

# FOSTERING A BETTER FOSTER CARE SYSTEM



**GRAND JURY 2015-2016**



---

## Table of Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Continuum of Care Act, AB403 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Prior Orange County Grand Jury Reports .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>SCOPE OF REPORT .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Current Placement Data (See Figure 1) .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Priority Placement with Relatives or Non-Related Extended Family Members .....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Orangewood Children and Family Center .....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>County Home, Foster Family Agency, and Group Home Placement .....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Shortage of Foster Homes .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<b>Quality Families versus Adequate Placement .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The Most Vulnerable .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Underutilized Resources .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>Quality Parenting Initiative.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>County Recruitment and Retention Efforts.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Limited Resources and Limited Recruitment .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Foster Parents: Valued Partners or “Cheap Motel?” .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>A Promising Model .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<b>The Role of Foster Family Agencies .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<i>Need for FFA Oversight .....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>The Cost of Foster Family Agencies .....</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>Obstacles to Success .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>REQUIRED RESPONSES.....</b>	<b>30</b>

Fostering a Better Foster Care System

---

**WORKS CITED..... 33**

**WORKS CONSULTED ..... 35**

**APPENDIX A: Glossary..... 36**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Children and Family Services (CFS) is one of four divisions of the County of Orange, Social Services Agency. CFS provides services designed to protect children from further abuse and neglect, and to ensure their safety, well-being and permanence. The agency places children into protective custody when they cannot be safe in their homes.

In October, 2015, the California Legislature enacted AB403 (Stone), the Continuum of Care Reform Act, which will have a significant impact on current foster care practices. AB403 is a comprehensive effort to make sure that all youth in foster care have their physical, emotional and mental health needs met; that they have the opportunity to grow up in supportive and permanent homes; and that they have the chance to become successful adults. The 2015-2016 Grand Jury investigated the commitment and readiness of Children and Family Services to implement this challenging legislation. CFS has been very successful enabling children in protective custody to maintain family ties by placing as many as possible with relatives, and providing support for the families who become caregivers. However, the Grand Jury also found CFS has failed to provide safe, nurturing and permanent homes for those children who are considered “hard to place.” This particularly vulnerable segment includes teens and children with serious medical and psychological needs. These vulnerable children often live in long term foster care with little prospect of adoption, reunification with parents or placement with relatives. CFS has also been unsuccessful finding homes to accommodate large sibling sets, so these children experience the trauma of being removed from parents and the additional pain and loss of being separated from their siblings.

The County has a severe shortage of foster homes, particularly homes for “hard to place” children. Employees of CFS at all levels acknowledged this shortage to the Grand Jury. CFS Self-Assessment reports and System Improvement Plans dating back to at least 2008 include the agency goal to increase and retain foster families, particularly those willing and able to accept teens, sibling sets, and children with serious medical and psychological needs. However the Grand Jury concluded that the efforts of CFS in this regard have been insufficient and unsuccessful. Furthermore, the shortage of available homes causes the County to rely on foster parents who may not be supportive or nurturing and on private Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) with limited data about the cost or quality of care these FFAs provide. The result is that traumatized children spend months in shelters awaiting placement, endure multiple placements and/or separation from their siblings, thus suffering further psychological damage.

The 2015-2016 Grand Jury strongly recommends that Orange County Social Services Agency Children and Family Services direct resources to attract and retain trained, supportive, and committed foster families who will provide love and stability to all children in foster care, including the “hard to place.” The Grand Jury further recommends that CFS clearly define its purpose in developing contracts with Foster Family Agencies (FFAs), restrict those contracts to

---

agencies providing unique services that the County cannot deliver, and carefully monitor these private agencies.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Continuum of Care Act, AB403**

In order to improve quality of life for dependent youth, the California Legislature passed AB403, Foster Youth: Continuum of Care Reform in October, 2015. The goal of this well-intentioned legislation is to place youth, already traumatized by removal from their families and the conditions that prompted that removal, into stable and supportive homes as quickly as possible. Among its many provisions, the bill strengthens training, qualifications and support for foster families; updates the assessment process so that children are placed in the “right home” initially with services tailored to meet their unique needs; and transitions children from congregate care, often called group homes, to home based family care.

The legislation aims to reduce and minimize that trauma by improving California’s child welfare and foster system and its outcomes for emancipated youth. Recognizing that children who live in congregate care settings are more likely to suffer from negative short and long-term outcomes, the law transforms group homes into Short Term Residential Treatment Centers (STRTCs) that will provide up to six months of specialized and intensive treatment for youth whose needs cannot be safely met in a family setting. If, based on a reexamination of needs, a child requires continued treatment beyond that period, a high level County official must provide authorization. Youth currently living in group homes must be transitioned into home based family care.

Among its other provisions AB403 mandates a comprehensive initial assessment for all children removed from their homes so that the first placement best meets the unique needs of the child. Furthermore, the legislation regards the foster parents as full partners on the child and family care team and requires that a foster parent act as a “reasonable and prudent parent, and provides a family setting that promotes normal childhood experiences that serve the need of the child.” (AB403, October 2015)

AB403 has many challenging and controversial aspects. It “streamlines” training and certification for both foster and adoptive families. Many youth advocates and Children and Family Services employees are concerned that the abbreviated training will leave caregivers overwhelmed and underprepared. Additionally, the law effectively disallows congregate care as a placement option. Some CFS employees stated that congregate care is sometimes a good option for teens, and they lamented the loss of some group homes, such as Boys Town. It will take several years of implementation to determine if the legislature acted wisely with regard to training and group home placement.

## **Prior Orange County Grand Jury Reports**

A 1999-2000 Grand Jury report entitled *Orange County is No Camelot for Emancipated Youth* examined the outcomes for Orange County youth who had emancipated from the foster care system and reviewed programs serving foster youth. The 2006-2007 Grand Jury wrote an update to the report entitled *Pre and Post Emancipated Youth: Is Camelot Still a Dream?* The report found that the County had few data sources to track emancipated youth; that youth needed multiple opportunities to practice Independent Living Skills; and that the County had implemented programs serving this population. California law now allows 18 to 21 year old youth to remain in foster care if they choose and provides an array of services that promote successful transitions.

The 2006-2007 Grand Jury also wrote a report entitled *Orangewood Children's Home: Overstaffed and Underutilized?* which found that, despite the steep decline in the average population of the facility, staffing remained the same. The report recommended that the County examine repurposing Orangewood. As of February 2016, Orangewood Children's Home remains underutilized with an average daily populations of 68 but a capacity of about 130.

During the same term, the Grand Jury wrote another report entitled *Where Are Orange County's Foster Children?* Of particular interest to the 2015-2016 Grand Jury was that the report asserted that 26% of the County's foster children lived outside of Orange County, often in homes in the Inland Empire. The report highlighted the burden that out of County placement creates for children, biological parents working to reunify with their children, and social workers whose caseloads were not reduced to allow for hours spent on the freeway. As early as 2006, the focus of Child Welfare had shifted from congregate care (group homes) to family homes. Ten years later, 20% of Orange County's foster children are placed out of the County and Orange County is still critically in need of foster homes.

## **SCOPE OF REPORT**

This study focuses on the recruitment efforts of Children and Family Services in the past decade and on the immediate need of the County to attract and retain caring families so that all foster children benefit from the intent of AB403. The primary emphasis of this investigation is the particularly vulnerable group of children: teens, children with serious medical and psychological needs, and sibling sets. The investigation also explores the relationship between Children and Family Services and private Foster Family Agencies (FFAs).

## **METHODOLOGY**

1. The Grand Jury conducted more than forty interviews with individuals including administrators, supervisors and social workers currently employed by the Orange County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services; County foster parents; volunteers and employees of various agencies that advocate for foster youth; and administrators from Foster Family Agencies contracted by the County.
2. The Grand Jury reviewed documents prepared by the Orange County Social Services Agency Children and Family Services; AB403 and other legislation pertaining to foster youth; numerous articles; and studies.
3. The Grand Jury visited Juvenile Hall, Orangewood Children and Family Center, Samueli Academy and several Foster Family Agencies.
4. The Grand Jury attended several training and support sessions for foster parents.

## **INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS**

“The psychological stigma associated with being labeled an ‘orphan,’ ‘foster kid.’ ‘ward of the court’ or ‘at risk youth’ can play havoc with one’s self-esteem. The terms used to describe our lowly status say that we are less than other kids: less fortunate, less worthy, less good, less capable, less important, less lovable...less almost everything.

