizations, such as Juvenile Probation’s Diversion Unit, Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County (CAPSLO) and the Child Care Resource Connection, are co-located in DSS offices around the county.

As part of DSS, CWS offers five service components: Emergency Response, Dependency Investigation, Family Maintenance/Family Reunification/Permanent Placement, Licensing, and Adoption. There is one Adoption Unit, located in the San Luis Obispo office. The unit consists of one Social Worker Supervisor, seven Social Workers, and two Administrative Assistants. Adoption Social Workers provide case management support as they assist with assessing and implementing the most appropriate permanent plan for a child whose reunification with their parents was unsuccessful. When serving in the role of a Secondary Adoption Social Worker, they assist the Primary Social Worker (either Family Reunification or Dependency Investigation) with identifying and assessing an appropriate concurrent plan for families. Adoption Social Workers also facilitate adoption through designated relinquishments and Safely Surrendered Baby situations.

The Probation Department offers services to youth through the Juvenile Division and Juvenile Hall. The Juvenile Division is comprised of the Juvenile Investigations, Juvenile Review, Field Supervision and Placement Units. The Juvenile Division provides services along a continuum of care, including prevention, intervention, supervision, and incarceration. Each area plays a key role in the juvenile justice system. San Luis Obispo County’s Juvenile Hall has a capacity to hold forty-five minors. The Juvenile Hall admits minors arrested by Law Enforcement and Deputy Probation Officers, and determines whether or not they will be temporarily detained pending a hearing before the Juvenile Court.

The Placement Unit is staffed by one supervising Deputy Probation Officer, three Deputy Probation Officers, and one Probation Assistant. Placement Unit duties include supervision of children placed in relative, non-relative, and Foster Family Agency (FFA) foster homes, group homes, transitional housing care, and placement aftercare. Local placement options include: FFAs (Family Care Network, Inc. (FCNI) and Aspiranet), Intensive Treatment Foster Care provided by FCNI, Calm Foster Care provided by FCNI, Wraparound Foster Care provided by FCNI, Aaron’s Boys Home, Youth Treatment Program, and the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) provided by FCNI.

Current Ward Placement:

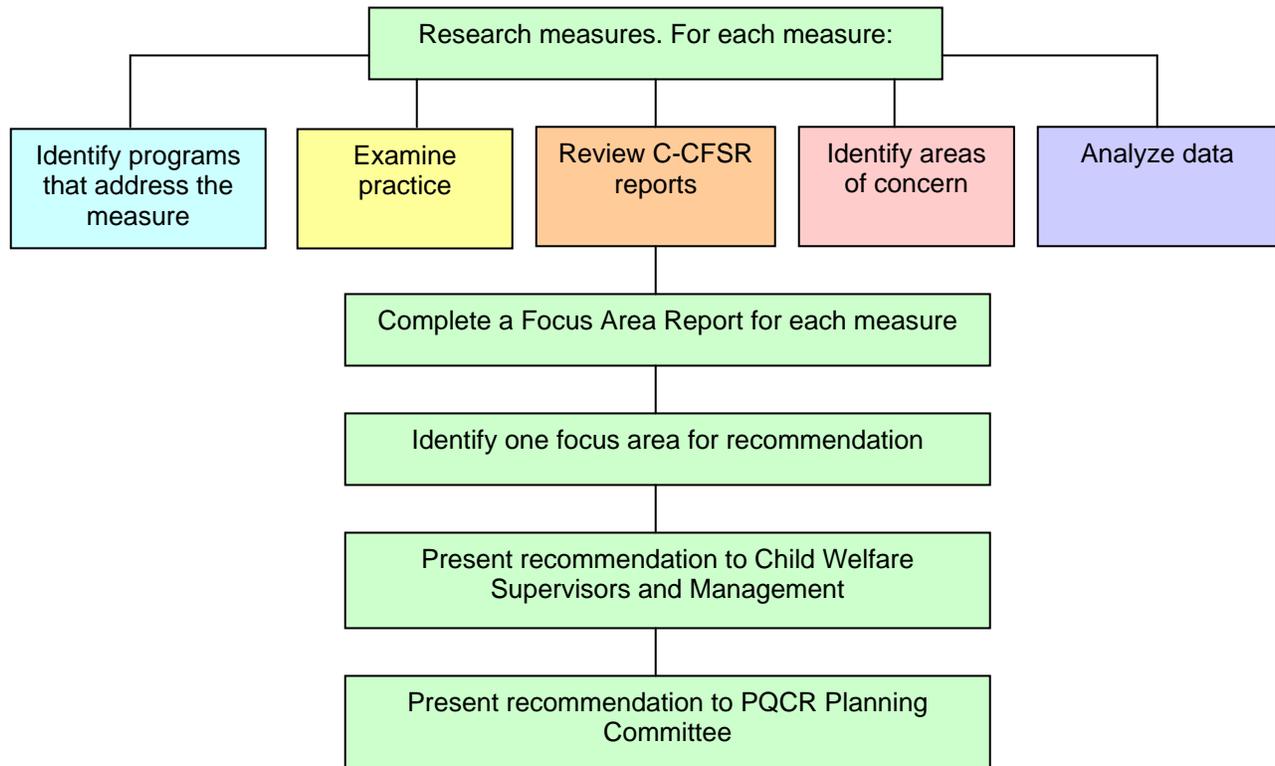
Total Wards	45
Number in NREFM (Non-Related Extended Family Member) Placement	1
Number in Group Home	23
Number in THPP	2
Number in Aftercare	8
Number in Custody	9
Number of AWOL	2

Data provided by the San Luis Obispo County Probation Department

Selection of PQCR Focus Areas

Since the implementation of AB 636, both Probation and CWS have been meeting or making steady progress toward meeting the Federal and State outcomes in child welfare. The PQCR offers both departments an opportunity to discuss current practice in one particular focus area, in order to gather feedback and ideas for the upcoming SIP. San Luis Obispo County has seen considerable improvement in past focus areas that were addressed by the PQCR. We have learned that the PQCR offers an opportunity to examine current practice and hear from staff and community partners about what is working and what might need to be improved. It also allows us to collaborate with staff from other counties and hear about promising practices in the focus area of choice.

CWS and Probation chose separate focus areas for the 2010 PQCR. CWS decided to focus on Timely Adoption, while Probation selected Placement Stability as its area of focus. CWS and Probation Program Managers researched all outcomes prior to deciding on these focus areas. While we looked at the data that indicated performance on each of the measures, we also considered areas which have not been looked at in past PQCRs, CSAs, and SIPs, as well as areas that are not addressed by recent changes in practice and programs. The following procedure was used to analyze each of the measures:



CWS Focus Area: C2.5 Timely Adoption

After considering all of the outcome measures, San Luis Obispo County CWS chose to focus on measure C2.5 Timely Adoption, which measures the percentage of children who were adopted within 12 months of the termination of parental rights. A child is considered to be legally free for adoption if there is a parental rights termination date recorded for all parents with legal standing. If a parent is deceased, the date of death is reported as the parental rights termination date.

Measure C2.5 Performance June 2006 to June 2009:

Date	Within 12 months		National Goal		Difference	
06/30/06	20/50	40.8%	27/50	53.7%	-7	-12.9%
06/30/07	34/72	47.2%	39/72	53.7%	-5	-6.5%
06/30/08	23/49	46.9%	26/49	53.7%	-3	-6.8%
06/30/09	18/34	52.9%	18/34	53.7%	-0	-.8%

Data provided by the CDSS/UC Berkeley Child Welfare Dynamic Report System

Although CWS has made some improvement in this measure, we strive to consistently meet the federal standard of 53.7%. Therefore, CWS chose C2.5 Timely Adoption to see how we might improve upon this measure, as well as for the following reasons:

- In 12 of the past 13 time periods CWS fell below the national goal for measure C2.5
- To evaluate the revitalization of Concurrent Planning in order to learn if it has had an impact on case practice and timely adoption
- To engage with counties that have improved or consistently done well in the area of Adoption and to learn from their success

Probation Focus Area: C4.2 Placement Stability

Probation chose measure C4.2 Placement Stability as their focus area: Of all children served in foster care during the year that were in foster care for at least 12 months but less than 24 months, what percent had two or fewer placement settings? This measure computes the percentage of children with two or fewer placements in foster care for at least 12 months, but less than 24 months. Time in care is based on the latest date of removal from the home. The national goal for this measure is 65.4%. Probation is not currently meeting the national goal for this measure.

Measure C4.2 Performance June 2006 to June 2009:

Date	2 or Fewer Placements		National Goal		Difference	
06/30/06	23/31	74.2%	20/31	65.4%	3	8.8%
06/30/07	13/24	54.2%	16/24	65.4%	-3	-11.21%
06/30/08	12/21	57.1%	14/21	65.4%	-2	-8.3%
06/30/09	13/19	68.4%	12/19	65.4%	1	3%

Data provided by the CDSS/UC Berkeley Child Welfare Dynamic Report System

The current data from 2010 shows that 16 out of 21 minors, or 76.2%, had two or more placement moves. Although Probation is currently meeting the national goal for this measure, the PQCR offers Probation the opportunity to explore reasons behind the yearly fluctuations, as well as possible solutions for improving on this measure. By focusing on Placement Stability, Probation hopes to address the following issues in particular:

- A significant placement failure rate of approximately 50%
- High number of wards that run away from placement
- High number of wards in juvenile detention as the result of placement failure
- Want to identify strengths and barriers and address systemic and/or other issues that contribute to these problems

Methodology

In researching data, CWS information was gathered from CWS/CMS, Safe Measures, the CDSS/UC Berkeley Child Welfare Dynamic Report System and internal data reports created by the DSS Information Technology Team. Probation data is accessible through the CDSS/UC Berkeley Child Welfare Dynamic Report System.

Sample Selection

The cases chosen for the PQCR interviews were selected as follows:

For CWS, the Adoption Program Manager reviewed the SafeMeasures quarterly reports for timely adoption. A determination was made to create a subset of cases that met the age requirement for school (6-17 years old). Two outlier cases were rejected, as they were very unusual cases with unique circumstances that would not likely be replicated in the future. Remaining cases were then chosen based on Social Worker assignments that would create parity among Social Workers to be interviewed. Approximately half of the cases chosen resulted in a successful outcome of adoption within 12 months of being legally free. The other half were cases that resulted in an unsuccessful outcome of adoption after 12 months (or in one case, adoption still pending after 12 months) of being legally free.

