



**Responses to Findings and Recommendations  
2015-16 Grand Jury Report:**

***“Fostering a Better Foster Care System”***

**SUMMARY RESPONSE STATEMENT:**

On May 11, 2016, the Grand Jury released a report entitled: “Fostering a Better Foster Care System.” This report directed responses to findings and recommendations to the Orange County Board of Supervisors, Orange County Social Services Agency (SSA), and the SSA division of Children and Family Services (CFS), which are included below.

**FINDINGS AND RESPONSES:**

**F.1. Orange County has a shortage of foster families and this shortage will become more acute with the implementation of AB403. The shortage is particularly acute for special populations such as teens, sibling sets, and children with special medical or psychological needs.**

**Response:** Disagrees partially with the finding.

While Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) recognizes the shortage of placement resources for each of these special populations, the impact of recruiting resource families under the provisions of AB403 are not yet known.

The intent of AB403 is that its implementation will result in an increase in the number of resource families available to serve this population. AB403 creates a uniform training and approval process for all types of caregivers (e.g. foster parents, relatives, non-related extended family members, etc.), who are now all considered “resource families,” which SSA/CFS has already begun to implement.

**F.2. Current Children and Family Services recruitment and retention efforts are inadequate and ineffective as evidenced by zero growth in available foster homes.**

**Response:** Disagrees partially with the finding.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) has consistently recruited new foster parents and retained them as either foster parents or adoptive parents. Of the 425 foster care applications received between 2011 through March 2016, SSA/CFS issued 420 foster care licenses.

However, given the continued need, SSA/CFS recognizes that further efforts are necessary to increase the number of resource families, especially those available to support the special populations listed in F.1. Further, SSA/CFS recognizes that it is necessary to diversify and enhance its marketing methodologies in order to recruit new resource families, both for long-term permanency and those not interested in adoption, and is currently developing a detailed marketing plan.

**F.3. Children and Family Services does not collect, analyze, or track data on the success of foster parent recruitment and retention efforts.**

**Response:** Disagrees partially with the finding.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) utilizes the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) database. The intent of the ETO database is to identify the initial point of contact with the resource family all the way through placement in order to gather data to measure recruitment and retention efforts. SSA/CFS recognizes that it does not currently fully utilize ETO. However, SSA/CFS does use ETO to track several data elements of recruitment, including: point of contact, placement preference and caregiver ethnicity and language capacity.

**F.4. Children and Family Services has not implemented the principles of the Quality Parenting Initiative in spite of its four year involvement in the project.**

**Response:** Disagrees wholly with the finding.

The principles of the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) are to rebrand the concept of “foster parent” and increase collaboration with foster parents to be part of the team that supports children placed in their care.

As a result of QPI, Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) developed a QPI logo for a branding message, facilitated icebreaker activities (including the child's parents and foster parents in a discussion to support the child's transition at the time of placement) and implemented the use of foster parent mentors.

Further, there is a bi-monthly QPI/Foster Care Advisory Board meeting and all SSA/CFS programs and multiple community stakeholders have been provided with an overview of QPI. SSA/CFS remains committed to continuing to reinforce the message and philosophy of QPI with CFS staff and the community.

**F.5. Children and Family Services does not adequately serve the needs of hard to place populations such as teens, large sibling sets and children with medical and psychological disabilities.**

**Response:** Disagrees partially with the finding.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) does provide specialized services to support the needs of these populations. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Specialized Family Services (SFS) provides case management support and placement services for children with medical and psychological disabilities.
- The Independent Living Program (ILP) that supports youth and young adults, ages 16 to 24, by linking them with ILP services, including support with employment, education, transitional housing and financial resources.
- Teen Court, which is a multi-disciplinary team approach to supporting the needs of older foster youth.
- Wraparound services to support maintaining youth in the least restrictive, most family-like setting.
- Transitional Housing Placement Plus (THPP), which allows for placement of minor dependents ages 16 to 18 to reside in community apartments where they can live independently with the support of the THPP contract provider.
- Temporary Shelter Homes dedicated to sibling sets.