Many of us are so distressed by what happened at home or in the system that we develop behavioral disorders, emotional problems or other mental health issues that compromise our ability to overcome the past and adjust to the future. Still others of us feel ashamed of our youth and spend a lifetime hiding from the past.

At best, the experience of being separated from family and placed in the care of strangers leaves a bloody scab on the psyche that may never quite heal.”

Walt Brown, PhD June 3, 2013

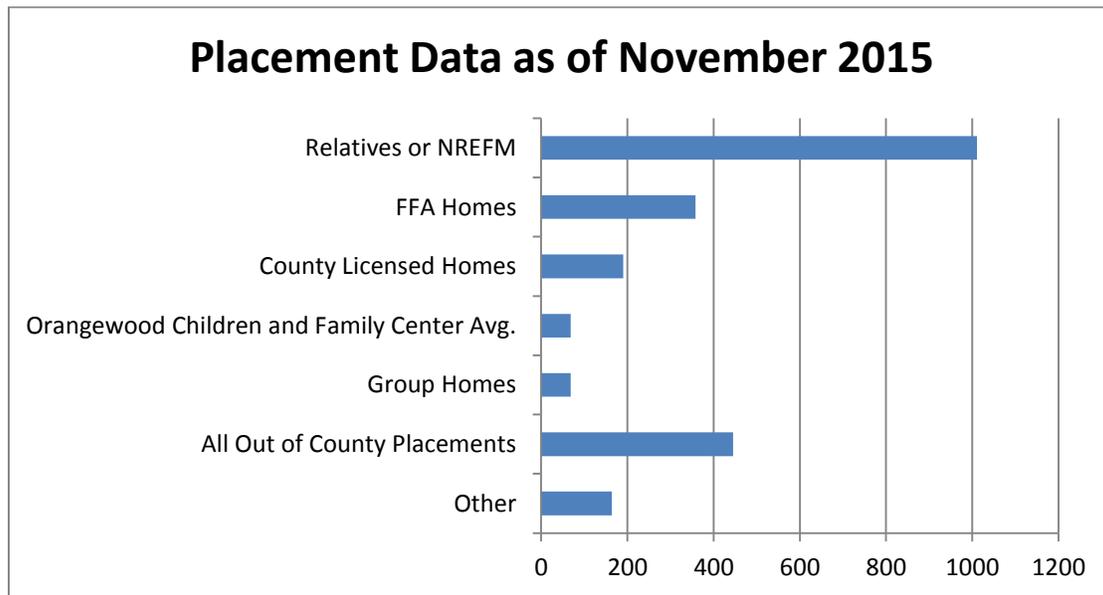
**Current Placement Data (See Figure 1)**

Figure 1

***Priority Placement with Relatives or Non-Related Extended Family Members***

Currently, approximately 2,300 children who have been removed from their biological parents are in foster care in Orange County with those numbers anticipated to increase over the next three years. Forty five percent (45%) of these children are placed with relatives, or non-related extended family members (NREFMs) such as former neighbors or teachers. Children and Family Services has prioritized this type of placement. Every CFS staff member, every state agency representative, and every foster parent that the Grand Jury interviewed clearly understood this goal and the policies and procedures that ensured its implementation. The agency's priority of placing children with extended family is clear and unambiguous, and the agency has been widely recognized for its efforts. During interviews with the Grand Jury, a few social workers and advocates for children expressed concern about the quality and suitability of some relative caregivers, but they are hopeful that the new Resource Family Approval Process would elevate the quality of these homes.

***Orangewood Children and Family Center***

Children and Family Services (CFS) has long relied on the resources of Orangewood Children and Family Center (formerly called Orangewood Children's Home) to care for children awaiting placement. The average length of stay in this facility is 31 days. However, some children remain

at Orangewood for six months or more because they are considered “hard to place,” and homes for this population are scarce. AB403 limits the use of emergency shelters such as Orangewood Children and Family Center to 72 hours after children have been removed from their homes. Fortunately, the Board of Supervisors and agency managers effectively lobbied the legislature to allow children to remain in Orangewood for ten days. However, ten days is a very short time to assess the needs of dependent youth and place them with families that meet their individual circumstances. The *OC Register* reported that a former member of the Board of Supervisors and current high level executive of the Orange County Alliance for Children and Families stated that the ten day limit at Orangewood “will be a significant challenge” for the Social Services Agency (Walker, January 10, 2016)

### ***County Home, Foster Family Agency, and Group Home Placement***

Priority placement with relatives is not always viable. Between 25 -35% of dependent children live in Foster Family Agency (FFA) homes. These private agencies are licensed and under County contract to certify foster homes. Only about 10% of dependent children are placed in homes licensed by the County. The County has an estimated 400 foster homes, but only 140 of these homes currently accept placements. Children and Family Services staff members suggest anecdotal reasons to explain why almost two thirds of its licensed homes do not accept children: some foster parents have added adopted or biological children to their family and are adjusting to the new situation, others have had changes in employment that limit their ability to care for foster children, and some long time foster parents have aged and are no longer able to assume the responsibilities of fostering. However, CFS keeps no data on the expressed reasons licensed families do not accept children.

The most current estimate of children living in congregate care (group homes) is 7 -15%. This statistic varies because of the population fluctuation at Orangewood Children and Family Center. Some of these children have recently been removed from their parents and others are youth who have been unsuccessful in one placement and are awaiting another. Most of the youth placed in other congregate care facilities are teens. The County is required by AB403 to find family homes for this population.

Twenty percent (20%) of Orange County foster youth are placed out of the County. The Grand Jury was advised that sibling sets are sometimes placed in counties where housing is less expensive than in Orange County. Other dependent youth are placed with relatives who live out of County. Some FFAs contracted by the County also have homes in neighboring counties.

CFS reports that children, on average, return to their parents within 12 months of being removed from their home. This reunification time is longer than both the California median time of 9 months and the National Standard of 5 months. (SIP, 2014-2019) On average, dependent youth

experience two placements per year. However, for youth, predominantly teens and preteens, who are in foster care for 24 months or longer, the statistics are alarming. A 2014 Orange County Self-Assessment Report states that 64% of children in foster care for two years or longer experience three or more placements per year. (See Figure 3)

### ***Shortage of Foster Homes***

In Orange County, the Social Services Agency Children and Family Services (CFS) acknowledged a critical shortage of foster homes even prior to passage of AB403, Continuum of Care Reform. In order to comply with the requirements of the new law, CFS will need to license between 100 and 150 quality homes by January 2017. Furthermore, the law acknowledges that many foster youth have endured psychological trauma and frequently have behavioral problems and mental health needs that require placement in therapeutic homes. Other children have serious medical needs. According to the *OC Register*, a former Executive Director of the Children's Services Orange County and leader of the Orangewood Foundation stated, "You're really talking about more of a professional parent." (Walker, January 10, 2016)

Currently Orange County has only 20 homes identified as Multi- Dimensional Treatment Foster homes and no Intensive Therapeutic Foster Care homes. Not only does Orange County need to recruit new foster parents, they need to recruit parents trained, certified and willing to nurture children with severe behavioral, emotional and psychological challenges. The 2015 Foster and Relative Caregiver Recruitment, Retention and Support County Plan states that approximately 100 new homes are licensed annually by the County, but approximately the same number leave the pool, thereby negating any potential increase in placement homes. (November, 2015)

### **Quality Families versus Adequate Placement**

AB403 does more than require that foster children be moved from group homes to family settings. It is the intent of the Legislature to ensure quality care for children by attracting and retaining loving caregivers skilled at meeting the needs of the children in their care who serve as critical members of the child's team. The law requires that each child receives a thorough assessment of needs and is placed in a home that serves those unique needs and provides stability and permanence when reunification is not possible. Given the shortage of County homes, the mandates are daunting. When asked about the quality of foster homes currently taking children, most County social workers rated 50 -60% as "excellent" or "good," 30- 40% as "adequate," and 10 -20% as "poor." Social workers often added that some foster parents were "good" for certain children but "poor" for others. These social workers defined an "adequate" home as one which provided children with room and board, but failed to make the children in their care a part of the family. Several social workers stated they began their career as idealists who believed foster parents were dedicated to children, but they now believe some are merely in it for the money.