For Probation, the placement supervisor requested each of the three placement Probation Officers provide a minimum of three current or recent cases that exhibited placement instability. Placement stability was defined as a child being in placement at least 12 months but less than 24 months with two or fewer moves. The placement supervisor then reviewed the list of cases to make sure they met the criteria and to remove any outlier cases. From the remaining cases, two were selected for each officer to participate in the case review process.

Participation in the PQCR Planning and Event

San Luis Obispo County began planning for the PQCR in March of 2010. DSS and Probation partnered with California Department of Social Services (CDSS) throughout the PQCR planning and event. There were many people involved in the process.

The PQCR Planning Committee consisted of the following individuals:

- Committee Co-chairs:
 - Belinda Benassi, CWS Program Manager, DSS
 - Tom Milder, Supervising Deputy Probation Officer, Placement Unit, Probation Department
 - Kimberly Brown, CDSS, Outcomes and Accountability Unit
- Committee Members:
 - Margie Albers, PQCR Consultant
 - Betty Hanna, Focus Group Consultant
 - Elise Roberts, Regional Manager, DSS
 - Christopher Monza, CWS Program Manager, DSS
 - Kat Lauterback, CWS Program Manager, DSS
 - Carol Wagner, DSS Staff Development
 - Chloe Campoverde, DSS Staff Development
 - Diana Horn, DSS Staff Development
 - Jannine Lambert, DSS Staff Development
 - Jill Powers, DSS Staff Development
 - Sandy Romero, Deputy Probation Officer, Probation Department

- Peggy Briggs, CDSS Outcomes and Accountability Manager
- Christina Hoerl, CDSS, Outcomes and Accountability Unit
- Liz Woods, Central California Training Academy (CCTA)
- Soledad Caldera-Gamage, Central California Training Academy (CCTA)

The PQCR event was facilitated by Margie Albers, Regional Training Academy Consultant. The focus groups were facilitated by Betty Hanna, Regional Training Academy Consultant, as well as Kimberly Brown and Peggy Briggs.

The peer interview panels were comprised of six Social Workers and three Probation Officers from Monterey, Riverside, Santa Cruz, Tulare, and Ventura Counties. All of these counties were invited to participate due to their successful rates of Timely Adoption and Placement Stability. There were three interview panels, consisting of one Probation Officer and two Social Workers on each panel. During the PQCR event, these three panels interviewed twelve CWS Social Workers and three Deputy Probation Officers, who represent a variety of education and work experience.

Also, as part of the PQCR event, nine focus groups were held. Our focus group participants included Social Worker Supervisors and Probation Supervisors, FFA, Foster and Adoptive Parents, Relative/NREFM placements, Probation Parents, CWS Youth, Probation Youth, CWS Court Stakeholders, and CWS Community Partners.

PQCR Tools

Literature Reviews

Prior to the development of the interview tools and focus groups questions, CWS and Probation studied the applicable literature reviews for Timely Adoption and Placement Stability. Both literature reviews were provided by Northern California Training Academy, and are available online at <http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy/resources.asp>.

A literature review discusses published information in a particular subject area. Its purpose is to review the critical points of current knowledge regarding the topic rather than reporting any new or original work. The ultimate goal of a literature review is to bring the reader up to date with current information on a topic. It also forms the basis for another goal, such as future research that may be needed in the area.

CWS

From the literature review on Timely Adoption, CWS learned that the key factors that affect both timely adoptive placement and timely adoptive finalization are:

- Child Characteristics
- Adoptive Family Characteristics
- Biological Family Characteristics
- Type of Abuse and/or Neglect Experienced by the Child
- Placement History of the Child
- Characteristics of the Case Worker
- Court System and Community Factors

The Timely Adoption literature review identifies many factors that affect timely adoptive placement and timely adoptive finalization. The child's age is an important factor; older children are less likely to achieve timely adoptive placement and be adopted. Placement history is another important factor, as children who experience multiple moves are half as likely to achieve timely permanency, whereas those who receive more services at placement have an easier transition and are more likely to stabilize. Sexually abused children have a slower path to permanency, and children with

emotional, behavioral or medical issues have a slower path to adoption. These characteristics are all important considerations when studying timely adoption.

In regard to Concurrent Planning, the literature shows that true concurrent planning offers many different options for the foster child. It has been found that the involvement of the birth family in decision making and the case plan is also important. In cases where parental rights have been relinquished, children are three times more likely to achieve permanency. San Luis Obispo County is currently working to revitalize Concurrent Planning by educating parents, staff and community stakeholders on the practice of concurrent planning and the importance of court timelines.

The literature review found that post-adoption services are also important, particularly for children over the age of 14. When more services are provided at placement and transition, the child is more likely to stabilize. The most requested services include counseling, educational services, community services and mental/medical health services. Another important consideration is the provision of intensive family preservation services for adoptive families, which provides short-term, in-home counseling for families.

The influence of systems and agency practice also has an effect on timely adoption. Social Workers' beliefs about the adoptability of a child, as well as the suitability of homes (in particular, less traditional homes), should be considered when assessing timely adoption. Additionally, recruitment plays a role. While it is important to recruit more homes, the literature review notes that single parent households may need more time to complete the adoption process. Furthermore, agencies should remember that children do better with relatives, but attitudes toward and acceptance of legal adoption can differ between cultures. Finally, open adoption should be considered as they allow children to maintain a connection to their family of origin. This is particularly important for older children. While San Luis Obispo County has been very committed to placement with relatives, other systems and practices mentioned offer a fresh perspective on achieving timely adoption.

Probation

From the literature review on Placement Stability, we learned that the factors that influence placement stability include the following:

- Timing in Placement
- Characteristics of the Home
- Children's Characteristics, such as Gender, Age, Race/Ethnicity, and Mental and Behavioral Health
- Type of Placement
- Foster Parent Characteristics
- Worker and Agency Characteristics
- Worker Retention

A strong indicator of placement disruption is the child's mental and behavioral health. Disruption is most likely to occur within the first six months of placement, as 70% of moves occur within this time frame. Additionally, the more placements a child has leads to a greater likelihood of future placement disruptions and behavioral issues, which in turn lead to more disruptions. Decreasing placement disruptions is critical for the well-being of children in care.

On the other hand, worker retention, kinship care and treatment foster care all result in increased placement stability. Worker retention plays an important role in placement stability. Children with fewer workers tend to have greater placement stability and reunification. Another important factor is the placement itself. Children do better with relatives or well trained placement staff or foster parents who understand behavioral issues. Support systems are important for the care providers, and the fewer children in the home the better. This is especially critical if a child has behavioral

issues. Placement and child specific services, such as transportation assistance, mental health services and foster family counseling are also important.

The literature review also provided important considerations for placement moves, including recognizing the importance that children place on their personal possessions, allowing families and youth to participate in the decision making process, proper screening and matching of foster parents, and providing detailed assessments of children and risk factors when planning for placement.

Both CWS and Probation learned valuable information through their respective literature reviews. While the information gathered was valuable during the PQCR, it will also be revisited during our CSA and as we develop our SIP in 2011.

Development of PQCR Tools

The literature reviews of Timely Adoption and Placement Stability both informed the process and the questions that were developed for the PQCR interviews and focus groups. Keeping in mind the information gathered from the literature reviews, the PQCR planning committee also reviewed several sets of questions, including those provided by CDSS and those used by other counties. The team identified useful themes and language that were incorporated into our own questions. Additionally, the questions were tested and refined during a mock interview. While the process was the same for both Probation and CWS, the questions differed, as each department had their own focus area for the PQCR. The interview tools are attached in [Appendix 1](#) and the focus group questions are included in [Appendix 2](#).

A case summary format was also developed and provided to the interview teams prior to the interview. This case summary was used by the interview teams so that they were able to familiarize themselves with the case prior to the interview itself. The case summary formats for both Probation and CWS are attached in [Appendix 3](#).

Summary of Practice

The peer interviews and focus groups all provided valuable information regarding CWS and Probation practices. CWS and Probation staff have reviewed and analyzed the data that was gathered. The following sections highlight the key information and trends that emerged from the PQCR.

CWS

STRENGTHS

The PQCR interviews identified many Social Worker, system and community strengths.

Social Worker strengths:

- Committed, experienced and dedicated to youth and developing a deep relationship with them.
- Good relationship with child, community and caretaker.
- Committed to “best interests.”
- Very proficient at multi-tasking.
- Knowledgeable about children, family, and resources.
- Excellent up front assessments of children’s needs with follow-up referrals to services.

Contributing factors include a positive work environment and the legacy from past practices of previous generations of staff. However, the interviewers attributed the beneficial conditions and

pleasant environment to the ongoing efforts and skills of this present group of Social Workers; their strengths and abilities to foster good working relationships and engagement among peers, partners, parents, children/youth and placements. This team approach to working cooperatively and transparently is a practice that was also noted and highlighted in the 2007 PQCR.

System strengths:

- Team Decision Making Meetings (TDMs) are usually held within 48 hours, and it is ideal when the Adoption Social Worker is able to attend and identify the concurrent plan.
- Excellent up front assessments of children's needs, with follow up referrals to services.
- Staff support of secondary assignment of Adoption Social Worker to Family Reunification cases.

TDMs and Concurrent Planning Meetings were incorporated into outcome measures prior to this PQCR. The fact that TDMs are held 95% of the time and Concurrent Planning Meetings are held 100% of the time illustrates that staff supports both of these practices, and that they are a systemic strength in San Luis Obispo County.

Community strengths:

- Good collaborative relationships.
- Commitment to best interests.
- Social Workers are dedicated to the children.

The Family Finding Program through Cuesta College and the Kinship Center were identified as useful resources for finding permanent connections for youth and providing resources for adoptive families. Social Workers were pleased that they could refer to these two local community partners and receive quick and professional service.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Many promising practices were identified through the case reviews and focus groups. These practices were grouped categorically as systems, openness/transparency, relationship building skills, and teamwork.

Systems:

- The Adoption Social Worker is assigned as a secondary Social Worker prior to the Jurisdiction/Disposition Hearing; their main role is to assess permanency.
- Due diligence of fathers is pursued throughout the court process.
- Post Permanency Mediation for post adoption contact, resulting in greater buy-in from the parents.
- Thoroughness of PRIDE (Parent Resource for Information, Development, Education) training.
- Support groups for Options for Recovery (OFR) parents are invaluable.
- Successful matching meetings.
- Wraparound Services are very helpful.
- Timeliness of court trial calendar; hearings occur within 2-3 weeks.
- CWS is doing a better job submitting court reports on time, which avoids continued hearings.
- Tribal adoption, where there is an adoption without terminating parental rights.
- Independent Living Program (ILP) services for youth have been extremely helpful.