However, SSA/CFS recognizes the challenges with placing these populations and the need for continued development of placement resources for them. The implementation of AB 403 is intended to help address the placement needs for this population.

**F.6. Children and Family Services has not utilized Samueli Academy as a resource to enhance educational opportunities for foster teens because they have not proactively promoted the school or provided transportation to the school.**

**Response:** Disagrees wholly with the finding.

The Samueli Academy is a public charter high school in Santa Ana that serves foster youth and youth from underserved communities.

There are multiple factors that impact where foster youth attend school, including: court orders, requirements regarding youth attending their school of origin, the educational right holder's preference and the youth's preference.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) has provided opportunities for the Samueli Academy to share information with social workers, who are encouraged to share this information and educate youth about this educational option.

Further, SSA/CFS is committed to continuing to nurture its relationship with the Samueli Academy, supporting the process of identifying potential students and supporting any foster youth for whom the decision is made that their best educational option is to attend the Samueli Academy.

**F.7. Children and Family Services has failed to clarify the role of Foster Family Agencies contracted by the County.**

**Response:** Disagrees wholly with the finding.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS), Community Care Licensing (CCL) Division licenses and monitors Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) in California. Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) has a FFA Master Agreement which defines the provisions of care to be provided by FFAs when serving Orange County foster youth. Any state-licensed FFA can qualify for an agreement under the SSA/CFS Master Agreement.

When determining placement options for dependents, SSA/CFS may consider a FFA based on the assessment of the multi-disciplinary team and SSA/CFS collaborating partners. SSA/CFS has defined and messaged the role of FFAs in Orange County's continuum of care and appropriately uses FFAs as placement resources.

**F.8. Children and Family Services does not adequately monitor the 51 Foster Family Agencies contracted by the County to ensure that they are adequately meeting the needs of the children in their care.**

**Response:** Disagrees wholly with the finding.

It is the responsibility of California Department of Social Services (CDSS), Community Care Licensing (CCL) Division to monitor Foster Family Agencies (FFAs). However, SSA/CFS recognizes that collaborating and supporting FFAs is a best practice and does provide support to FFAs. SSA/CFS screens each child/youth to ensure the appropriateness of the placement; this process applies to all placements, including FFAs, within the continuum of care. Additionally, SSA/CFS social workers visit with the children placed in FFAs on a monthly basis to ensure that the placement is meeting the needs of the child.

SSA/CFS is committed to continuing to enhance its collaboration with the contracted FFAs.

**F.9. The current caseload of Orange County social workers exceeds industry standards and will hamper efforts to implement AB403.**

**Response:** Disagrees wholly with the finding.

Caseload averages can be calculated a variety of different ways due to the complexity of the child welfare system and the various functions of the assignments. In order to calculate average caseloads, Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) used the total number of cases at a point in time of 7,263 divided by the number of filled positions at that point in time for mandated case management social workers of 498. This calculation results in an average caseload of 14.6, which is lower than the caseload standard of 16 referenced in R11 in the Grand Jury Report.

SSA/CFS recognizes that 14.6 is an average caseload, so there are social workers with caseloads above and below that number. In addition, SSA/CFS does have additional support staff that assist in mandated case management work. SSA/CFS will continue to evaluate caseloads as AB403 and new mandates are implemented and as industry standards are updated.

**F.10. Effective outreach is hampered by limited and outdated technology.**

**Response:** Agrees with the finding.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES:**

**R.1. Identify effective recruitment strategies and prepare and approve a plan that will increase the number of active County foster families by a minimum of 75 by July 1, 2017. (F1)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

The County of Orange 2015 Foster and Relative Caregiver Recruitment, Retention, and Support County Plan (RRS Plan) submitted by Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) and approved by CDSS defines goals for county placements, including: an increase in new foster homes, an increase in the percentage of placements with relatives and a decrease in foster parent turnover. It also provides strategies for meeting each of these goals. The RRS plan specifically sets a goal of 50 new licensed resource families, which has the potential capacity of a maximum of 300 new placements for children.