Interviews with volunteers and employees of children's advocacy organizations painted an even bleaker picture. They described homes where children were denied entry into the kitchen and to food available to other family members; they described foster parents who refused to allow children to participate in extra-curricular activities because they were unwilling to provide transportation; they described foster parents who frequently told the children in their care how "expensive" they were; they told the Grand Jury about children left behind when the family vacationed. One advocate expressed concern for a child who slept in the top bunk. During the heat of the summer, the child asked her foster mother for a fan, but her request was denied because the parent was unwilling to pay the cost of electricity. Several social workers and advocates described youth who had been in up to 12 placements while in care. Even current caregivers shared concerns about other foster parents they had encountered. They stated that they believe some foster parents accepted multiple teens in their home because the pay is better for hard to place youth. Grand Jurors asked why the County would continue to place children with adults who received repeated formal and informal complaints. Most staff answered that the County needs beds. While it is true that Grand Jurors also heard about loving, caring homes and interviewed foster parents dedicated to the children in their care, it is unacceptable for any children already traumatized by circumstances that led to their removal from their biological families, to endure further neglect and abuse in poor quality, uncaring homes, or those deemed "adequate" by a large contingent of social workers.

### **The Most Vulnerable**

AB403 acknowledges that children in foster care are affected by trauma as a result of being separated from their families and the situations that prompted that separation. The outcomes for youth who emancipate from the foster care system are bleak. Foster youth are likely to suffer a variety of negative outcomes including low academic attainment, involvement in the criminal justice system, alcohol and drug dependency, unemployment, early pregnancy and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (See Figure 2). The 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Report on the Condition of Children in Orange County states that, as a result of displacement from family and multiple placements, foster youth often perform below grade level, earn lower grades, experience higher rates of absenteeism and have more disciplinary problems than other pupils in the general population. While 11% of the general California school-age population is enrolled in special education programs, 27% of foster youth receive special education services. Forty five percent (45%) of foster youth earn a high school diploma. (Conditions, 2013) Of those, fewer than 2% graduate from college.

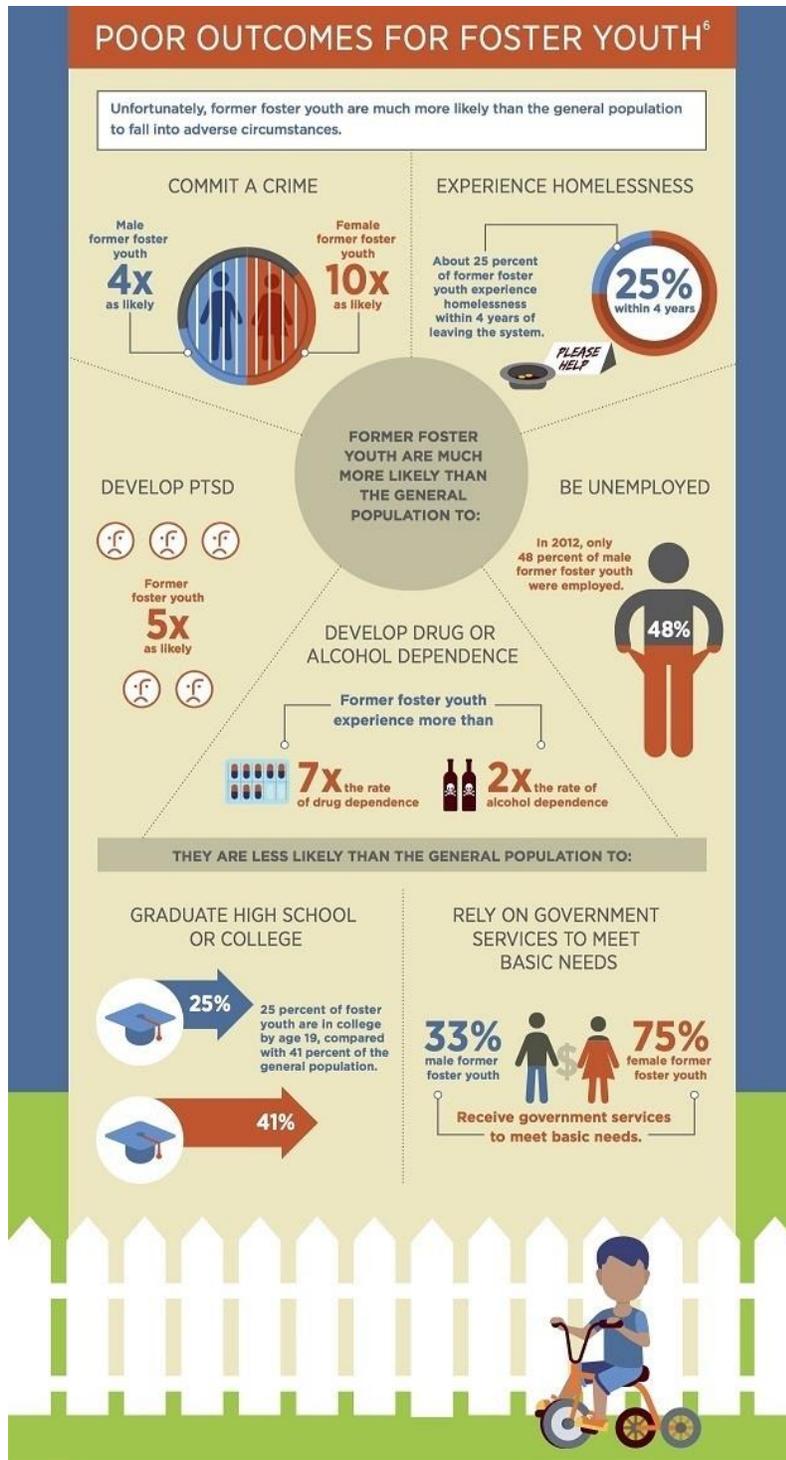


Figure 2 (Foster Club, 2015)

**Poor Outcomes for Foster Youth**

Often the homes described by social workers as “excellent” are those in which the foster parents intend to become adoptive parents. Babies and young children find homes with these families.

Most course trainers echo that sentiment. Many social workers acknowledge that the most troubled youth who have been in foster care for long periods, are increasingly unlikely to be adopted. They have no relatives to provide suitable homes and often bounce from placement to placement in “adequate” to “poor” homes with an open bed.

The number of Orange County youth in care for 24 months or longer, 727, is substantial. This population represents one third of the population of dependent children. Currently many social workers assert that adolescents in long term foster care develop behavioral problems, and the more severe the problems, the more likely youth are to be placed in “poor” rated families, and the more likely they are to experience multiple placements. Each placement change means that they may also change schools, therapists, doctors and other caregivers. They lose their personal belongings and their friends. It is not uncommon for teens to attend six or more middle and high schools, falling behind academically with each move. They are often assigned to special education. Every move creates further trauma and contributes to troubled behaviors and poor academic outcomes.

A 2006 study found a relationship between placement and the existence and severity of behavioral problems. (Leathers) A 2007 study found that children who experience multiple placements in foster care are more likely to engage in delinquency and become involved with the criminal justice system than youth in the general population. (Lewis, et al.) In fact, the Grand Jury learned that 52 youth are currently designated as dual jurisdiction. That is, they are both dependent foster children and on probation. Some became involved with the criminal justice system while in foster care. Finding placements for these youth is extremely challenging, and some are forced to remain in Juvenile Hall after they complete their sentences because there is no available placement.

Many social workers and administrators from Children and Family Services (CFS) interviewed by the Grand Jury routinely stated that foster youth fail placement due to their behavior. A large portion of staff interviewed at each level of the agency spoke of youth, particularly teens, whose behavior is bizarre, destructive, and defiant. Many indicated a belief that nobody wants these kids. Many youth run away from placement, putting themselves in danger. It is not uncommon for these teens to briefly return to Orangewood for a shower and a meal, and then run again. They are emboldened by peers who also go AWOL. Vulnerable youth hear that they have failed placement again, when, according to many social workers and child advocates, it is the system and the society that is failing the children. California law and agency policy mandate that children be placed in their home school, in the least restrictive environment, and in homes that are best suited to their needs. However, the reality is that the County has few good options available for adolescents and other children who are not “going home.” Published statistics reveal average placement numbers, average reunification rates, average statistics on in care

maltreatment, but they do not adequately capture the dire circumstances of those in long term care. (See Figure 3)

