

Title of Presentation: Improving Outcomes for Children in state custody through Evidence-Based Practices

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An intensive review of services provided to 108 randomly-selected children in the custody of a large southern state was conducted in order to evaluate if resources of the custodial agency (the Department) were being effectively utilized to achieve permanency. Each case assessment involved gathering extensive information from a variety of sources including the child, the child's family, the Department case manager, and agency providers, if applicable. Factors that brought each child into state custody were examined and a determination was made concerning whether that initial placement likely could have been avoided. Information was also collected on current activities directed toward achieving permanency for the child.

Key findings of the study centered on services provided by the Department aimed at achieving permanency for children as well as on the availability of potential family placements for the children in out-of-home care. It was found that 80% of the children in the study had significant family resources, that is family members or relatives who, with intensive, in-home, evidence-based services, may have provided viable placements. However, 60.2% of families reported receiving no services directed toward reunification. In addition, less than half of the families (55.6%) in the study reported receiving services designed to stabilize the family and prevent the child's entry into state custody.

Length of stay in custody and number of placements were also examined for these children. More than 20% of the children in this study who had been adjudicated Dependent/ Neglected had spent almost half of their lives in state custody. As the length of stay increased so did the number of placements. Forty percent of the children who had been in state custody for more than two years had also been in five or more placements. These findings are important because reducing the time that children spend in state custody is likely to have a positive impact on children and their families and will also result in cost savings, making funds available to increase the quality of services provided to children who need to remain in the custody of the state.

The researchers also made determinations, based on strict clinical criteria, concerning the most appropriate placement and services for the children. More than 80% of the children in the study who were in out-of-home placements at the time of the assessments were recommended to return home to parents or relatives with intensive evidence-based services.

Recommendations for system reform were made based on information from the study. First, it was recommended that the Department implement a case supervision process to ensure adherence to its practice model and increase accountability for actions being directed at family preservation, reunification, adoption, or independent living. A second recommendation was that Department resources be redirected toward services that address the most pressing issues affecting children and families while maintaining a high level of community safety, including barriers to family preservation and reunification, preparation for entry into adulthood for those aging out of custody, and initiation and/or completion of the adoption process.

The study shows that most children enter state custody due to problems within the family, rather than problems with their own behavior, yet very few of those families received services to address those problems. Providing more effective, intensive help to families rather than just to the children in custody – prevention services for family preservation, intensive home-based services addressing the issues of reunification, enhanced adoption services to help children find permanency quickly, and transitional living services for successful emancipation – is still the missing piece to solving this state’s child welfare problems. The study projects that strengthening families and enabling them to care for their own children would have a dramatic impact on this state’s children and families, perhaps releasing as many as 60% of children from state custody. With fewer children in the system, the state would be able to provide the most effective services to the children and families who need that help the most.