The RRS Plan acknowledges that the current foster care application and licensing process can create recruitment challenges. It is anticipated that the Resource Family Approval (RFA) process and other elements of AB403 will create a much more unified, family-friendly and child-focused process. Further, it is anticipated that the training and support offered by this new model will increase recruitment and retention.

Additionally, SSA/CFS intends to continue to enhance the partnership with groups such as Faith in Motion to increase public awareness and support of foster families and recruitment efforts.

**R.2. Identify effective strategies and prepare and approve a plan to increase the number of active County placements for large sibling sets, teens, and youth with high needs by a minimum of 30 by July 1, 2017. (F1)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

The County of Orange 2015 Foster and Relative Caregiver Recruitment, Retention, and Support County Plan (RRS Plan) identifies intervention strategies and specifies funding requirements to expand placement resources for these populations. The RRS plan specifically sets a goal of 50 new licensed resource families, which has the potential capacity of a maximum of 300 new placements for children. The emphasis in the RRS plan on these new resource families is those with the capability to place large sibling sets, teens, and youth with high needs.

**R.3. Dedicate available AB403 funds to enable foster parents to participate in recruitment efforts, serve as mentors and attend professional events beginning in County Fiscal Year 2016-2017. (F2, F4)**

**Response:** The recommendation requires further analysis.

At this time, the State budget for FY 2016-17 has not been approved; thus, it has not yet been determined how all aspects of AB403 funds may be utilized. Once the State has provided determination of how AB403 funds may be utilized, SSA/CFS will work with the County Procurement Office and Auditor-Controller on processes to implement the use of the funds by December 31, 2016.

It is important to note that there is already an established foster parent mentor program; that foster parents participate in various meetings, including the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI); participate in various professional events, including the QPI Conference and the County Welfare Directors Association of California Conference; and that there are foster parents who co-train trainings for new foster parents.

**R.4. Use available AB403 funds to provide additional transportation services for foster youth to appointments, visitations, court dates, etc. beginning in County Fiscal Year 2016-2017. (F2, F4,)**

**Response:** The recommendation has been implemented.

Under AB403, the expectation is that the new rate structure for placements will provide the appropriate resources to meet the youth's transportation needs. Also, SSA/CFS has had contracted services for several years that provide transportation for visitation and has built in contingency funding in FY 2016-17 in the event additional resources are needed.

**R.5. Provide foster parents with timely access to information and identify and adopt strategies to make them respected, equal and integral parts of the child's team as mandated by AB403 and according to the principles of the Quality Parenting Initiative. (F2, F4)**

**Response:** The recommendation has been implemented.

The County of Orange 2015 Foster and Relative Caregiver Recruitment, Retention, and Support County Plan (RRS Plan) defines Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services' (SSA/CFS') plan for partnering with foster parents to provide them

with the optimal support necessary for them to maximize their ability to provide the highest level of care for the children placed in their care.

Additionally, SSA/CFS supports the process of foster care providers communicating information to the Juvenile Court and utilizing Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings as the forum in which all parties involved with a case, including foster parents, have an equal voice to express their perspective in developing and supporting the best possible placement plan for a child.

SSA/CFS has made ongoing efforts to utilize several methods for communicating with foster parents in a timely and effective manner. Such efforts include the: OC4KIDS website; SSA Facebook page; the quarterly Link publication; and the various meetings open to foster parents, including the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)/Foster Care Advisory Board. SSA/CFS will continue to reinforce the message and philosophy of QPI with CFS staff and the community. Finally, SSA/CFS has maintained a strong partnership with the Foster Care Auxiliary, which also enhances support and communication with caregivers.