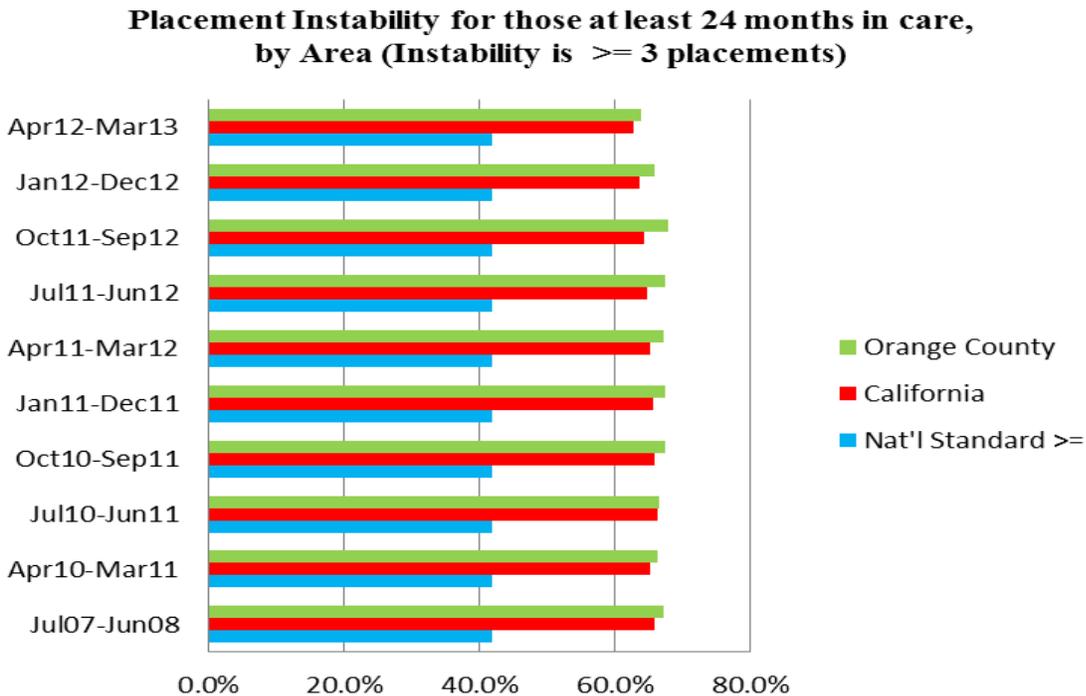


Figure 3

Another defenseless group is children with severe medical needs, both physical and psychological. There are 91 children currently designated as medically fragile. The number of dependent youth with serious psychological problems is growing, with estimates ranging from 35 -50% of the total dependent population. During interviews, some staff told the Grand Jury that statistics are difficult to obtain because many youth are not routinely psychologically assessed and are not seeing therapists. There are very few homes for these children and very few adequately trained parents in the County to meet the growing need.

Large sibling sets also present a significant challenge for Children and Family Services (CFS). There are currently 199 sibling sets of three or more in placement, 148 of whom are placed in Orange County. The agency's efforts in finding family members for sibling sets have been effective. When children are placed with relatives, 68% percent live with all of their siblings and 86% live with some of them. However, children placed in County foster homes do not fare as well. Only 47% are placed with all of their siblings and 72% are placed with some of their siblings. Thirty eight percent (38%) of children placed in FFA homes are placed with all of their siblings and 76% are placed with some of their siblings (See Figure 4). (Webster) Studies emphasize the importance of sibling relationships for dependent children and suggest that the maintenance of sibling ties "can nurture a sense of stability and continuity in the lives of foster youth." (Herrick and Piccus, 2005) Because children who have been neglected and abused by their caregivers have especially strong ties to one another, separating them may cause additional

trauma. Yet without available homes and systems to support families willing to take multiple children, County children may endure this additional trauma of separation. Thirty of the County's 199 large sibling sets are split between Orange and neighboring counties, making visitations difficult for the children and for their social workers.

### Placements with Siblings

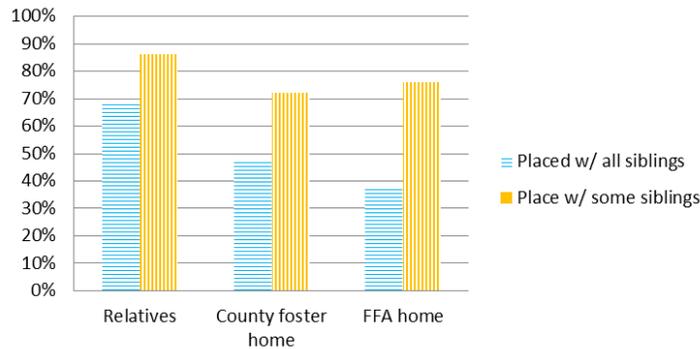


Figure 4

### *Underutilized Resources*

The County has some promising resources for its hard to place populations, although developing these resources may take some “out of the box” thinking. The first is Samueli Academy, a public charter high school dedicated to providing a “transformational learning environment” for foster youth and those in low-income communities. The academy offers its pupils consistency, stability, and a supportive community. In the fall of 2015, Grand Jurors attended Back to School Night at the Academy, met with dedicated teachers, administrators, and pupils who gave glowing evaluations of their educational opportunities. The Academy has staff dedicated to coordinating appointments and court dates for foster children, monitoring homework and providing tutoring.

The Academy was opened in August, 2013 as a result of the efforts of philanthropists Susan Samueli and Sandi Jackson and members of the Board of Directors of Orangewood Children's Foundation. However despite the fact that the Academy was created to provide state of the art education for foster teens and other disadvantaged youth, the Grand Jury learned that only a disappointing 17 of the 375 pupil population is comprised of dependent youth for the academic year 2015-2016. Considering that the population of dependent preteens and teens in Orange County is about 700, the paltry number of foster youth attending the school is even more dismal. (Webster) Some school and County staff stated that foster parents are unwilling to transport pupils to the school. The school was conceived with the idea of providing dormitory living with a wide range of support systems for foster youth. However, the dormitory construction was halted because of the pending provisions of AB403 regarding congregate care. The County is currently lobbying for an exemption, and, as of this writing, remains very confident that the facility will be approved as a 5/2 home. This designation means that foster youth will live in the

dormitory during the school week, and go “home” to foster parents on the weekend. In the meantime, the County has failed to adequately provide transportation to enable foster youth to attend the Academy. During interviews, the Grand Jury learned that CFS has not proactively provided outreach to middle school pupils transitioning to high school, to relative caregivers, or to foster parents. An Academy Board Member told the Grand Jury that the board had hosted a few “lunch and learn” events for County social workers, but the events were poorly attended. Since foster pupils who express a commitment to their education are automatically admitted to the Academy, while other applicants are admitted through a lottery, the County has an opportunity to proactively recruit and enroll teens for the 2016-2017 academic school year, provide transportation for them and begin identifying a pool of “weekend” foster parents.

Another possible placement resource is Orangewood Children and Family Center, a County owned and operated facility that serves as an emergency shelter for abused and neglected children. The facility includes six large residence cottages (and several others that serve ancillary functions), a school comprised of several classrooms, a gymnasium/recreation center, a playground, a swimming pool, a visitation area, a library, and a cafeteria. The facility has beds for more than 130 children, but its current average population is 68. This number will decrease since AB403 limits emergency placement at Orangewood to ten days. It is time to consider repurposing part of this facility. With some creative thinking and remodeling, the cottages at Orangewood could become individual “homes” for large sibling sets, medically fragile youth and the foster parents willing to care for them. Each repurposed cottage might house six children (the maximum allowed for home based care) and their foster parents. The idea that social services agencies provide housing for foster parents is not without precedence. The Grand Jury learned of examples of this practice in other states. Additionally Orangewood could serve as temporary dormitory living for Samuelli Academy until the proposed dorms on campus are constructed. Finally, a new animal shelter is reportedly in the planning phases for a site in Tustin, which would free up the County owned property for foster care homes with the advantage that the resources of Orangewood are less than a block away.

### **Quality Parenting Initiative**

The Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is modeled after a project of the same name in Florida. It began statewide in 2009 as a collaborative effort with the California Department of Social Services and the County Welfare Directors Association. The intent of QPI is to strengthen efforts on a statewide basis for the recruitment and retention of quality caregivers. The initiative defines a quality caregiver as “one who provides the foster child food, shelter, medical care, education, safety, support, encouragement, reassurance, self-esteem, self-worth, security, structure and love.” When appropriate, the caregiver mentors the biological parent. The assumption underlying QPI is that the Foster Parent “brand” is damaged, and the term “foster parent” has negative connotations. The initiative recognizes that the success of the child welfare system rests on

improving the image and quality of foster parents, and that doing so leads to successful recruitment and retention. QPI makes foster parents an integral, equal and respected partner on the child's team and recognizes that quality foster parents are a valuable asset for recruiting and training new foster parents. QPI provides foster parents with training that clearly articulates expectations and realistically informs potential foster parents of the challenges presented by traumatized youth.