Systemic practices are the infrastructure to our work. CWS constantly strives to refine and improve our practices so that they are more efficient and support our mission. Toward this effort, CWS assigns Program Managers and Program Review Specialists to attend, support and produce improvements at the various CWS program work groups held on a monthly basis. In addition, CWS

has initiated hiring a parent partner and youth partner and is working more closely with the California Youth Connection to implement and support many of their recommendations.

Openness/Transparency

- Social Workers talk about concurrent planning and permanency up front.
- The concurrent plan is discussed at TDMs, so that parents are aware from the very beginning of an alternate plan.
- Both Social Workers and attorneys ask youth what they want. It is important for the youth to be involved in the process. Youth appreciate being engaged and included in decisions, as well as Social Workers who advocate for them.
- Placement and identification of the concurrent plan occur at detention.
- Regular contact with the Social Worker is helpful, especially when they provide information about the court status and available services. Regular communication helps to enhance collaboration, clarify expectations, and explore options for permanency.
- The attorneys (which include County Counsel and panel attorneys for parents and children) all have good communication and relationships.
- Both the Adoption and Family Reunification Social Worker will meet with the foster family to talk with them about such things as concurrent planning and the home study process, so that the family is well informed of what the expectations are.

Openness and transparency are important to CWS. These practices help to educate people on our complex processes, giving all parties involved a say in each plan, and creating an environment of trust, candidness and good will. Court, placement, reunification and adoption are all complex issues that are not easily understood by our foster parents, parents, relatives, and youth. It is important that Social Workers take the time, energy and effort to clearly communicate expectations among all members of our team at the earliest time possible and throughout the process. It was noted that relatives may make a decision to not adopt at one point in time, but may change their mind at another point in time. It is promising to note that the practice of repeated conversations, and perhaps by different Social Workers, may make the difference in a child's permanency in a family. These discussions are never easy, but they should occur among all members of the team. It appears that this shared communication is occurring in support of our efforts toward openness and transparency.

Relationship Building Skills

- Social Workers are extremely supportive, responsive, and listen to concerns. Social Workers are dedicated, committed, and experienced. Social Workers know the children on their caseload and their needs, and they foster intimate relationship with teens.
- Social Workers set high standards for the well being of children on their caseload.
- Social Workers go above and beyond to establish and maintain family connections for children.
- Social Workers have good relationships with the youth. They visit frequently, even when the youth is placed out of county. Some Social Workers maintain relationships with children and families even after the cases are closed.

As seen in the previous strengths section, our Social Workers and the enthusiasm they bring to their work are valued. Whether they are new to the field or nearing retirement, the emphasis on their personal skills of communication and engagement were clearly highlighted by the interviewers and focus groups. Social Workers in San Luis Obispo County view their work as a calling rather than a job. This is evidenced by the fact that they go "above and beyond," and maintain relationships after case closure.

Teamwork

- Foster parents appreciate being included in the team.
- Most foster parents have contact with the birth parents, and are mentors for them. Foster parents recognize the benefits of developing a relationship with the birth parents.
- Foster homes are very committed to children and stay with them.
- Social Workers do a lot of “up front” work to ensure the placement is going well, and try to implement services to ensure the placement remains successful. Both the Adoption and Family Reunification Social Worker will meet with the foster family to talk with them about concurrent planning, the home study process, etc. so that the family is well informed of what the expectations are.
- Relatives are included in the development of the case plan when the children are first detained.
- Some Social Worker Supervisors use an eco map to show all of the relatives, as well as the services provided for the parents, children, and foster parents.
- Youth enjoy the relationship with their Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA).
- CWS ensures adoptive parents are open to their child’s sustained contact with their birth family and/or relatives, when appropriate.
- There is an attorney in San Luis Obispo County who does pro bono adoptions, which helps with timely adoption.
- Social Workers have good relationships with the relatives, as well as parents and children.
- Social Workers work with relatives to take sibling sets.
- Social Workers really prepare adoptive families for the child.

Teamwork is a cornerstone strategy to Child Welfare Agencies nationwide and one that San Luis Obispo County embraced early on. The interviewer teams and focus groups noted that there was a wide range of professionalism and case sharing strategy. This was borne out of a clearly defined Multi Disciplinary Team approach. The inclusiveness of TDMs (typically 10 or more persons attending) and the sharing of Structured Decision Making assessments allows for openness and conversations where the voices of our partners and parents are heard and considered. In 2010, the combined efforts of Family Reunification and Adoption Social Workers were enhanced with the secondary assignment of Adoption Social Workers. Emphasis on birth parents meeting foster parents is underway and will be further improved in 2011 when transitional plans and other protocols are established to further enhance the quality and consistency of their relationship.

PRACTICES NEEDING IMPROVEMENT

The PQCR interviews and focus groups identified practices that could be the focus for improvement. These practices will be grouped in the following categories: Family Reunification Services, Concurrent Planning, Matching, Court, Home Studies, Clinical/Services, Other Permanency Options, Systems, Skills, Transition Plans, and Placement.

Family Reunification Services

At the PQCR debriefing, it was clearly evident that the interviewers perceived San Luis Obispo County as extending Family Reunification services far beyond what they would have considered. This discrepancy between the visiting counties and San Luis Obispo County is important to note. The visiting counties were specifically chosen because they have reached and maintained a remarkable level of “Adoption within 12 Months Legally Free.” Some of the insights shared among both the visiting counties and the focus groups were:

- Children could have been moved to adoption sooner. Children are negatively impacted by the extension of family reunification services. By the time the child’s case is transferred to the Adoption unit they often have difficult behaviors. Additionally, the Court sometimes overrules recommendation for termination of services. Parents who do not comply with the Family Reunification plan are still given a lot of time to reunify while adoption is not considered.

- CWS is not consistently assessing the prognosis of reunification and developing strong concurrent plans at the beginning of the case.

The above points were underscored on multiple independent occasions by different interviewers, interviewees, and focus groups throughout the PQCR.

Concurrent Planning

Despite concurrent planning being seen as a strength among Social Workers, the following challenges were identified:

- Lack of true understanding of concurrent planning by all parties involved. Concurrent planning is still being defined; both the process and the procedures are unclear.
- Social Workers experience difficulty engaging birth parents in the concurrent plan. There is no buy-in after the termination of Family Reunification services and appeals are likely to result.
- Adoption Social Workers pick up concurrent planning at the 366.26 hearing.
- Concurrent planning is not discussed with foster parents until after Family Reunification services are terminated or around that time.

To summarize, it appears that the concurrent planning process is institutionalized among staff. Previously, the secondary Adoption Social Worker was not attending the formalized meetings in lieu of their supervisor attending for them, until after they were assigned as the primary Social Worker. However, this practice has now changed. Engagement and buy-in with birth parents, as well as communication with foster parents, are practice areas in need of improvement.

Matching

The adoption unit holds a monthly matching meeting which includes Social Workers and partner agencies. It is evident from the PQCR findings that some staff or community partners are either unaware of this meeting and/or the meeting does not fit the ideals that some staff or partners hold. It is also clear from the following comments that there is room for improvement:

- There is no system in place for a matching process or the Social Worker is unaware of such a process.
- Children are placed by availability of beds, as opposed to matching.
- Youth felt that placements in which they were matched appropriately (had similar religious beliefs, lifestyles, interest) were more successful. Youth felt they were often placed in homes that did not suit their individual needs, leading to disruption.

Court

A discussion on the court process and procedures resulted in the following observations that could be a focus for improvement:

- The termination of parental rights prior to having an adoptive home identified.
- Overall lack of understanding of the adoption and court processes.
- Court receipt of late reports from Social Workers creates delays and continued hearings.
- The unresolved immigrant status of children can delay adoption.

It was noted that some of our barriers to realizing timely adoption was historical, a result of a practice several years ago when parental rights were terminated in cases where children did not have an adoptive family identified. Some of these children then became teenagers who did not choose to be adopted or for whom adoption was no longer appropriate. Many of these teenagers had their permanent plan changed, but not before the 12 month period.

Other comments included the necessity of considering relative placement up to the 366.26 hearing, which can disrupt the placement. While this is true, it is also the law and cannot be changed by local practice. One potential practice improvement is to identify and engage relatives earlier in the process as a placement option.

Home Studies

A delay in referring and/or receiving completed home studies was cited as a practice that could be improved. Relatives struggle to complete the home study paperwork/adoption process timely, and may not have the financial resources to obtain certain requirements, such as finger prints. Special interventions may be necessary to engage relatives sooner and throughout the process.

Several years ago San Luis Obispo County decided to contract home studies to outside agencies licensed to perform home studies. As a result, when an adoption is finalized the outside agency receives reimbursement for their efforts via Private Adoption Agency Reimbursement Program (PAARP) funding. Ideally, outside agencies want to home study a family where the child to be adopted is already in the home and the recommendation of CWS is for that family to be the prospective adopter. In many instances children are not already in that adoptive home. This could be because the adoptive home is located out of county and the family was working toward visitation and reunification within county. Adoption Social Workers also note that there is no large inventory of completed home studies under this practice upon which to call on. It was stated that CWS is limited in its services as an adoption agency. Staff indicated a need for training on the department's recruitment activities.

Clinical/Services

The literature review for timeliness in adoption indicates older youth and children with severe behavioral issues, sexual abuse, educational deficits, and mental health needs require early assessment and service. Matching these older youth and children with specialized families who are capable and have the willingness to deal with those issues is crucial to a timely adoption. Observations and comments during the PQCR process indicate that there is some work to be done in this area:

- A thorough initial relative assessment process is needed.
- Many children who are abused and/or neglected have emotional and behavioral issues, sexual abuse issues, ADHD, and separation issues. Being removed from their parents can create further trauma and attachment issues. A smoother adoption process can help to alleviate some of these issues; children may have fewer behavioral issues if they know they will be adopted and there is permanency in their future.

In addition, the engagement of youth could be improved by Social Workers not visiting the youth at their school. The youth clearly stated that they do not like it when the Social Worker comes to the school to visit them. They feel it is embarrassing, distracting, and not an ideal place for quality visits.