SSA/CFS remains committed to evaluating and enhancing its efforts in continuing to build and nurture its collaborative relationship with foster parents.

**R.6. Document the use of the County Efforts to Outcomes database to track and evaluate the success of foster parent recruitment and retention efforts. (F2, F3)**

**Response:** The recommendation requires further analysis.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) utilizes the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) database to track several data elements of recruitment, including: point of contact, placement preference, caregiver ethnicity and language capacity. The intent of the ETO database is to identify the initial point of contact with the resource family all the way through placement in order to gather data to measure recruitment and retention efforts.

However, SSA/CFS recognizes that it does not currently fully utilize ETO to track information regarding licensing and adoptions retention and outcome data. SSA/CFS will be evaluating the capabilities of the ETO and anticipates that an analysis will be complete by December 31, 2016.

**R.7. Prepare and approve a plan to reduce to two the average annual number of placements for teens and other children in long term foster care by July 1, 2017. (F5)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

The State and Federal governments have established outcome measures regarding placement stability.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) is measured based on total number of placement moves during a given 12 month period. The Federal government has established the outcome goal of 4.12 placement changes per 1000 days in care (approximately 1.5 placement changes for each youth per year). SSA/CFS currently has a placement stability rate of 4.93 placement changes per 1000 days in care; this is a lower placement rate than the Grand Jury Recommendation.

**R.8. Prepare and approve a plan to increase the percentage of sibling sets placed together by 20% by July 1, 2017. (F5)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

This outcome is included in the County of Orange System Improvement Plan (SIP). As of the current fiscal year, SSA/CFS its SIP goal of having more than 75% of children placed with some or all of their siblings. Currently, 76.1% of children placed in out-of-home care are placed with their siblings. Additionally, a primary goal of the RRS Plan is to recruit more foster families with the ability to provide care for sibling sets. The recommendation to increase the percentage of siblings placed together by 20% is not reasonable because of the complex and varied reasons for determining the placement of children, including the individual needs of each child and court orders.

**R.9. Rewrite Foster Family Agency contracts to clarify their specific role and limit contracts to those that provide intensive and specialized care in compliance with AB403. (F7)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has the responsibility to certify and approve Foster Family Agencies (FFAs). Under AB403, FFAs will have to meet new criteria in order to be recertified. The Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services Master Agreement for FFAs will still require that FFAs meet the established criteria by CDSS and will be updated once those criteria are established.

**R.10. Reinstate a unit of social workers to monitor Foster Family Agencies by July, 2017. (F8)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

It is the responsibility of the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), Community Care Licensing (CCL) Division to monitor Foster Family Agencies (FFAs). However, Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) remains committed to enhancing its collaborative efforts with the FFAs. SSA/CFS collaborates with CCL through various meetings and forums including a monthly meeting attended by representatives from CCL and Probation, SSA/CFS Group Home liaison and the SSA/CFS FFA liaison. Further, SSA/CFS, FFA, and CCL representatives attend a Southern Counties meeting and a Quarterly FFA Forum.

Additionally, SSA/CFS social workers visit with the children placed in FFAs on a monthly basis to ensure that the placement is meeting the needs of the child.

**R.11. Reduce the caseload of social workers to a maximum average of 16 (the national recommendation) by July 1, 2017. (F9)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

Caseload averages can be calculated a variety of different ways due to the complexity of the child welfare system and the various functions of the assignments. In order to calculate average caseloads, Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) used the total number of cases at a point in time of 7,263 divided by the number of filled positions at that point in time for mandated case management social workers of 498. This calculation results in an average caseload of 14.6, which is lower than the caseload standard of 16 referenced in R11 in the Grand Jury Report.

SSA/CFS recognizes that 14.6 is an average caseload, so there are social workers with caseloads above and below that number. In addition, SSA/CFS does have additional support staff that assist in mandated case management work. SSA/CFS will continue to evaluate caseloads as AB403 and new mandates are implemented and as industry standards are updated.