The Grand Jury learned that the Orange County Social Services Agency Children and Family Services has been part of the pilot program to implement the Quality Parenting Initiative in the state for more than four years. CFS told the Grand Jury that staff had been assigned to implement the initiative and had attended QPI forums with Social Workers, Foster Families and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) volunteers. CFS provided the Grand Jury with dates when the agency had held town hall meetings and workshops to educate staff about QPI. The Grand Jury was advised that CFS distributed QPI literature widely throughout the agency. However, in subsequent interviews with social workers, the Grand Jury learned that most staff members had never heard of QPI, never received training in its implementation, and, most disturbing, did not observe any change in the quality of foster parents.

In addition, the Grand Jury was repeatedly told that current foster parents were the best recruiters of new foster parents, and this concept is a strong component of QPI. Yet, foster parents are not involved in any formal recruitment efforts. The Grand Jury could not identify a single effort to "rebrand" foster parents, although most case workers did indicate that they involve foster parents in decision making meetings. Some senior level staff from children's advocacy organizations and state agencies involved in the implementation of QPI stated that the Orange County Children and Family Services writes promising policies and procedures, but fails to provide adequate resources to implement them. Some children's advocates questioned the County's commitment to providing quality homes for foster youth and said that the system promotes mediocrity and actually makes it more difficult to be "good" than to be "adequate." Further, they told the Grand Jury that the County lacks expertise in recruiting and has failed to develop an understanding of the types of support systems necessary to retain quality foster parents.

Most foster parents interviewed by the Grand Jury expressed appreciation for the mentoring they had received from more experienced parents and were willing to assist others. Two parents had attended a QPI meeting hosted by the staff liaison; they were particularly interested in the clarification of legal issues surrounding fostering and adoption. Both volunteered to serve on a committee as foster/adoptive parent representatives. They have not been contacted about this committee in more than a year. The Grand Jury learned that a QPI conference, intended to provide education, support and networking for foster parents was held in Ventura in September 2015. Not one Orange County foster parent attended the conference. The Grand Jury was advised

by some agency employees that foster parents did not attend because the County did not make funds available to them.

## **County Recruitment and Retention Efforts**

### ***Limited Resources and Limited Recruitment***

Children and Family Services (CFS) has a Recruitment, Licensing and Development unit, but until early 2016, only three social workers and two event specialists were assigned to this task. The unit is charged not only with recruitment, but also with developing orientation and training for foster families. Clearly, staff resources were inadequate for the challenging tasks. In early 2016, the County added a significant number of additional social workers and two supervisors to this team. However, in addition to the critical tasks of recruitment, this unit is also charged with revamping the training program to implement Resource Family Approval (RFA).

The Grand Jury interviewed members of this unit in the fall of 2015. The Grand Jury was unable to ascertain the existence of a strategic plan for recruitment that contained specific goals. When asked to describe recruitment activities, almost all employees interviewed stated that they staffed booths at several local community events each month. The Grand Jury attended some community events and noted tables staffed by social workers passing out brochures about adoption and fostering. Some caseworkers expressed a need for ethnic foster families and informed the Grand Jury of recruitment efforts during Black History month, but the County had no presence at the Tet festival in Fountain Valley.

Social workers and CFS managers frequently spoke of the County's collaboration with Faith in Motion, a faith-based community whose stated primary mission is to find loving foster and adoptive families within the faith community. However, CFS has no data showing whether the collaboration between CFS and Faith in Motion has resulted in recruitment of foster families. The Faith in Motion website lists ten ways that congregants can help in this effort. Number one is to pray, number two is to donate items to foster families, and number three is to assist in the photography of children hoping to be adopted. Only the final two items on the list ask congregants to consider becoming foster or adoptive parents. At this time, Faith in Motion is integral to the unit's efforts to provide support for foster families and to raise awareness for the need of caregivers and the children in their homes. Almost all interviewees stressed the importance of building a strong relationship with the local congregations and anticipate that, over time, this relationship will result in a strong community of foster parents. In February, a local congregation hosted a "matching event" designed to introduce members of the faith based community to children in need of homes. CFS social workers intend to hold two or three such events annually. Many unit staff members were overwhelmed with responsibilities and cited lack of time, lack of personnel, and lack of funding to explain the limited recruitment efforts.

While the vast majority of individuals interviewed asserted that current foster families are the best recruiters of new families, most of the CFS staff interviewed, at each level, acknowledge that the County seldom utilizes its caregivers for this task. Most social workers cite a lack of available funding.

Some members of the Resource Family Recruitment, Licensing and Development unit stated that, to their knowledge, the County maintains no data on the success of its efforts, even though it possesses a data collection system called Efforts to Outcomes. CFS affirmed that the County does not currently use Efforts to Outcomes and did not keep data on recruitment/retention efforts. The current annual turnover rate of licensed foster parents is 25%.

The Grand Jury found little evidence of efforts to recruit families for “hard to place” populations in spite of the fact that the County has reiterated that need for a decade. One staff member told the Grand Jury of recruitment efforts for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) population. Another social worker organized an event titled Mission Possible aimed at finding homes for teens, and another stated that the recruitment unit once had a table at a local hospital in an effort to recruit foster parents with medical expertise. The Grand Jury reviewed a 2009 County Self-Assessment Report in which CFS acknowledges the need to increase and retain foster families and wrote that from 2009 to 2012 the Orange County Social Services Agency Children and Family Services Division would have as a focus to “Increase the number of foster and adoptive families that will care for foster youth who are large sibling sets, older children, minors with children, youth who are preparing to emancipate and children with special medical needs.” (County Self-Assessment, 2009) That same year the Systems Improvement Plan highlighted areas that need improvement. Among its recommendations was “Need to recruit and develop foster and adoptive resource families for siblings, older children, minor parents, special medical needs and to meet the cultural and racial needs of our children.” (SIP, 2009) More recently, a 2014 Self-Assessment report reiterated that same recommendation to increase placement resources for sibling sets, older youth, and children with special needs. (County Self-Assessment, 2014) In spite of these repeated assertion, there is no evidence that the County allocated adequate resources for the task or made this need a priority.

### ***Foster Parents: Valued Partners or “Cheap Motel?”***

An executive at the California Department of Children and Family Services stated that recruiting 100 to 150 homes will be a big lift for Orange County, but a bigger concern is a conversion strategy that “hooks” and engages families. The Grand Jury learned that efforts to retain and support foster families in the county are minimal. Only one social worker is assigned as a liaison to all of the County’s families. There is no back up social worker trained to assume this job in the event the assigned individual is unavailable. The current social worker carries a Blackberry when

out of the office for conferences or sick days. The Grand Jury did not talk to a single foster parent who did not know this tireless staff member. The liaison is on the board of the Foster Family Alliance which provides canned foods, clothing and equipment donations for families. They also host four annual events. Among the four are a Spring Festival to recognize social workers and a dog show. The liaison also holds a quarterly meeting of Club Mom and Dad, which attracts about 30 participants, and occasional support groups. The Grand Jury learned that a few foster parents host their own mentoring and/or support groups without remuneration. They stated that there is a critical need for additional mentoring, but the County does not allocate funds to support this effort.

The Grand Jury had informal discussions with more than 20 foster/adoptive parents. Most stated that the Trauma Informed Training they receive has been professional and vital to understanding the needs of children who had experienced abuse and neglect. The Grand Jury attended several course sessions and noted that the classes were co-taught by a County social worker and foster parent who could provide practical suggestions for using the theories presented.

Foster parents interviewed generally have positive interactions with their assigned social workers, but many stated that these caseworkers are so overworked that it is difficult to get to spend quality time with them. Most stated that assigned social workers return calls and answer emails and never miss a monthly visit, however the meetings are often perfunctory. Some foster parents said that social workers sometimes visit children at school, so that the caregivers do not see a social worker for two months or longer. They also reported that they and the children in their care suffer from the constant staff turnover in the agency. Some reported having multiple caseworkers. Foster parents hoping to adopt the children in their homes are especially frustrated by the delays that result while new social workers become familiar with cases.