Other Permanency Options

The hierarchy of permanency should reunification not be possible, tends to be in this order: 1) adoption 2) guardianship 3) planned permanency living arrangement. Adoption is the most permanent of permanency plans and it is the standard by which the Court considers all other plans. However, agencies are increasingly recognizing that adoption may not be the ideal plan, especially as it applies to relatives. The following insights were provided at the PQCR:

- In some cases, relatives don't necessarily want to adopt, they would rather do guardianship. However, they go along with what the County orders.
- There is a lack of understanding regarding how older youth can get adopted.
- Youth stated additional efforts were needed with the matching process.
- Youth want to be engaged in the matching process.

There is also a need to educate youth on the permanency of adoption and its privileges, judging from one comment by a youth who felt that if a child comes into placement in their late teens, adoption "doesn't really make sense [because you] have to move when you're 18 anyway."

Systems

Some comments pertained to system improvement, including:

- Childcare is not routinely offered during trainings for foster parents.
- Foster parents felt that front-end Social Workers (those working in Emergency Response and Court) are not always as engaging or collaborative with the foster parents.
- An Adoption Social Worker is not always assigned right away to Family Reunification cases.
- TDMs are not always perceived as “family friendly,” and can be intimidating for families when too many agency staff is present.
- Frequent changes in Social Workers prevent consistency of practice and offering of services.
- Adoption caseload work is not specific to adoption.

Transition Plans

Transition plans facilitate the placement move process, ensuring that both the child and the foster families are emotionally prepared for a child’s departure from one placement and arrival at a new home. Transition plans will be a focus for CWS in 2011 and have been announced to foster parents, the Court, and Social Workers. Some suggestions regarding placement changes were made at the PQCR:

- Social Workers could have more sensitivity about placement changes for children in order to support a healthy placement transition. The foster parents would like to be informed of the items they need to prepare for the child, such as size of diapers, appropriate formula, etc.
- Youth felt there was no preparation when changing placements. They were informed only a day or so prior to the placement change, and didn’t have a chance to say goodbye to friends and foster parents. Youth feel more notice and time would be beneficial.

Placement

Placement stability has improved dramatically, as has the availability of county licensed foster homes. However, various practice improvements were noted in this area:

- There is still a lack of foster homes, and insufficient resources.
- There is a need for more culturally diverse homes.
- We talk about beds, not families.
- Social Workers are not encouraged to recruit adoptive families.
- When foster parents are asked to adopt and are educated about the home study process, it can cause the foster parent to become less supportive of the reunification process.

San Luis Obispo County has Options for Recovery (OFR), a program that specializes in the placement of drug exposed infants with specially trained foster parents. OFR foster parents agree to work side by side with substance abusing birth parents. However, OFR homes are not encouraged to adopt the children as they are trained to work with the families in reunification. It was noted that this causes a conflict, as OFR homes are specifically trained to deal with children that have special needs. OFR foster homes are not concurrent or adoptive homes, but the child is bonding with the foster parents while in placement. It was further stated that children in foster homes that only want to provide family reunification are in a bind as adoption can impede keeping the child in a stable placement, as the foster family does not wish to adopt yet would still like to keep the child.

Placement with relatives and Non-Related Extended Family Members (NREFM) has historically been high in San Luis Obispo County, but this can sometimes come at a cost for timeliness in adoption:

- Relatives have different needs compared to foster homes. Relatives need additional time to fully understand the court and adoption process, and to emotionally accept the decision to adopt.
- Relatives may initially say that they would like the children placed with them because it is so emotional; however, they may later delay adopting.

- Completing a home study with relatives versus foster parents is very different. Home studies take a very long time, especially for relatives. The support and training needs are different. CWS may not always take this into consideration when requesting that a home study is completed in four months.
- Relatives are not adequately educated about the whole permanency process. Relatives stated they have to learn about the process, resources, and the differences between guardianship and adoption on their own. This makes it difficult to really understand permanency. While relatives understand the importance of providing permanency to children, they did not seem to have a great deal of information about the differences between the permanency options.
- Emergency Response Social Workers have very little time to do a thorough assessment of relatives to determine if they are a suitable placement. This can lead to children being placed in homes that are later deemed not appropriate for permanency.
- The Social Worker doesn't always look for paternal relatives if the father is unavailable or whereabouts are unknown.
- Home studies are usually ordered after the 366.26 hearing. Rarely are home studies referred prior to 366.26, which can cause things to take longer.
- Several families prefer to wait for the free attorney to avoid attorney costs.

TRAINING NEEDS

The PQCR interviews and focus groups noted training needs. It is noteworthy that the training needs did not include staff as the target audience. The target audiences for identified for specific training included birth parents, relatives, foster parents, and adoptive parents.

Birth Parents

- Concurrent planning training: what are concurrent planning and the roles of the primary and secondary Social Workers? Parents think their children are being adopted. Foster parents don't know what the concurrent plan is.

The goal is for birth parents to understand why two Social Workers are working on their case. There appeared to be confusion and distrust once a birth parent realized one Social Worker's goal was adopting the child. Various workarounds were mentioned, including having the secondary Adoption Social Worker be called a permanency worker at TDMs and waiting until the end of reunification services to introduce the Adoption Social Worker. CWS has stressed the importance of specific and defined concurrent planning with county licensed foster families and DSS Social Workers in 2010 via workshops and improvements in documenting the plan in court reports.

Relatives/NREFMs

Approximately 50-60% of San Luis Obispo County's placements and adoptions are with relatives and NREFMs. Unlike foster parents, relatives and NREFMs are not mandated to complete a set course of training or continuing education. The lack of training, knowledge or understanding may delay achieving stability in the home and may create a situation where relatives and NREFMs and/or the Social Worker do not feel the family is ready to adopt. This delay contributes to untimely adoptions. This problem is magnified in San Luis Obispo County because a high percentage of adoptions are with relatives. Relatives and Social Workers stated several times that relatives would do well if they were required to participate in PRIDE training. At this time, relatives and NREFMs are *invited*, but are not mandated to attend or complete this training. Other suggestions included additional education and training regarding the services available for adoptive parents, grief and loss issues following an adoption, dealing with the birth family, and in-depth training for parenting abused and neglected children. The relatives recognized that they can't parent these children the same way they parent their birth children, but expressed wanting more training and resources to assist them with understanding the children's specific needs.

Another source of training was mentioned for relatives, concerning prognosis and treatment for birth parents. The relatives care about the parents, and find it frustrating to not know how they are progressing and what they needed to do. This also suggests that relatives and NREFMs be provided with more details around the parent's prognosis and treatment (to the extent permitted under confidentiality laws) than what is gleaned from the brief Court Recommendation Report.

Foster Parents

Approximately 25-35% of San Luis Obispo County's placements are with foster parents; half with county licensed foster parents and half with certified foster family agencies. CWS and foster family agencies are each responsible for training their foster family parents. Because the focus groups were blended, it is not possible to determine the source of these comments.

It was noted that mentorship style training would be helpful. Foster parents feel it would be nice to hear more from experienced foster parents before they start receiving placements, as this is where they get the most useful information. Foster parents also feel that adoptive parents are well trained on birth parent issues. Adoption is discussed very briefly during PRIDE, but not really trained in detail. Foster parents have to work with the adoptive parents to help them be more open minded to birth parent contact.

It was also mentioned that follow-up training appears to be in order after the general PRIDE training. San Luis Obispo County's PRIDE training consists of 27 hours of instruction. However, foster parents felt that the PRIDE training was too basic, and would like the County to provide more in-depth training, in areas such as trauma issues and the CWS system. In addition, there may be a role for parent advocates to teach foster families how to deal effectively with birth families.

Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents are not their own unique group, as they consist of relatives, NREFMs, FFA foster families, and county licensed foster families. All of the above trainings could easily apply to them. If a family pursued adoption, the need for a discussion with adoptive parents about post-adoptive services was important, but considered lacking. This task was previously assigned to a half time post adoption Social Worker whose job was to meet with every adoptive family prior to or at adoption finalization, and to offer their business card along with a list of resources. Throughout the years, the adoptive families were part of a newsletter that suggested when it would be a good time to reconnect with the agency or with other service providers. This practice was discontinued when the position was eliminated.

SYSTEMIC/POLICY CHANGES

The PQCR interviews and focus groups resulted in suggestions for system or policy changes in the areas of training, placement, Family Reunification, adoption, home studies, and Court:

Training:

- Initiate required training for relatives and NREFMs.
- Foster home training to become like OFR homes (specialized training and the willingness to work with birth parents). However, as they are not an official OFR home, they can adopt.
- Enable OFR homes to work with relatives at the same time they are working with birth parents. There is a push to place prenatally exposed children in OFR homes, so Social Workers aren't really working with relatives at that time. For OFR, the focus is on the birth parent and the OFR parent, and not the relatives.

Placement:

Implementing transitional plans and allowing youth to participate in matching meetings was recommended. Youth would like more notice prior to a placement change. DSS should try harder to notify them of any changes as well as making sure that the placement is a good match.

Training or open communication regarding a child in permanency might also need to be considered. Currently, our Placement Unit is not trained in adoption. The perception is the Placement Social Worker only looks for bed space for a child, rather than permanency. Cross training between the Adoption and Placement units could address these misperceptions regarding placement and permanency.

Family Reunification:

Family Reunification Supervisors and Social Workers should be vigilant to consider ongoing searches for relatives and the use of relatives as placement. It was noted that the law regarding prospective adoptive parents has made things more difficult as there are now more people fighting over the children. It was also mentioned that DSS should consider being more selective in extending Family Reunification services.

Adoption:

The following recommendations suggest earlier, more defined and expanded use of the Adoption Social Worker's secondary role:

- Adoption Social Workers don't fully understand their role as secondary Social Worker. They don't want to overstep their boundaries in regards to the Family Reunification process.
- Adoption Social Workers don't receive all of the information from meetings, such as the concurrent planning review, TDMs, concurrent planning meetings, and meetings between the Adoption Social Worker Supervisor and FFAs. When they are not involved in the initial TDM, they feel that they are "picking up the pieces."
- Completing a home study four months after it is referred is very difficult. It would be helpful if the home study worker was able to jointly meet with the family and the Adoption secondary Social Worker during the Family Reunification phase. That way, when the home study referral is made, they already have a relationship with the family and it is easier to get the home study done timely.
- The Adoption secondary Social Worker should refer home studies prior to termination of parental rights, if the recommendation is to end services and refer to a WIC 366.26 hearing.

