

ABSTRACT OF THE PROGRAM

In response to California Department of Social Services (CDSS) Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), Placer County closed the Children's Emergency Shelter on December 13, 2016 ahead of legislative mandates. CCR prioritizes family homes over congregate care to facilitate outcomes that are more successful for foster youth. Through a competitive process, Koinonia Family Services, a foster family agency, received the award to partner with Placer County to develop a community-based emergency foster care model providing resource family (foster family) homes for children when they are temporarily removed from their parents, and/or those with a variety of behavioral health needs while they are awaiting out-of-home placement.

Koinonia successfully recruited a number of foster families, now called resource families, for the emergency shelter model, but through this developmental process, it was determined that there were not currently enough resource family homes willing to take youth with behavioral challenges. Thus, Placer County Children's System of Care (CSOC), in conjunction with Koinonia, created a small six-bed emergency group home for these short-term situations. This hybrid model of emergency foster care is an innovative approach to addressing the needs of foster youth while honoring the spirit of Continuum of Care Reform.

THE PROBLEM OR THE NEED FOR THE PROGRAM

In response to recommendations from CCR, the State of California created and codified Assembly Bill (AB) 403. This legislation mandated the reduction of the use of congregate care placement settings to ensure that when children are removed from their own families, they are placed whenever possible with relatives or someone familiar or, when this is not possible, with other caregiving families that are able to meet their physical, social and emotional needs until they can return home. AB 403 also requires that placements of children in foster care be in the least restrictive, most family-like environment, and states that placement in a residential setting should be limited to circumstances when the child requires residential care due to his or her individual needs.

CCR mandates reducing the use of county operated children's shelters by requiring counties to create a robust transitional plan for the development of Temporary Shelter Care Facilities (TSCF) to address the unique circumstances and needs of the populations they serve while remaining consistent with the CCR principles described above; that counties shift to a home-based family treatment model for emergency care; to develop an appropriate plan to repurpose shelter facilities when necessary; and finally, for CDSS to develop a legislative report no later than January 1, 2021, which outlines the number of children and youth served by temporary shelter care facilities (formally known as children's shelters), characteristics of children residing at these facilities, and whether there is continued need for the licensing and operation of TSCF.

In response to CCR's call to move away from the antiquated children's shelter model and operate TSCF's, AB 403 set forth a transition timeline calling for the reduction in the duration of stay at a TSCF to 10 days from 30 days. This was noted to be the interim duration of stay with the ultimate goal of transforming all TSCF's to facilities designed to place foster youth immediately into a family setting or an appropriate residential treatment program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

Placer County developed a model that facilitates the goals of the legislation rather than implementing the phased requirements. The former Placer County Children's Emergency Shelter (30-bed residential facility) could have been re-tasked as TSCF and reduced the duration of stay for foster youth, but CSOC leadership opted to expedite the transition so that children were exposed to conjugate care as little as possible if at all. A workgroup was created to draft a request for proposal for a community partner to contract with Placer County to provide resource families on standby for ages 0-18. A Shelter Care model that had existed for children ages 0-5 previously because the Children's Emergency Shelter was only licensed to provide care for youth ages 6-18 inspired this model. Another component of the old Shelter Care model was a greater emphasis on diverting children from the contract homes whenever possible and placing directly into a concurrent foster family (a home certified for adoption). Now these homes are called resource families and they are all certified for adoption. The practice of diverting youth whenever possible was applied to the expanded age range of 0-18 in the hopes of reducing the need for contracted resource families.

Placer County awarded the contract to Koinonia Family Services to provide emergency foster care for foster youth. In July of 2015, Koinonia began recruiting and training resource families specifically to be emergency shelter care homes with bed space for two-four foster youth per family. The initial goal was to have 12 to 15 families in place by July of 2016 and pilot the program in parallel with the Placer County Children's Emergency Shelter for a full year prior to closing. In July of 2016, it was determined that the contracted resource families were ill-equipped to address the needs of foster youth with acute behavioral needs. Following the discovery of this unmet need, Placer County and Koinonia then collaborated on the creation and licensure of a six bed group home in a family-like setting. An addendum to the existing contract with Koinonia specified that they would complete all Department of Social Services and Department of Health Care Services requirements to transition the six bed group home to a Short Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP) in compliance with CCR requirements in order to effectively accept and provide services to youth with challenging behavioral and mental health needs when they are not appropriate for community-based resource families. For those children and youth who can be placed directly into a resource family, Koinonia shall continue to recruit and maintain a network of emergency resource family homes in, or adjacent to, Placer County for our community-based emergency foster care model.