Foster parents understand and support the County's determined effort to reunify children with their biological families. However, most expressed anger and frustration at the lack of regard the agency has for them. One foster father said that he is no more than a "cheap motel" to the County. Of particular concern is the scheduling of mandated visits between children and their biological parents who have a legal right to spend six or more hours each week with their children. Foster/adoptive parents stated that the visitation schedules did not take into consideration the needs of the children, and that they changed constantly. One foster mother with a two-year old spoke of having to wake her child from naps. Another, who is fostering two sisters, had to pull the girls from dance lessons because the biological parent twice requested schedule changes that interfered with the classes. Some foster parents also said that monitors are present during these visits, but they are seldom consistent. These constant new faces are extremely upsetting to young children. When foster parents ask for consideration about scheduling, they are ignored or considered uncooperative. A number of parents pointed out that their training courses focused on the critical job of the caregiver to help abused and neglected

children develop trust. Trust, they learned, is a result of consistent behavior, established routines and familiarity. Many foster/adoptive parents noted the disconnect between the curriculum and the realities of working with Children and Family Services.

As a result of their training, parents are aware of the challenges of the children in their homes, but many stated that the County did not provide support to manage behavioral and mental health challenges. In addition to consideration for scheduling and behavioral intervention support, foster parents want assistance with visitations and frequent appointments with physicians and therapists. Foster parents, especially those with other children in the home, are overwhelmed with the responsibilities and want assigned social workers to transport and monitor these appointments.

Few foster/adoptive families believe that CFS regards them as integral, equal and respected partners on the dependent child's team. They frequently told the Grand Jury that they are denied educational, medical and psychological information that is crucial to making decisions about parental responsibilities such as discipline and school placement.

Another frequent complaint regards agency communication. For example, during a break in a course attended by foster/adoptive parents, one father stood up to inform the others about his fruitless attempts to get information about the new Resource Family Approval training. He contacted an appropriate staff member, but that individual was no longer working in the job capacity. He left multiple messages with a newly assigned staff member, but had received no response in a week. He acknowledged that the changes required by the new legislation are challenging for the agency, but he could not comprehend why someone would not return his call if only to say that a decision is pending.

Many foster parents agree that the social services system is better suited to "adequate" or "poor" parents who do not care about the development of the children in their care. "Good" parents are the squeaky wheels to overworked staff. One foster mother of a troubled teen told the Grand Jury that she had spent more than \$3000 on therapy for her youth because the County had not provided needed mental health care. A group of foster parents wishing to adopt children in their care told the Grand Jury that their original intention when they attended the County orientation program was to adopt two or three children. They bonded with and loved the children in their care, and had hoped to expand their families while doing something positive for the community of abused and neglected children. However, they are all disillusioned by the lack of regard they had experienced. They recognize that foster parents should be the best recruiters for new foster parents, but they could not, in good conscience, speak positively of their County experiences. Many social workers stated the CFS is far more concerned with the budget than with the needs of children and their caregivers.

### ***A Promising Model***

During its investigation, the Grand Jury learned about a promising recruitment and retention program entitled The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM). “The MFM is a foster care delivery service model designed to improve the safety, well-being, and permanency of children, adolescents, and families on foster care. The MFM is grounded in the assumption that families with access to resources and support networks are best equipped to provide a stable, loving, and culturally supportive environment for children and adolescents.” (Mockingbird) The model is based on a concept of the MFM constellation, which provides a kind of extended family and community. Six to ten foster families live in close proximity to a centralized, licensed and experienced foster or respite care family in a Hub Home. The Hub Home provides assistance in navigating the system, peer support for children and parents, planned and crisis respite as needed, and social activities. Instead of running away, as many do, teenagers can “chill” for a few nights at a Hub Home, and foster parents can be confident that they will not end up struggling with no support. The model has been successful in stabilizing placements and in retaining foster parents in states and counties where it has been implemented. If Orange County Children and Family Services adopts this model, it may be a valuable asset for recruiting and retaining quality foster parents and provide stability for foster youth.

At the end of November 2015, The County of Orange Social Services Agency submitted a foster and relative caregiver recruitment, retention, and support proposal to the state. This proposal was a requirement for counties that wished to access state funds available for the implementation of AB403. The County proposal contained specific strategies with concrete activities and measurable goals to recruit quality caregivers, specifically for hard to place youth, and to support those caregivers. Several of the strategies are contained in the recommendations in this Grand Jury report. The Grand Jury questioned why, given the long term and urgent need for quality homes for children, and given the County’s voluntary participation in the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), the County had not developed its own plan, determined reasonable goals and implemented strategies during past years. In the proposal to the state, the County requested \$6,000,000 to fund these activities. In January, 2016 the Grand Jury learned that the state had granted slightly more than \$2,000,000 to the County agency.

### **The Role of Foster Family Agencies**

According to the state Department of Social Services, County placement agencies use Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) for the placement of children who require intensive or specialized care. FFAs are non-profit entities that recruit, certify, train and support foster parents; provide professional support to foster parents; and find homes for children who require intensive care. Some FFAs operate group homes, although that function will change under the provisions of AB403. Some of these agencies also assist in adoptions. Currently, the Orange County Social

Services Agency has contracts with 51 FFAs. Although these figures are fluid, the Grand Jury learned only about 10% of dependent youth are placed in homes licensed by the County, while 25-35% are placed in private FFAs. Yet, most staff members, even some management, could not identify any intensive and specialized care provided by these 51 agencies. One social worker named a particular agency that placed Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) children. The Grand Jury examined three contracts from frequently used FFAs. None contain provisions for intensive or specialized care. The Grand Jury also interviewed senior staff from a representative sample of FFAs. Many of these individuals also affirmed that they provide beds or homes, but could not identify specialized treatment that they provide. They did not accommodate children with severe medical or mental health needs, they did not specialize in homes for “hard to place teens,” and those located in Orange County had few large homes available for sibling sets. Some FFAs operate homes in neighboring counties where housing is more affordable, and they provide homes that accommodate siblings. One FFA administrator expressed a desire to work with the County to provide homes for dependent youth who are on probation.

Senior FFA staff are knowledgeable and candid about the provisions of AB403 and the difficulties of finding homes for “hard to place” populations. Many of the smaller agencies expressed concern about the cost of accreditation required by the new law. Some of the FFAs provide adoption services and stated that most of their placements are to foster parents planning to adopt babies and small children. Many staff reported positive interactions with Children and Family Services, and praised the caseworkers. However, some lament a lack of communication with CFS. Many senior staff spoke of the challenges of recruiting and retaining foster families, but they have been more successful than CFS in recruitment. The Grand Jury asked a small group of FFA foster parents why they had chosen to work for a private agency rather than the County. The most common response was that the private agency returned the foster parent’s call when the County did not. The others appreciated the frequent visits and availability of FFA social workers.

By law, FFA social workers are limited to caseloads of 15 and are required to visit children three times each month. By contrast, County social workers carry a caseload of approximately 25 and make monthly visits to children. Additionally, a County social worker’s case consists not only of the foster parent and the child, but also the biological parent when the rights of the parents have not been terminated.

CFS stated that FFAs provide more services to the children, but aside from the more frequent visits by the social worker and their lower mandated caseloads, the Grand Jury did not find any differences in the level or quality of care. One CFS manager stated that FFAs have the infrastructure to provide quality care for children, but could not explain what infrastructure meant or why the County lacked it. One executive from the state office of Children and Family

Services praised the Wraparound (WRAP) services that Orange County Children and Family Services provides and stated that, as a result of WRAP, the County already had some of the support services mandated by AB403 in place. The wraparound process is an intensive, individualized care management process for youth with complex needs. A number of social workers told the Grand Jury that they, too, appreciate WRAP. Given that the County has a well-established WRAP program, the Grand Jury could not understand the need for the “special services” of FFAs.

### ***Need for FFA Oversight***

In December, 2013, *Los Angeles Times* reporter, Garrett Therolf wrote a damning expose of Foster Family Agencies contracted by the Los Angeles County Social Services Agency. Therolf alleged that children living in homes run by private agencies were about one third more likely to be the victims of serious abuse than children in state supervised homes; that agencies accepted convicted criminals as foster parents; and that the system was so poorly monitored that FFAs with a history of abuse continued to care for children for years. Therolf wrote that at least four children had died as a result of abuse or neglect in homes overseen by private agencies in the five years prior to the publication of his article. (Therolf, December 18, 2013) Another high profile death of a toddler in a Riverside/Imperial Valley FFA home prompted further concern about the system. Some believe the system is ripe for abuse since revenue is based on foster stipends. Unscrupulous FFAs could hire substandard foster parents in order to place more children.