While San Luis Obispo County CWS believes that all children are adoptable, adoption may not always be the most appropriate plan for every child. During the focus groups, some relatives stated that they would like to discuss permanency options other than adoption. It was suggested that CWS consider guardianship or foster care with relatives instead of adoption, if it is in the best interest of the child.

Home Study:

In regards to home studies, it was noted that the Adoption Social Worker should refer home studies prior to termination of parental rights, if the recommendation is most likely to be to end services and refer to a 366.26 hearing. Otherwise, refer home studies after parental rights are terminated while waiting for everything to be solidified and stable before doing the home study. DSS should also consider doing some home studies in-house, as was done in the past, so that foster parents are able to get the foster and adoptive home study completed at the same time.

Court:

The following recommendations suggest that the County should create more finalization hearings:

- It takes a very long time to get a finalization date from the court. The Adoption Social Worker submits the finalization paperwork and does not find out the finalization date until 30 days later – this is not the case with other counties. This can push things out 2 to 3 months.
- Scheduling finalization hearings causes a delay in the process, because the court only has one finalization date each month.

RESOURCE ISSUES

The PQCR interviews and focus groups noted several resource issues that affected various target groups: relatives, youth, placement, court, and adoptive families.

Relatives:

The group most profoundly lacking resources is, not surprisingly, relatives and NREFMs. As a group they are underserved by training and do not have a collective voice to let their needs be known. A foster parent generally has history working with DSS and has access to training and mentorship that the relative does not. In addition, the foster parent who has had several placements and/or adoptions has a degree of on-the-job training that the relative does not have. The following lack of resources for relatives and NREFMs was noted:

- Relatives need more support with the transition from foster care to the home study process.
- There is a need for more resources/training/education for relatives. For example, talk to them about the court process and the adoption process.
- Create support services and resources specifically for relatives that are adopting, such as support groups and trainings specific to relatives. Accessibility to resources is also an issue. Relatives may be impeded by distance, transportation needs, and child care.
- Relatives felt that they didn't know about all the services and resources available. They stated it would be helpful to have someone specifically talk about the resources and tell them how to access the services, such as Wraparound Services, support groups, and relevant trainings.
- For one partner agency, relatives are not required to complete the adoption training because they already attended PRIDE. PRIDE is not enough for adoptive families, especially relatives. They need additional training regarding grief and loss issues, as well as support groups.
- Relatives have different needs than foster homes. Relatives need additional time to really understand the court process, the adoption process, and to emotionally accept the decision to adopt. Trying to work with all these issues and complete a home study in four months is extremely difficult.

Court:

The Court currently has a process in place to assign and fund an attorney for immigration resolution, but apparently it is not known to staff or families. Education about this resource is needed, as it was mentioned that there is a need for someone to take care of the immigrant status at the beginning, so that the adoption is not delayed later on.

Adoptive Families:

It was noted that there are limited post adoption services for families in San Luis Obispo County. Kinship Center is the sole resource, and they are only located in the North County.

- Services needed to assist adoptive families with emotional and behavioral issues, sexual abuse, substance abuse, mental health.
- They need additional training regarding grief and loss issues, as well as support groups.

AREAS NEEDING STATE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The PQCR interviews and focus groups reported the following areas needing State technical assistance.

Home Study

The Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) home study format was described as extremely time consuming and tedious to complete. It may also require excessive information about areas that are not relevant to the adoptive parent's ability to care for the children. The prospect of improving on the home study report or process is welcomed, given the noted challenges and delays encountered.

366.26 Court Report

Relative connections and assessments are not being documented. Many sections are missing out of the 366.26 hearing report. Other jurisdictions have localized practice in documentation of relatives that may result in fewer contested hearings. County Counsel has already mentioned the prospect of improving our 366.26 court report in this area and the idea was embraced by adoption staff.

DOCUMENTATION

Relatives

There is a need for tool to track relatives on Family Finding, relatives that are placement options, and relatives that have been ruled out for placement. A system should be developed that can be transferred between the units with this information. The lack of a system to efficiently track relatives and communicate the work completed remains a challenge. San Luis Obispo County will welcome additional ideas in this area.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Observations and recommendations were made in the following areas: training, placement/transition/matching, resources, home studies, concurrent planning, and Social Workers.

Training

- NREFM and relatives need to have access to and attend the same trainings as foster parents. They need more support with the CWS process and more education in order to better understand the system and needs of their children.
- Older youth need more services and education around adoption.
- Consider policy to not visit youth at school in all but the rarest occasions. Instead, pick the youth up, and take them to do "normal things," such as going out to eat, shopping, or for coffee.
- Concurrent planning training for FFAs, relatives and NREFMs.

Placement/Transition/Matching:

San Luis Obispo County is launching the Transitional Planning program in 2011, in coordination with the Quality Parent Pilot Project and California Youth Connection. This program will address and remedy some of the concerns regarding transitions in placement. It will also address these two recommendations:

- Develop a form or questionnaire that Social Workers complete prior to placing a child. This will include basic information for the foster parent on such things as allergies, size diapers, and medical issues. This will help with placement transitions.
- Have birth parents and foster parents meet with each other to facilitate permanency for children.

At a recent Matching Meeting the following items were addressed and considered very practical recommendations to implement:

- DSS could consider using “child available” photo sheets to allow adoptive families to really visualize the child, and not just get an image about children based on information they read. Having a picture of the child really helps adoptive parents open their minds up about certain behaviors, etc.
- San Luis Obispo County should consider having matching meetings in other areas within the county in order to broaden their horizons and perhaps recruit additional adoptive parents.
- San Luis Obispo County should consider participating in other matching meetings, such as Valley Exchange and the Bay Area Supervisors of Adoption (BASA), to find additional resource families for older youth.

Additionally, youth want to have more input in their placement decisions. The youth stated that they would have liked to be adopted, but that it was not seriously pursued for them because they entered care at an older age. This recommendation is worthy of consideration and will be further evaluated, perhaps through a group workshop and one-on-one consulting with a skilled Adoption Social Worker.

Youth also stated they were very uncomfortable packing their belongings prior to a move. They feel the Social Worker should be there with them, as some foster parents made them feel extremely uncomfortable while packing and some have been accused of stealing. This recommendation suggests that the assigned primary social worker accompany the youth on their last day at placement to assist with practical tasks like packing, record collection, and closure. This could be worked into the Transition Plan project.

Other recommendations that are part of routine practice but should be re-evaluated or further explored and discussed include:

- Explore more viable relatives/NREFMs early on, as the birth parent might be more amenable to intervention/adoption if that happens.
- Implement notifying relatives to the 5th degree.

Resources

Relatives suggested having one person whose primary job is to educate relatives about the entire CWS process, the court process, the adoption/guardianship process, etc. They would like a specific person who can answer questions, provide education, and link them to resources. This recommendation appears to suggest a non-case-carrying Social Worker assignment. In the past, a position was dedicated to this half-time program as a post-adoption Social Worker. This could be considered for the future.

The request for mediation available after the 366.26 hearing suggests that post adoption issues can and should be mediated. DSS does contract a neutral third party organization to conduct juvenile dependency mediations for court cases. DSS also contracts with a state agency to conduct post permanency contact mediation prior to 366.26 hearings. It is not clear whether this recommendation could be satisfied by either of the two existing agencies. If not, consideration could be given to explore other options.

Home Studies

It was recommended that DSS consider doing more home studies in-house, rather than referring all home studies to outside agencies. This recommendation suggests that not all home studies should be referred out. It is true that DSS has not used their own Adoption Social Workers to conduct adoption home studies for several years, except for the rare request for courtesy adoption home studies from other counties and states. This assignment is delegated to a specific Licensing Social Worker with a master's degree and adoption experience and training. It is possible that

Adoption Social Workers can do their own home studies in-house if the need is known and arises, but the workload issue would need to be addressed.

Concurrent Planning

The following recommendations were made regarding concurrent planning:

- The concurrent planning concept needs to be explained to foster parents more than just at PRIDE training.
- Consider changing the Adoption Social Worker role to “permanency worker” for TDMs. This might result in more openness from birth parents to the concurrent planning process and a greater willingness to provide additional information about relatives.
- Concurrent planning training for FFAs, relatives and NREFMs.
- Fewer extensions of Family Reunification services so that adoption can happen earlier.

Concurrent planning was revisited, revitalized and re-launched within DSS and with county licensed foster parents in 2010. Further training and outreach to relatives, FFA foster parents, and parents is being recommended.

It is also clear that the visiting counties and state analysts believe that San Luis Obispo County has a practice of extending family reunification beyond the point that they would consider, based on their impression of the selected cases. This shift of Family Reunification vs. Adoption may present a more difficult cultural or paradigm shift for staff, but a shift that would ideally occur at each and every concurrent planning meeting.

Social Workers:

Self care for Social Workers was proposed. Social Workers do participate in an annual all-staff Self Care Conference. They can also utilize Employee Assistance Program referrals. There are debriefings held by licensed professionals after particularly traumatic investigations, cases or outcomes. This recommendation seems to suggest that Social Workers have more ongoing opportunities for self-care, or support groups beyond what is currently available. This suggestion may be examined in more detail and with more specificity among the various Social Worker workgroups.

Probation

PROMISING PRACTICES

The case reviews and focus groups came up with the following promising practices relative to placement stability:

- Pre-placement case staffing procedure
- Use of risk assessment tool
- Timely psychological evaluations
- Placement of youth in group homes with frequent pro-social activities
- Placement of youth in the county when possible
- Wraparound Services
- Collaboration with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)
- Experienced, caring and creative probation officers

During the course of the individual case reviews and focus groups, certain existing practices or strengths were identified as having a positive effect on placement stability. Currently the Probation Department has an internal pre-placement staffing committee. The committee addresses pre-placement services that have been provided, potential relative placement options, and mandatory relative notification when placement is recommended. Probation also uses the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI), a validated risk assessment tool to help identify

the youth's major needs, strengths, barriers, and incentives and produce an effective case management plan. The YLS-CMI risk score is included in the information provided for every staffing and informs the committee's placement decisions. This committee also provides for quality assurance. For example, they ensure a psychological evaluation is obtained for any case where Probation is recommending out of home placement. These evaluations are often obtained in two weeks or less and this timeliness can help inform the initial placement and provide a better placement match from the outset, thereby positively affecting placement stability.