COST OF THE PROGRAM

Funding for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015-16 was provided by State and Federal funds (\$79,200) and County funds (\$118,800). Funding for FY 2016-17 was provided by State and Federal funds (\$374,875) and County funds (\$160,660) for a total of \$733,535. Funding for the addition of the six bed STRTP in FY 2016-2017 increased the total compensation by \$318,219 for a revised aggregate amount of \$1,073,754. These totals were offset by the subsequent decrease in operating expenses generated by the operation of the Placer County Children's Emergency Shelter. For Example for FY 2017-2018 there is an expected budget offset of \$765,313 related to the closure of the Children's Emergency Shelter and decreasing the divisions funded positions by 11. The aforementioned decrease in costs associated with the shelter closure is not inclusive of the operational expenses of the physical plant as well as the resource needs of the residents. Operational expenditures were also reduced for county partners and area schools, as the children were more likely to be placed within their community and in closer proximity to their school of origin, thereby reducing transportation costs and time in transit. A resource family instead of a county/school staff person is now facilitating many of the needs of the foster youth.

THE RESULTS/SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM

The program proved so successful while running in parallel to the Placer Children's Emergency Shelter that the decision was made to close the shelter ahead of schedule and well in advance of the 2021 transitional deadline imposed by the State of California. In the days leading up to the closure there were only two foster youth residents in a facility designed to maintain thirty residents. There has been a net reduction of 25 percent in the number of youth entering emergency care during the first full year of

operation of the emergency shelter care partnership with Koinonia. In addition, there was a 70 percent decrease in foster youths being placed into congregate care. The Placer Children's Emergency Shelter typically received 140 to 160 placements annually and for the calendar year 2017 there were only 37 youths placed at the Koinonia STRTP also known as Koinonia Connections. One of the greatest benefits of this hybrid program is the flexibility to meet the needs of Placer's foster youth population, however, this flexibility can also place pressure on the model's capacity. The program was designed to address the emergency placement needs of foster youth for a duration of up to 30 days. Sometimes the foster youth need to stay a little longer awaiting a more permanent plan and the program provides that flexibility at the risk of denying another youth an emergency option. Because of this, even more efforts to recruit resource families are currently under way in Placer County.

WORTHINESS OF AWARD

Placer County's partnership with Koinonia Family Services has demonstrated creativity with addressing a legislative mandate well ahead of legal requirements to the benefit of Placer County foster youth. In keeping with the tenets of CCR, this public/private partnership has placed significantly more youth into resource family homes in lieu of congregate care. Providing foster youth access to resource families on an emergent basis reduces the trauma children experience entering the child welfare system when compared to congregate care. Resource families offer a home-like setting that reduces the secondary trauma foster youths may experience from each other in congregate care. In this unique hybrid program, trained professionals appropriately place the foster youths with greater behavioral needs in a therapeutic environment at the STRTP (six-bed home). This model also reduces the likelihood that children with greater behavioral needs could further traumatize other foster youth not needing the higher level of care.

This innovative program not only greatly impacted the lives of foster youth in terms of where they put their head at night; it measurably impacted other facets of their lives by providing the youth more time (not spending it in a car traveling to a central shelter) and access to their community as well as their school of origin. In addition, worthy of note is the reduction in costs associated with running emergency foster care. By decreasing the overall costs of providing emergency foster care by closing the Placer Children's Emergency Shelter, other system of care programs will benefit as the fiscal resources can be re-distributed throughout the department and/or division to provide for better service delivery in other county programs.

The CDSS has noted that Placer is the only county who sought this creative solution, and thus, suggested it should be shared with other child welfare serving agencies and systems of care. This is another reason for nominating this emergency foster care model for the NACO award.

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