During its investigation, the Grand Jury found no evidence of abusive practices in Orange County. Statistics on placement stability, abuse allegations, incidence reports and other measures of care are consistent in County and FFA homes. Furthermore, AB403 mandates FFA accreditation and additional training and screening for foster families. However, The Grand Jury did find an alarming lack of oversight, monitoring, and evaluating by the County for its 51 contracted FFAs and the homes where County children live. At one time, Children and Family Services (CFS) assigned a unit of ten social workers to monitor FFAs; however, in 2010 this unit was eliminated because of budget cuts. Many social workers expressed dismay and anger about the elimination of a unit they considered essential. Some staff stated that they have nowhere to go to express complaints about FFAs or their homes. Only one social worker is assigned as a liaison between all FFA homes and the County. The Grand Jury was informed by the California Department of Children and Family Services that auditors inspect FFA homes to ensure that they are free of safety hazards. Community Care Licensing (CCL) is charged with annual inspections of all FFAs. However, the Grand Jury searched a Community Care Licensing Division website to find inspection dates for FFAs used by the county. Most inspections occurred at intervals of two years or more. One FFA manager told the Grand Jury that the agency had not been inspected for two years, another FFA manager stated that he/she could not remember when the last inspection took place, and a third said that the inspections were conducted when CCL came to the facility to

investigate a misconduct evaluation. The Grand Jury learned that CCL is understaffed and subject to frequent staff turnover. A unit of County social workers investigates all allegations of abuse or misconduct in foster homes and CCL is also charged with conducting its own investigation. Because CCL is understaffed, misconduct allegations sometimes remain open for long periods. The vast majority of county social workers, representatives of the state Department of Social Services, and management at children's advocacy organizations agree that some FFAs are highly professional and dedicated to the children in their care. However, they also agreed that others are poorly run, have lax standards for foster homes, and are looking to maximize profit. Without close oversight, the County has only anecdotal information to make distinctions.

### ***The Cost of Foster Family Agencies***

The Grand Jury learned that the cost of placing a child in a County home is about \$800 per month, but the County pays FFAs about \$1800 - \$2300 per child. These figures are inexact because AB403 is changing the rate structure of foster homes and other care facilities. Placement rates are also dependent on the age and severity of needs of the child. FFA staff stated that the County is getting a bargain since private agencies assume administrative costs and provide special services. The Grand Jury inquired about the relative costs of FFA versus County home placement, but was told that the County, once again, did not have data comparing these costs.

During interviews, various agency staff at all levels stated that the Children and Family Services is too reliant on FFAs to provide homes for foster children and, as a result, do not adequately support recruitment efforts.

### **Obstacles to Success**

During its investigation, the Grand Jury found several systemic problems that contribute to the County's inability to recruit and retain quality foster families. AB403 and the Quality Parenting Initiative state that caregivers are equal members of the child's team, informed of the child's medical and educational history and current needs. AB403 further requires that foster care must be "child centered," not agency centered, and that services be brought to the child. These provisions place great responsibility on already overburdened County caseworkers. The Grand Jury learned that the national recommended caseload for social workers is 16. FFA social workers are restricted to caseloads of 15. Yet, in Orange County, social workers typically have caseloads of between 23 and 30. It is not reasonable to expect that social workers with such high caseloads can nurture relationships with foster families, provide them with the additional support mandated by the law, and develop relationships with children. In the 2014 County Self-Assessment Report, the Orange County Social Services Agency identified a need to "Reduce caseloads so that social workers can spend more time with families (both caregivers and parents) to encourage reunification and help keep placements stabilized." (Self-Assessment January,

2014) The Grand Jury could find no evidence of any implemented or anticipated effort to reduce caseloads.

In addition, Grand Jurors learned that the turnover rate for social workers is 25% annually. For children and caregivers who must adapt to new social workers, the turnover is disturbing. Most social workers, particularly caseworkers, placement workers, investigative workers and emergency response workers interviewed described burnout and lack of support from senior managers. Some described leaders who are so far removed from casework that they are unable to understand the demands placed on social workers. When asked about the high rate of turnover, one manager told the Grand Jury that social workers are part of the trend of millennials who want a work/life balance.

Another problem is poor communication at all levels. Websites intended to provide names, titles, addresses and other contact information for agency staff are outdated and erroneous. The Grand Jury involved in this investigation often made six to eight phone calls before reaching desired staff. Twice the Grand Jury found errors in the class schedules intended for use by foster parents. These were not misspelled words or missing commas, but inaccurate dates and contact numbers. At one class attended by the Grand Jury, the instructor was thirty minutes late and explained to the waiting students that the erroneous date in the class schedule had caused confusion. County staff often spoke of the online site OC4Kids as a recruitment tool; however the Grand Jury noted this website is virtually unchanged month after month and provides little information for potential foster parents except dates, times and locations of orientation classes. Websites did not accommodate online chats and the County has no social media presence. Considering the greatest pool of potential foster parents is adults in their thirties and forties who rely on technology daily, it is imperative that the County upgrade its technology.

## **Conclusion**

During its investigation, the Grand Jury learned that most counties in California and throughout the nation are grappling with the challenging responsibilities of foster parent recruitment and retention. It is not the intention of this study to suggest that Orange County alone is remiss in adequately caring for dependent children in “hard to place” categories. In fact, even the most vocal critics of the system frequently stated during interviews that Orange County Children and Family Services is far better to work with and for than social service agencies in neighboring counties. Nevertheless, every County has an ethical responsibility to care for its children – all of its children, regardless of how difficult the task. Statements of need and intent must be followed up with genuine efforts, with resources and with dedicated staff. In the Academy Award winning film, *Spotlight*, which told the story of the *Boston Globe*’s expose of child abuse in the Catholic Church, a child advocate poignantly states, “If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.” (Spotlight, 2015) Orange County cannot be a County that contributes to the

Fostering a Better Foster Care System

---

neglect and abuse of already victimized children who cannot advocate for themselves by simply declaring that “they present a problem,” or “we are working on that,” or “we don’t have funds.” CFS must adhere to the spirit of AB403.

For those County officials, employees and citizens unmoved by moral and ethical arguments, it is important to consider practical realities. If foster care children are not given the opportunity to become healthy, educated, stable and contributing adults, the County will “pay” later when they emancipate to unemployment, mental instability and prison.

## FINDINGS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, the 2015-2016 Grand Jury requires (or, as noted, requests) responses from each agency affected by the findings presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Based on its investigation titled “Fostering a Better Foster Care System,” the 2015-2016 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at 10 principal findings, as follows:

- F1.** 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.
- F2.** Current Children and Family Services recruitment and retention efforts are inadequate and ineffective as evidenced by zero growth in available foster homes.
- F3.** Children and Family Services does not collect, analyze, or track data on the success of foster parent recruitment and retention efforts.
- F4.** Children and Family Services has not implemented the principles of the Quality Parenting Initiative in spite of its four year involvement in the project.
- F5.** 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.
- F6.** 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.
- F7.** Children and Family Services has failed to clarify the role of Foster Family Agencies contracted by the County.
- F8.** 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.
- F9.** The current caseload of Orange County social workers exceeds industry standards and will hamper efforts to implement AB403.
- F10.** Effective outreach is hampered by limited and outdated technology.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with California Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.05, the 2015-2016 Grand Jury requires (or, as noted, requests) responses from each agency affected by the recommendations presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Based on its investigation titled “Fostering a Better Foster Care System,” the 2015-2016 Orange County Grand Jury makes the following 17 recommendations.

Children and Family Services should

- R1.** 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)
- R2.** 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)
- R3.** 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)
- R4.** 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,)
- R5.** 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)
- R6.** 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)
- R7.** 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)

Fostering a Better Foster Care System

---

- R8.** Prepare and approve a plan to increase the percentage of sibling sets placed together by 20% by July 1, 2017. (F5)
- R9.** 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)
- R10.** Reinstate a unit of social workers to monitor Foster Family Agencies by July, 2017. (F8)
- R11.** Reduce the caseload of social workers to a maximum average of 16 (the national recommendation) by July 1, 2017. (F9)
- R12.** 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)
- R13.** Use AB403 funds to contract with a professional marketing agency to assist in foster home recruitment efforts. (F2)
- R14.** Develop a process to provide accurate and current information on Children and Family Services websites by January, 2017. (F2, F10)
- R15.** 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)
- R16.** Complete a study to determine the comparative cost of services provided by County homes versus Foster Family Agencies by January, 2017. (F7)
- R17.** 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)

**REQUIRED RESPONSES**

The *California Penal Code* Section 933 requires the governing body of any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the governing body. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court). Additionally, in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such elected County official shall comment on the findings and recommendations pertaining to the matters under that

elected official's control *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, *California Penal Code* Section 933.05 subdivisions (a), (b), and (c) detail, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

(a) As to each Grand Jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:

(1) The respondent agrees with the finding.