Placement of youth in group homes located in San Luis Obispo County, as well as in group homes that keep youth busy with frequent pro-social activities such as Independent Living Program (ILP) services, were also identified as promising practices related to placement stability. Specifically, the Youth Treatment Program (YTP) was identified as an in-county program that provides good services and is inclusive with families. Wraparound Services were also identified as a promising practice. They are frequently used as an option prior to out-of-home placement. San Luis Obispo County has a model wraparound program in the Family Care Network's "Familia De Novo." Good collaboration with CASA was also brought up; it was noted that there are cases where the CASA worker accompanies the Probation Officer on placement visits.

Themes around the work of the Probation Officers were also identified as strengths or promising practices. Specifically, the relative experience of the Probation Officers assigned to the placement unit, as well as their commitment to the youth on their caseloads was mentioned. Probation Officers were noted as relationship oriented, engaging with the families they work with and creative in facilitating family contact. For example, Probation Officers were commended for transporting parents to group homes to facilitate family visits, which positively affect the youth's stability at the placement.

PRACTICES NEEDING IMPROVEMENT

The following practices/issues were identified as affecting placement stability and needing improvement:

- Proper matching of youth with group home.
- Limited number of in-county group homes.
- Limited number of group homes using Evidence Based Practices.
- Lack of family involvement in group home programming.
- Pressures to place youth quickly out of juvenile hall.
- Pressures to place youth locally or in least restrictive environment.
- Lack of family finding program.
- Family engagement and involvement in the case plan.
- Listening to youth who say their program is not working.
- Youth leaving programs early or returning with lack of appropriate aftercare plan.

The case reviews and focus groups identified practices or areas needing improvement. Proper group home matching was a repeated theme. Proper matching is important to placement stability as it is reasonable to assume that a youth improperly matched with a foster placement is more likely to abscond from or otherwise fail to successfully reunify from that placement. Probation is limited by the fact that there are only two group homes in the county; and even outside of the county there are few group homes using Evidence Based Practices. Another issue addressed was that group homes do not involve the family enough during the period of placement. Aside from the issues with the placements themselves, there are pressures to place youth quickly in order to minimize the time they are detained in juvenile hall. This can lead to rushed placements and less than ideal matching of youth with placements. Pressures to place youth locally or in the least restrictive placement can also have a negative effect on placement stability as this can lead to a poor placement match when a placement is not equipped to meet the specific needs of the youth.

This can result in a youth having to fail a local or less restrictive placement in order to ultimately get placed in a program that can meet the youth's needs.

Probation does not have a Family Finding program or Probation Officers trained in family finding. This limits potential relative placement options, as the youth often have limited knowledge about relatives. Additionally, parents can be resistant to relative placement and therefore provide limited information to the Probation Officer. Another issue identified was family engagement. Specifically, lack of youth and family involvement in the out-of-home placement case plan and the initial placement identified for the youth was noted. Given the statutory requirement that placement case plans are to be completed at the time of disposition, there is at times little involvement from the family or youth in developing the case plan. Families often contest the placement recommendation up until it is ordered by the court. Another obstacle is the fact that the Probation Officers supervising youth in the community are less familiar with the placement case plan. This leads to less involvement and buy-in from both the family and youth. Current practices regarding initial placement also lead to less family involvement. There is little communication with the family about the initial placement options and a lack of formalized involvement by the family during this period.

Additional issues identified were the fact that youth felt they are not heard when they state their program is not working, as well as youth who sometimes leave programs early or return due to the lack of an appropriate aftercare plan. It is important that the Probation Officer listen to youth who indicate that a program is not working for them as it may be a sign of an improper match. If unaddressed, this is likely to lead to placement instability if the youth absconds or fails to progress in the program. When youth reunify too early or without an appropriate aftercare plan, it can lead to placement instability if they have not acquired the necessary skills to be successful back in the community, or if their caregivers are not in a position to provide the necessary care and control. This may result in future out-of-home placement that could have been prevented. Statutory pressures and input from other stakeholders such as parents and attorneys can contribute to the issue of early reunification. A lack of appropriate services in the community can complicate aftercare planning.

TRAINING NEEDS

Training needs identified out of the Probation portion of the PQCR process include:

- Family Finding and relative placement.
- Family engagement.
- Case planning.
- Concurrent planning.
- Aftercare planning.
- Training for specialized offender populations, such as sexual offending or substance abusing.
- Evidence Based Practice as specifically related to out-of-home placement programming.

Some clear themes came to light regarding training needs during the case reviews and focus groups. The need for Family Finding training was especially apparent as it played into other issues such as more effective use of relative placement prior to group home placement or as a concurrent or permanent plan. Family engagement is a needed area of training as placement cases often involve some of the more difficult families to work with. Overcoming barriers and engaging and motivating families can be a difficult task without formal training. Case planning was also identified as an area in need of training, specifically concurrent planning with families and aftercare planning. Training in specialized offender populations was also noted. Monitoring progress in areas such as sexual offending or substance abusing behaviors is difficult without a good understanding of the specialized needs of these populations. Training on Evidence Based Practices as specifically related to out-of-home placement interventions would also be helpful in order to help Probation

Officers provide quality assurance of placements and identify which programs have a greater likelihood of reducing a youth's delinquent behaviors.

These needs have already been communicated to Probation Department training personnel. A case planning training for San Luis Obispo County is being developed with the UC Davis Research Center for Family-Focused Practice (RCFFP). Probation will also be enrolling a Probation Officer in the upcoming RCFFP training on Family Finding.

SYSTEMIC/POLICY CHANGES

The PQCR process suggested changes in the following systemic/policy areas:

- Initial placement procedures.
- More family involvement in case plan.
- Pressures to release from juvenile hall.
- Pressures to place locally or in the least restrictive environment.
- Formalization of Concurrent Planning and Aftercare.
- Reunification of youth too early.
- Division of Juvenile Facilities eligibility issues.

Modification of practices and procedures between the placement order and the time the youth is actually placed in foster care are needed. More formal input from the youth and their family in the selection of the group home would likely provide better placement matching as well as more buy-in from the youth and family. More involvement from the line placement Probation Officers in the initial group home matching decisions was also suggested. These Probation Officers are most familiar with the placements and felt they could provide valuable input to this decision making process which would assist in improving placement matching and stability. In addition, reducing the pressures from juvenile hall to place minors quickly would aid in better matching decisions as would reducing the pressures to place locally or in the least restrictive environment. While these are important considerations, finding a placement equipped to meet the youth's specific needs should be the highest priority. Case planning is another area where policy and procedural changes would be appropriate. Setting up a process to better involve the family in the case plan after the placement order is made would likely have a positive affect on buy-in and therefore placement stability.

More support for and formalized processes around concurrent planning and aftercare are also needed. Better formalizing the concurrent planning process would help develop better understanding of concurrent planning by the Probation Officers and minimize instability in the event reunification efforts fail. Setting up more formalized procedures around aftercare would also be appropriate. Formalizing the aftercare process would likely result in more services being in place at the time of the youth's return to the community and facilitate better utilization of interventions such as Wraparound Services for aftercare programming.

Reunification of youth too early was also identified as a factor affecting placement stability. Educating and better communicating with stakeholders such as the youth's attorney and the judge around issues affecting reunification could help with this issue.

A major systemic issue affecting placement stability has been the changes to the Welfare and Institutions Code altering who is eligible for commitment to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Division of Juvenile Facilities (DJF). The tighter restrictions on youth eligible for commitment to DJF has at times meant placing higher risk youth in unconfined group home placements that are ill equipped to address some of the youth's behaviors. This can negatively affect that individual youth's stability and also affect the stability of other youth in these

programs as they are exposed to higher risk peers that they might not have been otherwise exposed to.

RESOURCE ISSUES

Some resource issues identified were as follows:

- Lack of group homes in San Luis Obispo County.
- Lack of placements using Evidence Based Practice.
- Cost of placements has gone up.
- State budget issues.
- Lack of confined treatment options.
- Lack of auxiliary funds.

As previously noted, there are only two group homes for delinquent youth in San Luis Obispo County. Furthermore, group homes around the state have been slow to adapt to Evidence Based Practices in the field of community corrections. The recent rise in the cost of out-of-home placements is another resource issue affecting San Luis Obispo County, as well as other jurisdictions around the state. This comes at a difficult time for probation departments as some juvenile probation funding is uncertain due to budget issues at the state level.

Another resource issue is the lack of confined treatment options for high risk youth. As noted earlier, fewer youth are eligible for commitment to DJF. San Luis Obispo County does not have a camp program or the resources to pay other counties to treat our youth in their camp programs. Oftentimes that means re-placing youth in unconfined group homes even after they have failed in similar settings on multiple occasions.

A lack of auxiliary funds was another resource issue identified. Probation does not have “flexible” funds that can be used for things such as incentives for youth in placement and has limited resources to help families with visiting youth in placement or facilitating youth furloughs home.

AREAS NEEDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Some areas in need of technical assistance for the Probation Department were as follows:

- Case planning.
- Concurrent planning.
- Updating forms and procedures.

Case planning was a repeated theme during the PQCR and Probation could benefit from technical assistance in this area in order to better involve youth and families and develop improved policies/procedures. Concurrent planning was another recurring theme. Improved understanding of this requirement is needed on the part of Probation Officers, as is clearer delineation of concurrent planning in reports and case plans. Lastly, technical assistance in the area of placement procedures and forms in general would be helpful.

DOCUMENTATION

No documentation themes were identified for the Probation Department.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following observations and recommendations were noted:

- Develop more pre-placement services.
- Support/encourage more local placement options.

- Improve initial placement matching procedures.
- Work with placements to incorporate more evidence based practice.
- Develop family finding program.
- Greater involvement of youth and family in all aspects of placement process.
- Identify and remove barriers to family involvement.
- Educate stakeholders so they understand and support the placement process.
- Improve aftercare plans and services.
- Additional training for the probation officers and increased resources.

Observations and recommendations covered all phases of the placement process. To begin with, more pre-placement services are needed to help prevent out-of-home placement whenever possible. San Luis Obispo County has promising services such as a model Wraparound program and at risk services for boys in the Bakari Program, and for girls with Teens Together. However, these programs have limited availability and further services are needed. The Probation Department is in the process of partnering with local treatment providers to establish evidence based programs including “Thinking for a Change.”