**R.12. Prepare and approve a plan for an employee retention program to achieve a goal of reducing the turnover of County social workers to 10% per year by January 2018. (F9)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

In 2015, the social worker attrition rate (turnover) for Children and Family Services was 7.01%. From January 1, 2016 through April 30, 2016 the attrition rate of social workers is 3.89%. This attrition rate is lower than the recommendation. Note that the attrition rate also includes internal promotions which are a positive for the department and employee professional development.

**R.13. Use AB403 funds to contract with a professional marketing agency to assist in foster home recruitment efforts. (F2)**

**Response:** The recommendation has been implemented.

On March 28, 2016, Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) entered into a marketing contract for recruiting resource families. The four elements of the contract are to be implemented by June 30, 2016. The contract objectives include:

- Conduct an audit to identify and assess existing resource family awareness and recruitment campaigns being implemented at the regional, state, and national level. An essential goal is to identify best practice programs that may be utilized in SSA/CFS.
- Develop a project brief that defines objectives, audience focus, strategies, tactics, metrics, and timing for SSA/CFS implementation of its marketing efforts.
- Collaborate with SSA/CFS to develop bilingual recruitment campaign messages and a theme to unify program communication.
- Develop a campaign “road show” presentation that can be used at town halls, community events and stakeholder meetings for targeted recruitment of resource families.

**R.14. Develop a process to provide accurate and current information on Children and Family Services websites by January, 2017. (F2, F10)**

**Response:** The recommendation has been implemented.

This is part of the County of Orange marketing plan to recruit additional resource families, which was developed in March 2016. The marketing contractor is providing suggestions on how to improve the OC4KIDS website, which is expected to occur by January 2017.

**R.15. Upgrade technology to reflect current industry standards by July 1, 2017. Upgrades may include, but are not limited to, websites offering agent chats, user blogs and case management systems. (F2, F10)**

**Response:** The recommendation has been implemented.

Social Services Agency/Children and Family Services (SSA/CFS) utilizes the Child Welfare Services/Client Management System (CWS/CMS), the State mandated case management database for child welfare cases, for all child welfare cases and is meeting industry standards. As a member of the County Welfare Directors Association of California, SSA/CFS receives updates and information about changes to the CWS/CMS system and other technological programs being used and considered in child welfare services.

The marketing contractor is providing suggestions on how to update the OC4KIDS website, which is expected to occur by January 2017. Additionally, SSA already manages Facebook and Twitter pages and is exploring the growth of these platforms.

**R.16. Complete a study to determine the comparative cost of services provided by County homes versus Foster Family Agencies by January, 2017. (F7)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

The rates for licensed foster homes and Foster Family Agencies are established by the California Department of Social Services. The type of placement for a particular child is always based on a detailed assessment of the child's individualized needs, not on the cost of placement.

**R.17. Prepare and approve a plan to triple enrollment of foster youth to Samueli Academy for the 2016-2017 academic year and provide transportation to the academy as needed. (F6)**

**Response:** The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

The Samueli Academy is a public charter high school in Santa Ana that serves foster youth and youth from underserved communities.

There are multiple factors that impact where foster youth attend school, including: court orders, requirements regarding youth attending their school of origin, the educational right holder's preference and the youth's preference.

Transportation is built in as part of those services that are expected from and are provided by relative caregivers, foster parents, FFAs and group homes. This includes

transportation to the educational institution that was identified as part of the child's case plan.

SSA/CFS has provided opportunities for the Samueli Academy to share information with social workers, who are encouraged to share this information and educate youth about this educational option. CFS is committed to continuing to nurture its relationship with the Samueli Academy, supporting the process of identifying potential students, and supporting any foster youth for whom the decision is made that it is their best educational option to attend the Samueli Academy.

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