(2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.

(b) As to each Grand Jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:

(1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.

(2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.

(3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.

(4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefore.

(c) If a finding or recommendation of the Grand Jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a County agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the Grand Jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary /or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Fostering a Better Foster Care System

---

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with *Penal Code* Section 933.05 are required or requested from:

Responses are required from the following governing bodies within 90 days of the date of the publication of this report: Orange County Board of Supervisors (Findings 1-10, Recommendation 1 – 17).

Responses Requested:

Responses are requested from the following non-elected agency or department heads: Orange County Social Services, Department of Children and Family Services (Findings 1-10, Recommendations 1 -17).

---

**WORKS CITED**

- “California Child and Family Services Review County Self- Assessment Report,” July 2009. Orange County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services Division. Web February 17, 2016.
- “California Child and Family Services Review County Self-Assessment Report,” January, 2014. Orange County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services Division. Print.
- “County of Orange System Improvement Plan Annual Progress Report, 2014-2019. Orange County Social Services, Children and Family Services Division. Web February 17, 2016.
- “System Improvement Plan, (SIP),” November 7, 2009 Orange County Children and Family Services Agency, Children and Family Services Division. Web February 17 2016.
- “The Current State of Foster Care, the Latest Statistics from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS). *Foster Club Newsletter*. Foster Club Inc., 2015 Web February 2, 2016.
- “The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM).” *The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare*, October, 2013. Web 3/4/16.
- Assem. Bill 403, 2015 -2016, Section 111.
- Brown, Waln. “The Psychological Consequences of Separating Siblings in Foster Care.” *The Chronicle of Social Change*, June 3, 2013, Web. February, 2016.
- Children and Families Commission of Orange County, *Conditions of Children in Orange County, 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, 2013*. p85. Print.
- County of Orange Social Services Agency. “2015 Foster and Relative Caregiver Recruitment, Retention and Support County Plan.” November 2015. Print.
- Foster Club, Inc, 2015. “Statistics on Foster Care,” statistics from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Web February 2, 2016.
- Herrick, M.A., and Piccus, W. “Sibling Connections: the Importance of Nurturing Sibling Bonds in the Foster Care System,” 2005. As quoted in Cohn, Michelle. “Sibling Placement: the Importance of the Sibling Relationship for Children in Foster Care, April 2008, June 2012. Web March 3, 2016.
- Leathers, S.J. “Placement Disruptions and Negative Placement Outcomes Among Adolescents in Long-Term Foster Care: The Role of Behavior Problems.” *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30(3), 307-324. 2006. Print.

- Lewis, E.E., Dozier, M., Ackerman, J. and Sepulveda-Kozakowski, S. "The Effect of Placement Instability on Adopted Children's Inhibitory Control Abilities and Oppositional Behavior." *Developmental Psychology*, 2007 43(6), 1415-1426. Print.
- Orange County Grand Jury 1999-2000. "Orange County Is No Camelot For Emancipated Youth." Web, February 17, 2016.
- Orange County Grand Jury 2006-/2007. "Orangewood Children's Home: Overstaffed and Underutilized?" Web, February 17, 2016.
- Orange County Grand Jury 2006-2007. "Pre and Post Emancipated Youth: Is Camelot Still a Dream?" Web, February 17, 2016.
- Orange County Grand Jury 2006-2007. "Where Are Orange County's Foster Children?" Web, February 17, 2016.
- Spotlight*, Directed by McCarthy, Tom, and written by McCarthy Tom and Singer, Josh. Open Road Films. 2015. Film.
- Therolf, Garret. "Private Foster Care System, Intended to Save Children, Endangers Some." *The Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2013. Web, January 19, 2016.
- Walker, Theresa. "Wanted: More Foster Parents." *The Orange County Register*, January 10, 2016 A1+. Print.
- Webster, D., Armijo, M., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Putnam-Hornstein, E., King, B., Rezvani, G., Wagstaff, K., Sandoval, A., Yee, H., Xiong, B., Benton, C., Hoerl, C., and Romero, R. *California Child Welfare Indicators Report from University of California at Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project*, 2015 Web, January 4, 2016.

**WORKS CONSULTED**

*Children and Families Commission of Orange County. Conditions of Children in Orange County, 21st Annual Report, 2015. Print.*

Cohn, Michelle. "Sibling Placement: The Importance of the Sibling Relationship for Children in Foster Care," April 2008 and update by Ariyakulkan, Lyn June, 2012. *National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. Print.*

Honomichi, Ryan and Brooks, Susan. "Predictors and Outcomes of Long Term Foster Care, A Literature Review," February, 2010. *UC Davis Extension, Center for Human Services. Web 1/9/16.*

Steiner, William. "Will Reforms Aid Victimized Children?" *The Orange County Register*, January 20, 2016, Opinion 7. Print.

**APPENDIX A: Glossary**

1. **AB403, Continuum of Care Reform:** Comprehensive reform legislation intended to make sure that youth in foster care have their day-to-day physical mental and emotional needs met; that they have an opportunity to grow up in permanent and supportive homes; and that they have an opportunity to become self-sufficient, successful adults.
2. **Congregate Care:** see Group home.
3. **Emancipation:** The legal process by which a minor child petitions the court to allow him/her to become an adult.
4. **Foster Family Agency (FFA):** a non-profit entity that recruits, certifies, trains and supports foster parents; provides professional support to foster parents; and find homes for foster children.
5. **Foster Home:** A temporary home where a youth may live while in the custody of the state.
6. **Group home:** A home that cares for more than six foster youth, often adolescents. In California, recent legislation requires that Group homes transition to Short Term Residential Treatment Centers.
7. **Independent Living Program (ILP):** Provides training, services and benefits to assist youth in achieving self-sufficiency prior to and after leaving the foster care system.
8. **Intensive Therapeutic Foster Care:** Placement in specifically trained foster parent homes for foster youth with severe emotional or behavioral health needs.
9. **Intensive Therapeutic or Treatment Foster Homes:** A foster home in which the foster parents have received special training to care for a wide variety of children and adolescents, usually those with significant emotional or behavioral problems. These parents are more closely supervised and assisted than parents in other foster homes.
10. **Kinship Foster Family Care:** The full-time nurturing of a child requiring out- of-home placement by someone related to the child by family ties.
11. **Matching:** A process by which an adoptive family or potentially adoptive family is chosen for a family, based on the needs of the child.
12. **Mockingbird Family Model (MFM):** A foster care delivery service model designed to improve the safety, well-being, and permanency of children, adolescents, and families in foster care. The MFM is grounded in the assumption that families with access to resources and support networks are best equipped to provide a stable, loving, and culturally supportive environment for children and adolescents.
13. **Multi-Dimensional Treatment Care (MDTC):** A behavioral treatment alternative to residential placement for youth who have problems with chronic anti-social behavior, emotional disturbance and/or delinquency.
14. **Non-Related Extended Family Member (NREFM):** a term used to describe an individual who has a prior close relationship with a child he/she is fostering. For example, a NREFM may be a former teacher or neighbor of the foster child.

15. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** A mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event.
16. **Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI):** The Quality Parenting Initiative is modeled after a project of the same name in Florida. It began statewide in 2009 as a collaborative effort with the California Department of Social Services and the County Welfare Directors Association. The intent of QPI is to strengthen efforts on a statewide basis for the retention of quality caregivers.
17. **Resource Family Approval Process (RFA):** A family friendly and child-centered caregiver approval process to replace the existing multi-level process for licensing foster homes, and approving relatives, adoptive parents and guardian caregivers.
18. **Respite:** Care provided to a foster child for a short period of time by someone other than the primary caregiver.
19. **Reunification:** Return of a child to the family from which he/she was removed.
20. **Short Term Residential Treatment Center: (STRTC)** A new facility type mandated by AB403 to replace group homes/congregate care which will provide short-term, specialized, and intensive treatment for foster youth whose needs cannot safely be met initially in a family setting.
21. **Sibling Sets:** A group of two or more related children who share at least one biological or adoptive parent in common.
22. **WrapAround Program (WRAP):** An intensive individualized care management process for foster youth with complex needs. During the WRAP process, a team of individuals who are relevant to the well-being of the youth collaboratively develop a plan, implement that plan and evaluate success over time.