More local placement options are needed and it was recommended that the Probation Department encourage and support efforts in this area. Improvements are needed in initial placement matching procedures. Reducing outside pressures and better involving the placement Probation Officers in this area could lead to a better initial placement that is equipped to meet the specific needs of the youth. A lack of evidence based services in current placements was noted. Supporting and encouraging existing placements to incorporate more evidence based practice would be beneficial. Developing a Family Finding program was also suggested as it would draw on additional family supports, identify more family placement options and likely increase placement stability especially for those youth who currently have little family support or viable reunification options.

Working to increase youth and family involvement at all stages was also recommended. Specifically, including more youth and family input in the initial placement could promote better matching with more buy-in and therefore promote placement stability. Allowing youth to visit prospective placements and/or talk to other youth who have been in placement was further suggested. Listening to youth and taking action when they say their placement is not working was also recommended. Some youth did not feel their concerns were heard or that they were believed when they said they were going to run away from placement. Furthermore, identifying and removing barriers such as transportation to family involvement was also noted.

It was also noted that educating stakeholders more on the placement process would be helpful in getting their increased buy-in and support. Oftentimes, the recommendation for placement is contested by the youth and their attorney and this creates an adversarial atmosphere. Overcoming these barriers is extremely important once the placement order is made. For example, getting the attorneys’ support and helping the attorneys understand the importance of proper matching in the initial placement would likely increase the buy-in of the youth and family and reduce the pressures to place the youth as quickly as possible in order to remove them from juvenile hall.

Improving aftercare planning and services was another recommendation. Formalizing the procedures around aftercare planning, as well as better utilizing interventions such as Wraparound Services as a component of aftercare, could provide for a better transition when the youth returns to the community. Improvements in this area could also prevent re-placing the youth in the future.

Lastly, it was observed that the placement Probation Officers are experienced, caring and creative in their work. Supporting them with needed training in areas such as case planning, concurrent planning and family engagement, as well as providing them with the resources to support youth and families in the placement process would go a long way towards increasing placement stability.

Conclusion

While the 2010 PQCR provided positive feedback on the strengths and dedication of CWS and Probation staff, it also provided valuable information on areas needing improvement in order to achieve both placement stability and timely adoption. Following the PQCR, the Adoption unit met to discuss many of the findings, as they are eager to proceed with implementing many of the ideas they heard during the PQCR event.

Many of the findings from San Luis Obispo County's PQCR are reflective of the information cited in the literature reviews. For CWS, the literature review on Timely Adoption mentioned the need to educate parents on CWS and adoption processes and timelines, as well as the need for post-adoption services. Both of these needs were mentioned often in both the peer interviews and focus groups.

For Probation, the Placement Stability literature review stressed the value of well trained placement staff and foster parents, as well as the importance of youth and family input in the placement process. Peer interviews and focus groups often mentioned the need for the staff at group homes to be well trained and receptive to the needs of youth. Additionally, the interviews and focus groups placed a high importance on the need for youth and family involvement in placement decisions.

After reviewing all of the information gathered during the course of the PQCR, CWS has identified three issues that were frequently repeated:

- San Luis Obispo County gives parents too long to reunify.
- San Luis Obispo County should explore training parents and relatives on concurrent planning and relinquishments/waiving services.
- San Luis Obispo County should manage their own adoption finalization calendar.

For Probation, three recurring themes were:

- The need for greater youth and family input and involvement in placement decisions.
- The need to develop more local placement options for probation youth.
- The need for additional training for placement officers in such areas as family finding, family engagement, case planning and concurrent planning.

This information will provide direction as CWS and Probation proceed with our next steps in the C-CFSR process. These issues will be further discussed and evaluated as we conduct the CSA, seeking further input from community partners on many of these concerns. Additionally, they will be addressed in the SIP, as CWS and Probation develops its plan to improve upon practices and services to better serve the youth and families of San Luis Obispo County.

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEPUTY PROBATION OFFICER INTERVIEW TOOL

INTRODUCTIONS

Introductions:

- ❖ Interviewer Team: Briefly identify interviewers and their work experience. Explain each interviewer's role (time keeper, recorder, and lead interviewer).
- ❖ Briefly explain purpose of the interview.
 - ✓ Anonymity
 - ✓ No right or wrong responses
 - ✓ Qualitative information about practice
 - ✓ Concentrate responses on the focus topic: **Placement Stability**
 - ✓ Okay to generalize from other cases

Probation Characteristics

1. How long have you worked for SLO Probation Department?
2. What is your education and training background?
3. What has your average caseload size been since you have worked in the placement unit?

Youth Characteristics/Initial Placement

4. Please describe this youth (age, gender, composition of family of origin).
5. What behavioral, mental health, and/or emotional needs does this minor have? Please describe the assessments utilized to determine the minor's needs.
6. Please describe the process your department followed when determining where the minor would be first placed? What about that process worked? What did not work?
7. If you could do it over, would you have chosen the same type of placement or would you have made a different decision? Please explain why or why not?
8. Please describe the quality of the transition of the minor from his/her home to their initial placement?
9. How were the parents included in the decision regarding where the minor would be first placed?
10. What types of services were provided to the minor's parents before and after the minor was placed out of the home. Was Wraparound Services attempted or offered? Were there any additional services or interventions that you feel may have prevented the need for the minor to be placed out of the home?

Placement History

11. Please describe the minor's placement history.
 - a. How many placements did the minor have?
 - b. What type of placements were they?
 - c. What happened that led to each placement change?
12. How did the minor's mental health, behavioral, and emotional needs impact the success or struggles of each placement?
13. What barriers did you encounter when trying to obtain needed mental health or behavioral services for the minor?
14. How did you work with the minor and the group home staff when issues arose within the group home?

Parent Involvement/Positive Connections

15. What is or has been the parent's role/participation in the placement process?
16. Please describe the contact between the parent and the youth.
 - a. How often did they have contact?
 - b. What type of contact did they have?
 - c. Was the contact positive/negative?
 - d. How did the contact impact the placement?
17. What steps did you take to engage the parent? What steps did the group home take to engage the parents?
18. What positive activities was the minor involved in while placed out of the home?
19. What kind of positive connections with other adults were you able to help the minor maintain? Do you feel these connections helped support the minor maintain placement stability?
20. If the youth did not have any positive connections, what do you think were the barriers to making those connections?

Concurrent Planning/Aftercare

21. How were relatives/NREFMs located and assessed for placement?
22. *If the youth was in group home care:* how did you make the decision to place the youth in group home care rather than relative care?
23. *If the youth was in relative care:* how prepared was the relative/NREFM to manage the youth's specific needs? How many support systems did the caretaker have?

24. What is your understanding of concurrent planning practices?
25. How did you implement concurrent planning practices with this case?
26. What steps were taken to develop the minor's aftercare plan and who was involved in the development of the aftercare plan?

Probation Officer Characteristics

27. How many probation officers did the youth have? If there was a change, in what way do you feel this impacted the case?
28. What training have you received regarding effective case management, placement decision-making, placement matching, etc.?
29. What Department policies and procedures encourage relative/NREFM placements or other alternatives to group home placements? How are you supported in looking at alternatives to group home placements?
30. What trainings have been provided to you regarding concurrent planning?
31. What factors do you feel help youth remain in placement?

Closing

32. If you could go back and change something the Probation department did that would have improved the placement stability for this minor, what would that be?

PQCR INTERVIEW TEAM OBSERVATIONS

Use this space to prepare for the debriefing session. Answers need to be specific to the focus area of Placement Stability.

- ❖ Identify documentation trends identified:
- ❖ Identify promising practices:
- ❖ Identify barriers & challenges:
- ❖ Identify training needs:
- ❖ Identify systemic/policy changes:
- ❖ Identify resource issues:
- ❖ Identify areas needing state technical assistance:
- ❖ Other:

CWS SOCIAL WORKER INTERVIEW TOOL

INTRODUCTIONS

Introductions:

- ❖ Interviewer Team: Briefly identify interviewers and their work experience. Explain each interviewer's role (time keeper, recorder, and lead interviewer).
- ❖ Briefly explain purpose of the interview.
 - ✓ Anonymity
 - ✓ No right or wrong responses
 - ✓ Qualitative information about practice
 - ✓ Concentrate responses on the focus topic: **Timely Adoption (Adoption within 12 months of being legally free)**
 - ✓ Okay to generalize from other cases
- ❖ Ask the Social Worker for a brief summary of his or her education background (BSW, MSW, Title IV-E), CWS experience, length of time with the county.

Child's characteristics/placement history (To be asked of both Adoptions and FR Social Workers)

1. Please describe the child's characteristics? Age at removal? Ethnicity? Reason for removal?
2. Discuss the child's behavioral, mental health, and emotional needs? What assessments/services were provided to address the child's needs and support the placement?
3. If the child experienced sexual abuse, what specific services were provided to support any issues the family had to deal with?
4. Please describe the child's placement history? How many adoptive/concurrent placements did the child have? If any placements failed, what happened that led to the failed placements?
5. How did you transition the child into the adoptive/concurrent home?

Birth Family background (To be asked of both Adoptions and FR Social Workers)

6. Please describe the birth family composition and history. Two parent home, married, separated, siblings, etc.

Adoptive Family background (To be asked of Adoptions Social Workers only)

7. What is the family composition of the adoptive family?
8. How open was the adoptive family to services for the child? Please explain.

9. On a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, how engaged was the adoptive family? Tell us what happened that encouraged or discouraged engagement.
10. Please describe the adoptive family's understanding of the benefits, legal rights, and responsibilities of an adoptive parent vs. guardian vs. foster parent. How did you know that this was their understanding?

Social Worker background (To be asked of both Adoptions and FR Social Workers)

11. What are your beliefs about concurrent planning practices? Do you feel DSS fully embraces and supports concurrent planning?
12. What are your beliefs about different types of adoptive homes (i.e. single parents, same-sex couples, trans-racial adoptions, social economic status, etc.)?
13. What ideas do you have that might assist you to meet this deadline in the future?
14. At what points, if any, were the parents offered the opportunity to waive services and/or designate a relinquishment?
15. Who did you contact for permanency for this child? Tell us how you engaged those families? What factors did you consider when making the adoptive placement?
16. How were relatives assessed for placement of this child? What were some of the barriers? What worked?
17. Were you aware of the "12 months legally free" date for this child? Were you aware of when it had been 12 months since parental rights were terminated? How did these dates/timeframes influence your approach to the case?

Concurrent Planning (To be asked of both Adoptions and FR Social Workers)

18. What is your understanding of SLO County's policies and procedures for implementing concurrent planning? How do you feel about this process (i.e. strengths, challenges)?
19. Was there a relationship between the birth parents and foster/adoptive parents? If yes, please describe the relationship.
20. Was openness in adoption and post permanency contact discussed or explored? If so, how was it explored?

Recruitment (To be asked of both Adoptions and FR Social Workers)

21. What factors such as tools, skills, traits, home composition, or history were considered when searching for a permanent home for this child?
22. Please describe your efforts to locate relatives/NREFM for permanency for this child.

23. What is SLO County's procedure for matching children with foster homes? What are the strengths and challenges of this process?

24. Was a TDM held? If so, what were the strengths and challenges in having the TDM? If not, why was a TDM not held for the child?

Post Adoption services (To be asked of Adoptions Social Workers only)

25. Please describe the services available to adoptive families after an adoption is finalized.

26. What support is available for older youth that are adopted?

27. How prepared was this child for the adoptive family, transition into the home, etc? What services were offered to support the family unit as a whole prior to and after finalization?

SOCIAL WORKER OBSERVATIONS

28. Hindsight is often 20-20. If you could go back in time and change something child welfare did that would have helped this child become adopted what would that have been?

29. Anything else you would like to add about this child's adoption?

PQCR INTERVIEW TEAM OBSERVATIONS

Use this space to prepare for the debriefing session. Answers need to be specific to the focus area of Timely Adoptions (Adoption within 12 months of being legally free).

- ❖ Identify documentation trends identified:
- ❖ Identify promising practices:
- ❖ Identify barriers & challenges:
- ❖ Identify training needs:
- ❖ Identify systemic/policy changes:
- ❖ Identify resource issues:
- ❖ Identify areas needing state technical assistance:
- ❖ Other:

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

CWS COURT STAKEHOLDERS

1. What promising practices do you see occurring in the court room that promote timely adoption?
2. What are the barriers and challenges that you see which impede timely adoption?
3. What are some systemic or practice changes that you would like to see child welfare do to increase timely adoption?
4. What do you view your role to be in promoting timely adoption in child welfare?
5. What do you think the judges and attorneys can/should do directly to promote permanency for older youth?

CWS RELATIVE PLACEMENTS

1. As a caregiver, what does “permanency” mean to you and what do you think permanency means for the child you are caring for?
2. What is your understanding of the differences between adoption, guardianship and long term foster care? What services are available under each permanency option? How did you learn about this service/information?
3. What is your understanding of adoption as a permanent plan? As a relative caregiver, do you prefer adoption or guardianship? Please discuss why.
4. Were you included in developing the youth’s case plan and case planning activities? If yes, how? If the permanent plan was **not** adoption, what are some of the barriers to adopting children that you have seen?
5. What are the top 3 things social workers did to help you when a child was placed in your home?
6. What are the top 3 things you would have liked your SW do to help you with a child being placed in your home?
7. What type of training do you think relatives/NREFMs would benefit from?
8. What barriers exist that make it difficult for you to attend existing trainings?
9. How many people do you have that support you in helping you to parent this child?

ADOPTIVE, FOSTER AND FFA PARENTS

1. What kind of training did you have? On-going training? Support? What is the protocol for respite care? Transportation assistance?
2. How did the social worker help you and the foster children solve conflicts that happened in your home?
3. Did you have a relationship/communication with the biological parents? If yes, please discuss the quality of that relationship.
4. What are the top 3 things social workers did to help you when a child was placed in your home?
5. What are the top 3 things you would have liked your SW do to help you with a child being placed in your care?
6. What factors do you think lead to a successful adoptive placement? What services could be provided that might lead to more finalized adoptions?
7. How many people do you have that support you in helping you to parent this child?
8. If you have ever been a fost-adopt parent and children were removed from the home, please tell us some of the reasons for the moves.
9. Additional Question if time Permits: When children are placed in your home, how are you prepared? How does the transition process occur? What kinds of information are you provided? How are you informed about their favorite foods, activities, etc?

CWS SUPERVISORS

1. For each unit (i.e. ER/Court, FR/FM, and Adoption) what practices do you think might be impacting timely adoption in SLO?
2. What is your understanding of the home study process? When does it begin?
3. How and when is concurrent case planning implemented? And what is your role in overseeing implementation?
4. How are you involved in the decision making regarding permanency?
5. In the last year or two, what improvements have been made that contribute to successful adoptive placements and finalizations?
6. How do you see the involvement of the court affecting timely adoption?
7. Describe the most significant recurring challenges or barriers that exist which impede timely adoption within SLO?
8. How can each unit help improve timely adoption in SLO?
9. Do you have suggestions about how to make improvements to practice that would support timely adoption occurring? Are there any prior practices the county used to follow that you would like to see revived?

CWS YOUTH

1. Describe a good living situation while you were in foster care?
2. What are the services/resources that helped you while in foster care?
3. What services/resources would have been helpful or useful to help you stay in a permanent home?
4. Tell us some of the reasons you had to change placements. If you had to change placements, what helped you to make it easier?
5. How many social workers did you have?
6. How did your social worker tell you when you had to change placements?
7. How did you spend time with Child Welfare Social Workers when they visit you? When you had a good visit, what happened to make things click? What made the visit good? Where did they visit you? How often did they visit you?
8. If there was a placement you had to leave, but wished you could have stayed: Was there anything your social worker or caregiver could have done to help you stay there? Was there anything you could have done differently?
9. What does permanency mean to you? What do you think about adoption?
10. How were you involved in finding or transitioning into your permanent home?

CWS COMMUNITY PARTNERS

1. As a Community Partner, what do you feel are some practices that SLO County implemented which work well to improve successful adoptive placements and timely adoption?
2. What else have you seen in other counties/agencies that work?
3. How do you feel about SLO County's matching meeting process? What would you do differently to make it more successful?
4. In your experience, what do you feel is the most prominent issue influencing timely adoption within SLO?
5. Do you feel that there are any systematic barriers (i.e. Courts, Regulations, etc...) that contribute to an adoption taking over twelve months?
6. Would you like to share any strategies you use that you feel would improve adoption in SLO and reduces the chance of a failed adoptive placement?
7. What are your thoughts about the home study process? Is it efficient? In what ways does it support timely adoption and in what ways does it impede timely adoption?

PROBATION MINORS

1. Tell me about the decision that was made that put you in your first placement.
2. Did you have any other relatives or friends that you feel may have been willing to care for you when it was determined you could no longer live at home? If so, who were they? Did your PO ever discuss these individuals with you?
3. What did you think when you went to your first placement? Did you understand why you were placed in a foster home/group home?
4. Was there anything you think could have been done to better prepare you for your first placement?
5. Were you able to maintain regular contact with your parents once you were in placement? Please describe your contacts with your parents.
6. What type of relationship did you have with your care providers? Did you feel you were able to discuss your feelings about your placement with your PO?
7. What issues led to your placement changes? What do you think would help ensure that minors aren't changing placements multiple times?
8. What was different about the placements that you describe as "successful" versus those that were "unsuccessful?"
9. What things do you think are most important in helping someone like you be successful in placement?
10. If you were a probation officer working with youth in out of home placement, what specific things would you do to help the youth maintain while in placement and be successful after they returned to the community?

PROBATION SUPERVISORS

1. What programs or practices do you believe are most effective in promoting placement stability for probation youth?
2. What programs or practices do you believe could be added or improved on in order to improve placement outcomes and promote placement stability?
3. What factors have you seen or do you believe contribute to a minor having multiple out of home placements? How do you think these factors could be better addressed by the Probation Department?
4. When reviewing court reports and other documents such as placement case plans, what specifically do you look for to see that the PO is working to make placement successful and minimize placement disruption?
5. How can you tell if PO is working towards successful reunification or establishing permanent connections for the minor?
6. What do you do to support and encourage your POs in searching for alternatives to group home placements?
7. How do you think family engagement affects placement stability? How do the POs engage parents? How do the placements engage parents? What have you seen that works to engage parents?

8. What departmental practices, policies or procedures are in place that guide the placement process and do they support establishing permanent connections for probation youth? What, if any, additional practices, policies or procedures are needed?
9. How would you describe the line POs understanding of out of home placement issues such as placement stability? Do you believe they are sufficiently trained in this area and if not, what types of training do you see are needed?

PROBATION PARENTS

1. How do you feel about the services your child received prior to his/her out-of-home placement? What resources and/or services would you have liked to see implemented prior to your child being placed out of the home?
2. Do you (or did you) understand the reasoning behind why your child was placed out of the home?
3. How were you included in the decision to pursue an out-of-home placement for your child? What could have made that decision-making process better?
4. When the out-of-home case-plan for your child was developed, were you included in the process? If so how? If not, why not?
5. Once your child was placed out of the home, how often did you see or hear from the probation officer and what was the quality of the contact?
6. Let's talk about visits. How often did you see your child when he/she was placed out of the home? What was the contact like?
7. Did you experience any barriers to having regular contact with your child? If so, what were the barriers? What suggestions do you have for ways to overcome these barriers? Do you have suggestions of how to make visitation better for families of children in out-of-home placement?
8. We would like to know your thoughts on placement stability. Did your child go to more than one placement? If so, what do you think could have prevented this?
9. What worked well for you while working with the probation department during the time your child was in out-of-home placement? What are the strengths of the probation department and your experience with them as you see it?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX 3: CASE SUMMARY OUTLINES

SLO County 2010 PQCR CWS Case Summary

Child's Name:
Birth Parents:

Child's Date of Birth:
Adoptive Parent(s):

Dates:

- Start:
- Legally Free:
- Exit:

Case Summary:

Attached: SafeMeasures Case Summary
Detention Report
366.26 WIC Report
Mental Health Assessment Letter (if applicable)
Martha's Place Assessment (if applicable)
CASA Report (if applicable)

SLO County 2010 PQCR Probation Case Summary

FACE SHEET	
Name:	DOB:

DELINQUENCY HISTORY

Petition Date	Offense	Code	Section

PLACEMENT HISTORY

Name of Placement (current/most recent first)	Date of placement	Type (relative, non-relative, FFA, group home, Trans home)	Reason for leaving placement

ATTACHMENTS:

- Current case plan
- Most recent placement progress report
- Most recent disposition report
- Disposition report from initial out of home placement